

Sales centers go high tech

Immersive technology makes buyers feel right at home.



Walk into the sales gallery of the newly built Ritz-Carlton Residences in Miami Beach and you'll see the uber-luxurious condo development's half-acre, rooftop pool and deck, as well as its waterside lobby, looming overhead.

What you're seeing is indeed part of this chic community, but the image isn't real. It's a hologram—actually, two of them—embedded into a 36-foot-wide, 15-foot-tall exhibition wall that also boasts videos, photos, and a diorama of the project, giving visitors a digital taste of what they'll experience if they purchase a unit at the property. Behind it all, in a private screening room, designer Piero Lissoni narrates a video, articulating his vision for the building.

To be sure, the Ritz-Carlton's towering holograms make a huge impression on buyers, but they're not the only high-tech sales display in town. Take a short drive up the A1A, and you'll come to the recently opened sales gallery at Oceana Bal Harbour, a 240-unit luxury condominium complex that features a larger-than-life, interactive scale model. Standing six feet tall, the 18-foot-wide model allows potential buyers to select and "light up" a specific unit in the building with a wireless remote. When they do, images of that unit's floor plan and unique views instantly appear on the walls surrounding the model.

Welcome to the 21st-century real estate sales experience. While model homes, paper brochures, and take-home binders used to be the hallmark of new home sales, today's sales tools are digitally dazzling, using displays of light and tactile, immersive experiences to give buyers a (virtual) feel for their new home.

And it's not just a trend being rolled out by luxury condos on the coasts, either. Take the newly opened sales center at Bellmoore Park, a community of new, upscale single-family homes built by the Providence Group in Johns Creek, Georgia. There, touch-screen displays integrate with the community's site plan, current inventory, and Google maps. The tool can be displayed on a kiosk, or can be used on a tablet while walking around the model or community.



The Ritz-Carlton's private screening room plays a video featuring the building's designer.

The importance of the human element

What all of these sales centers have in common is a propensity to leverage technology to highlight, but not upstage, their communities. And the professionals who've designed the centers say that while a well-executed, immersive high-tech sales experience can help buyers reach for their checkbooks, the technology can't build relationships.

At the Ritz-Carlton Residences, Miami Beach, for instance, Ophir Sternberg, CEO and founding partner of Lionheart Capital, the community's developer, reports the holograms have been a huge hit with potential customers. "Customers feel more connected to a property when they can fully immerse themselves in the features of the sales

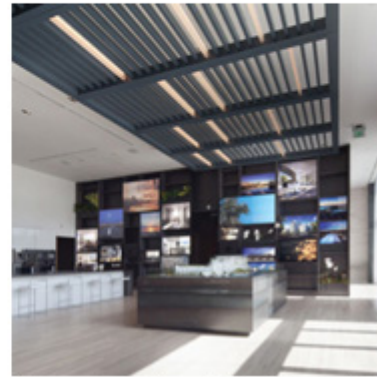
gallery," Sternberg says. "But the sales experience needs to be as humanizing as it is technologically advanced. Buyers want to interact with people as much as they want to interact with technology, and there are certain aspects of the sales gallery that simply cannot be replaced with a machine."

For example, not only is the Ritz-Carlton Residences sales staff standing by to take potential buyers on a tour, but a personal, on-site butler is available to handle any request buyers might have. And for a taste of Miami Beach, a captained day yacht awaits outside, ready to chauffeur buyers to nearby Miami hotspots at a moment's notice.

Get people in the door

And of course, having a high-tech sales center is meaningless if you can't get people through the door to use it. At Princeton Classic Homes in Houston, sales manager Brett Briggs uses technology to target and interact with buyers before they ever get to his sales center door.

"During the high summer sales season, we'll look to buyer-specific online outlets such as relocation websites—in Houston that's the Houston Newcomer Guide—Facebook pages for key areas of town, Twitter, and educational institution sites," Briggs says. "We look a lot to online portals and a targeted demographic methodology to reach buyers based on the inventory of product we have."



The sales center at the Ritz-Carlton Residences in Miami Beach.

Back to sales basics

A focus on the fundamentals is also apparent at single-family Bellmoore Park in Georgia. There, Mitch Levinson, managing partner of mRELEVANCE, which designed and implemented the community's kiosks for the Providence Group, says simplicity, along with the human touch, should be the cornerstone of any technologically enhanced sales center, not an afterthought.

“It is important to use technology that buyers already understand.”

— Mitch Levinson, managing partner, mRELEVANCE

"Nothing will replace an effectively trained, skilled sales person," says Levinson. "These are just tools to help them do their jobs, and they're great at highlighting features, benefits, and the lifestyle of your community. But your sales people are still the ones who have to work with the customer."

Levinson points out that when it comes to choosing those technology tools, it's better to select ones people are already familiar with than to try to be on the cutting edge. "People respond better when common tools and techniques are used, like the Google maps tools we implement with Google locations, directions and 'finger swiping' tools," Levinson says. "People are familiar with those before they get to the sales center and understand how to use them immediately. It is important to use technology that buyers already understand."

In other words, whether it's a tablet, kiosk or 15-foot-tall hologram, people have to connect with it. And when they do, sales are sure to follow.