

Networking the new way

By **REBECCA RAGAIN**
For Pamplin Media Group

● **W**e've all heard the phrase "six degrees of separation." But Lisa Balmes, real estate broker and co-owner of Chris Balmes Properties in Tualatin, thinks that in Portland, it's more like two degrees.

● Relationship-based marketing is nothing new in the real estate industry. But some of the ways in which people are staying connected today are relatively new.

● Balmes has been using online social networking sites to connect with clients and potential clients for about five years, which puts her well ahead of the curve.

● "I remember when it was really hard to get people to look at the emails you sent out saying, 'Hey, I joined this new thing.'"

● Balmes entered the social networking realm when she signed up for MySpace, the social networking site that was founded in 2003. Now, she prefers Facebook, with its nearly 6 million self-designated fans.

● It's obvious why Balmes likes Facebook: 941 people are connected to Balmes' page on the site. Those 941

Facebook friends read Balmes' postings about new real estate listings and see photos of houses for sale.

Does that actually help her buy and sell houses, or find clients for her company's property management service? Absolutely. Balmes estimates that she has gained six or seven clients through Facebook referrals, just in the past year.

For instance, Balmes recently re-connected with a couple of people, siblings, with whom she went to high school. They exchanged a few pleasantries through Facebook: "Hi, how are you, your kids are cute, that kind of thing," Balmes says.

Even though contact was minimal, when Balmes' rediscovered friends found out that their parents were considering selling their Orenco Station townhouse, they suggested that their parents contact Balmes with any related questions.

"They knew from my [Facebook] updates how much I was into real estate and property management," says Balmes, who did eventually end up listing the parents' house.

Balmes says she's signed up on pretty much every social networking site there is, although she focuses mostly on MySpace,



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Facebook and Twitter. Membership with these groups is free, but there is a cost in terms of time invested; Balmes spends roughly eight to 10 hours per week posting to social networking sites.

Balmes, who has taught social media classes for other Chris Balmes Properties agents, says that people often ask how

much time is the right amount to spend on social networking sites.

"The answer is, really, you're going to do as little or as much as you want in order to make yourself more successful," says Balmes, adding that it can be helpful to get familiar with a couple of sites before signing up for a slew of them.

The downside to using social networking sites for business purposes is always having to appear to be at the top of your game. Posting comments about fights with significant others or complaints about co-workers won't fly if the goal is to put forward a professional image.

"You really don't have much down time," says Balmes.

Because Balmes is a people person and ends up friends with many of her clients anyway, she does feel comfortable posting somewhat personal information, like movies she's seen recently. But for the most part, her comments are about real estate listings and business meetings.

For Balmes, the pros of being active in social media outweigh the cons. She points out that consumers today do much of their home-buying research online.

"They're spending a lot of time online looking at properties before they call and say, 'Oh, I want to look inside this one,'" says Balmes. "So the more places you have [listings] posted, the better off you are."



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