

# The virtual world

Indian real estate firms are taking advantage of the latest innovations in technology to connect with NRI customers much faster and in more efficient and cost-effective ways

By Syed Ameen Kader  
**Special to PW**

One of the greatest things that information technology has done is make distance less of an obstacle in business. In the property sector, as customer profiles constantly shift towards more tech-savvy, well-travelled and multi-location buyers, developers are adopting the latest technologies to remain connected all the time.

As such, in order to reach out to a much wider spectrum of the property world,

developers now have a new marketing mantra — connect virtually. Innovations such as a 3D video walk-through, VoIP calls, live chat, live cameras and video conferencing have become more common in today's property world.

Indian developers are realising the importance of such technologies as they tap into the lucrative non-resident Indian (NRI) market, particularly in the Middle East. Industry observers say developers have been using walk-through videos, various types of computer-generated imagery and professional photography to attract attention for quite some time. AutoCAD has been a particularly important tool to create 3D walk-through projections.

Mumbai-based Godrej Properties, for example, offers virtual tours of its apartments in addition to 3D floor

plans, so customers can get a clear picture of what they are buying.

"Where sample flats are not available, we have traditionally offered video walk-throughs of rendered homes. In the future, we will launch a virtual reality walk-through experience that we are very excited about," says Girish Shah, Executive Vice-President for Marketing and Sales at Godrej Properties.

Customers can also view a gallery of project updates on the company's website that is updated every month to reflect the current status of the construction progress, adds Shah.

Though all these innovations help generate interest and a certain degree of confidence, most NRI buyers prefer to inspect the project personally or through relatives or representatives in India. This has been mainly

influenced by the lack of digital records, including project documentation and regulatory clearances.

But developers understand that customers are now more demanding. "The real estate sector is evolving and developers are re-strategising their marketing efforts to bring greater transparency in their dealings and bring added value to their customers," says Anshuman Magazine, Chairman and Managing Director of CBRE South Asia. "With the help of the latest technology, developers are creating platforms for closing the gap with customers."

Bengaluru-based Mantri Developers, which also has offices in the UAE, says its priority has been to adopt innovative marketing techniques and digital support systems. "We have been the trendsetter in the indus-



3D rendering has been a popular way of showcasing various development projects

try for launching innovative marketing tools such as digital kiosks, interactive mannequins, live video chat, live construction feed, augmented reality and the recently launched mobile

tool Corp App," says Snehal Mantri, Director of Marketing and Human Resources at Mantri Developers.

She says all these tools make the company easily accessible and ensure that day-

Buyers can now use a range of virtual reality tools to check the features of properties without visiting the actual project site

since the Indian rupee hit rock bottom, Indian developers have struck gold with the NRI market, which reportedly accounts for more than 15 per cent of the total property sales.

Since overseas buyers are often unable to see the property themselves, Magazine says developers have taken to uploading and updating project photographs on a regular basis. "This practice helps to keep home buyers abreast of the project's progress, which also brings in transparency and trust between both parties," he says.

Mantri agrees that virtual marketing helps them win customer trust and is very useful for NRI investors who cannot visit the project site often. The company has a large customer base in the Middle East that is using many of these facilities.

The current slowdown in the Indian domestic market has also helped foster creativity among developers to reach out to potential customers outside the country. The industry has been using the digital space to suit the changing profile of the average and aspirational home buyer of today.

Larger developers, for example, are now providing live, around-the-clock chat facilities on their websites, which allow potential buyers living abroad to obtain basic information about a certain project easily.

#### Virtual interior layout

Godrej says visitors to their site can call for free via VoIP or request a live chat. The company has Flickr and Pinterest image boards to share images, and a branded YouTube channel for video updates.

"Our iPad apps allow visitors to experiment with various furniture layouts and even see how customised interiors such as various wall colours will look," says Shah. "Even the actual views from the homes are captured in panoramic photos."

In marketing property today, it's not only about the end product, but also the experience. "Technology has certainly helped a lot when it comes to enhancing the customer experience," says Mantri. "Besides, the growing competition is compelling business organisations to go the innovative way to engage with their prospective customers and cut down on advertising cost.

The use of effective technologies ensures that



Pictures: Supplied

While traditional buyers still prefer to visit the project site before purchasing a property, industry experts believe technologies that offer augmented reality will play an increasingly important role in the decision-making process



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**Girish Shah**  
Executive Vice-President  
for Marketing and Sales,  
Godrej Properties

the key message of any business reaches the target audience effectively." Live camera feeds, which provide up-to-the-minute video or picture updates of project sites, have recently caught the fancy of developers. The service allows customers to track the construction progress of their property from anywhere in the world. Ideally, multiple cameras are strategically placed around the project. Buyers therefore no longer have to rely on images posted by the developer or have to travel to the site.

Mantri Developers utilises live camera service for its Mantri Alpine development in Bengaluru. "This application mitigates the hassles and gives an easy solution that helps our customers and partners keep track of the progress of the project, simply by going online and clicking on the live feed option," says Mantri.

The video feed truly revolutionises the property purchasing experience and provides a sense of security in the minds of customers, adds Mantri.

Godrej Properties is also exploring this facility. "We are launching the CCTV setup at Godrej Anandam, Nagpur. Apart from monitoring site activities, the technology will help us capture and display real-time construction updates," says Shah.

Although it's very new in India, the video feed service is now being adopted by a fast-growing number of developers. "Yes, developers are fast catching on to this trend, especially those catering to the NRI market," says Magazine. "Developers are embracing this new trend as it helps them showcase their projects to a wider, global audience in real time — and at a fraction of the cost."

Developers and their project partners have used live cameras for quite some time for internal documentation. This tool allows



Developers are enhancing their mobile services



them keep a tab on the progress of the construction, including the number of labourers and the volume of materials used on any particular day. Many of the leading construction companies in the Middle East are already going this route.

EarthCam, one of the market leaders in this technology, says it has a strong presence throughout key markets in the region. The company has documented several projects in the Middle East and North Africa, including the Mushaireb Downtown Doha, The Dubai Mall, Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, Abu Dhabi International Airport Mid-field Terminal, Doha Convention Centre and Tower, Bahrain Bay and King Abdullah Sports City.

The company's CEO and Founder, Brian Cury, was invited last year to speak at the Turner Innovation Series conferences in Abu Dhabi, Doha and Dubai.

Our clients use construction cameras to monitor their projects remotely from any location at any time, document the process for a complete archival record to verify compliance and promote their projects with professional hand-edited, time-lapse movies," says a spokesperson of EarthCam.

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There are now applications that allow visitors to experiment with various furniture layouts (top) and even explore various features such as the landscape design (above)

In India, project management firms are using IT solutions such as the Primavera Enterprise Project Portfolio Management to prioritise, plan, manage and execute various aspects of the construction process. These IT-driven solutions have helped several developers improve the management of various construction projects significantly, resulting in substantial development cost



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**Anshuman Magazine**  
Chairman and Managing  
Director, CBRE  
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**Snehal Mantri**  
Director of Marketing  
and Human Resources,  
Mantri Developers

savings and on-time delivery of projects.

Godrej Properties, for example, monitors its flagship development in Vikhroli via CCTV. "We also have Building Information Modelling modules layered into the enterprise resource planning system to track the progress of each and every activity as well as the overall progress.

This is then presented in the form of business intelligence dashboards to senior management," says Shah.

While traditional buyers still prefer to visit the project site before purchasing any property, industry

experts say technology will continue to play a critical role in buyers' decision-making process.

**Augmented reality**

"We are already investing substantially in technologies that will make us future-ready," says Shah. "We plan to launch augmented reality virtual tours that will transport customers to their future dream home."

Today's virtual world has brought home buyers much closer to their dream home.

However, experts believe online property marketing tools still have plenty to cover in the future. ■

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