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# Real Estate Agents Are Weaponizing Snapchat

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13-16 minutes

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This story is not about Snapchat's Millennial-seekers: Miranda Kerr filming her squat workout routine, Warby Parker doling out free sunglasses, Team Hillary snapping a guy dressed like Uncle Sam at the DNC. It's not about Kim K's assets or DJ Khaled's keys to success, or people like my 19-year-old cousin, who graciously watches me try to get jiggy with the platform as the ancient Millennial that I am. This story is about Alex Wang: suburban dad of three, Silicon Valley real estate agent, a steady ace at selling houses in Silicon Valley's frenetic housing market. Closing some \$50 million of homes last year, Wang is skilled at his job, but certainly not famous. With his modest 1,600 Snapchat followers, Alex Wang is worth considering because of who he, his cohort, and his target audience are on Snapchat: middle age-ish folks who get really stoked about property taxes and negotiations and open houses.

In internet speak, they're olds. So, so olds.

But get ready, they're coming for your platform: every day for

the last few months, Wang, in his late 30's, has opened Snapchat several times a day to record a snap “story,” a string of seconds-long photos or videos. (Whether “story” should gets finger quotes or not shows Snapchat’s odd moment in summer 2016: laughably basic to the early adopters, yet not quite the stuff of the mainstream lexicon. That will change very soon.) Wang trains the camera on his face with a couple incipient wrinkles etching his forehead, purple Ray-Bans over his eyes and his hair gelled up into a peak.

With the handle HelloAlexWang, he often starts with a shot of his 5:30 morning workout to prevent going full dad bod. He then snaps his work day, calmly calling out sloppy agent behavior and meting out pro tips, providing a snap-by-snap counter-narrative to the dilettantes and reality TV charlatans he sees overrunning his industry. “The general public thinks we’re a step above a used car salesman,” he told me, “and with most of the industry — rightfully so.” He sometimes throws some entrepreneur-y schtick in there (“How much grit you got?”), inspired by the snap stories of Wang’s favorite 40-year-old Snap royalty idol, [Gary Vaynerchuk](#).

Wang regularly trades Snapchat tips with six other realtors across the country — only one of whom falls into the Millennial age bracket — a posse that calls itself the SnapPack. Like, you know, the Rat Pack. Wang’s idea.

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Wang’s Snapchat obsession is very relevant not to just other real estate agents, but maybe also to someone like you there, reading this article on Medium hoping to be, if not a capital-

letter Thought Leader, at least relevant in your industry, the requirements of which keep ballooning from tweeting to Facebooking to possibly pinning and Instagramming, and now — as Wang has figured out — snapping.

“It’s staring me in the face,” says Andrew Lipsman, vice president of media and insights at comScore who’s been running the numbers. He uses Snapchat “barely — mostly with my wife and about two other friends,” which describes the relationship of many adults with the platform right now.

“There’s an acceleration against every demographic segment in the last six months. This is where Snapchat breaks out.”



Lipsman explains that 15 percent market penetration is generally the tipping point when a platform goes mainstream, that moment when it seems that everyone around you is on it,

so you better get on there, too. Younger users have long since passed that mark — with nearly 70 percent of smartphone users 18–24 being on the app as of this summer, and 41 percent of 25–34 year-olds, according to comScore’s metrics.

But Wang’s demographic is edging up to that 15 percent tipping point: installed on 14.4 percent of smartphone users age 35 and up.

Brad Inman, the founder of the popular real estate news site Inman.com, says he’s not an expert on Snapchat yet, but “realtors adopt anything that will make them money. They don’t do things for fun, because they don’t have a job. They adopt technology like crazy, but it’s reward-based.” Part of the value of Snapchat is similar to other social media in that customers must follow their accounts — choosing to be advertised to. Taco Bell told AdWeek that users are “crazy engaged”: 80 percent of its Snapchat followers open its stories, and 90 percent of those watch the stories in their entirety. Will that translate to something like real estate?





It's still early days, and realtors — like most new snappers — are still figuring out their method and their audience. Snapchat will be featured at Inman's national real estate conference in San Francisco this month, amid a series of tech panels that also include Google optimization and predictive analytics and how to make a killer listing video. Leading the Snapchat discussion will be Spokane-based realtor Marianne Bornhoft, who tells me she takes a scattershot approach that reveals her daily life, real estate-related or not. Over the last few days on Snapchat, I've watched her attend her Portland high school reunion, stroll through JoAnn Fabrics, bob her head to music while wearing a hippie photo filter, and walk through a house listing.

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By her side on the panel will be New York broker Michael Meier, whom I followed on a recent weekend while vacationing on the Jersey shore, before returning to snap his real estate class on Monday. Meier's snaps veer into heavy meta territory — he often posts #Snapucation seminars, which is one Snapchatting real estate agent telling other snapping real estate agents how to snap better. He has his classroom students practice a "snap pitch" of themselves, [he told](#) an Inman reporter, and offered \$2,000 to any student who could impress him enough with a snap pitch to motivate him to hire

them: “Not using Snapchat, or video at all, is like not using the phone when it became commercialized.” He told the reporter he’s now considered “the real estate Snapchat guy.” He’d been on the platform four months.




Of course, the gregarious and self-promotional “I’m #1” DNA of real estate agents is a natural fit for a social media platform that thrives on both. Not long after starting to use Snapchat earlier this year, Wang found and started trading snaps with the six agents who would form the SnapPack. Among them was Neil Mathweg, an avuncular realtor from Madison, Wisconsin, who produces a real estate podcast called [Onion Juice](#). He invited the group into a Google Hangout to record a show, in which they mostly evangelized the platform and gave a “how to” to other agents. Having watched the SnapPack on the platform daily by that point, “I felt like I was at a family reunion,” says Wang.

Alex Wang is the SnapPack’s hip Silicon Valley member with all the pitch-perfect details. In a region where realtors are some of the only suit-and-pearls holdouts, Wang walks into negotiations dressed much like his techie clients — Air Jordans and simple short sleeve shirts. He graduated from Berkeley with a degree in cognitive science before turning to his parents’ profession of real estate (much against his mother’s wishes, who asked him for the first five years of his career when he would take the LSAT). He keeps TED talks cued to play in his Tesla while driving to appointments, climbs at the rock wall gym, and has body-hacked his sleep down to

about five and a half hours a night. He often lunches with clients at tech campus cafeterias (also part of his Snapchat reel). Techies don't go for the used-car-salesman types, he says: "You want to pick the real estate agent you'd ask to babysit your kids."

Not that Wang doesn't have a showman side. He played an extra as a Chinatown gangster in "Hemingway and Gellhorn," and a soldier on "xXx: State of the Union" ("Whenever they need an Asian male cast, I'll reach out"). But Wang so fit the bill of Silicon Valley's iteration of a realtor that he was cast in an episode of TLC's "My First Home" this year, entitled "Silicon Valley Shenanigans." The so-called shenanigans were how much the houses cost and how competitive the real estate market here is — where the competition often takes drone footage of houses so as to sell them abroad in China, sight unseen. With most standard-issue houses in the area going for about \$2.5 million, it was a challenge to find any listing that met TLC's cut-off price of \$500,000. They finally identified one lonely house outside of Facebook's headquarters that fit the bill.



On a recent Friday, I walked into Wang's office lobby in downtown Palo Alto, where I killed a few minutes flipping through posed pictures of agents in "Luxury Home Magazine" — the way marketing used to be done in the industry, and to an extent, still is. I checked Wang's latest snap on my phone to see what was causing the slight delay. Yep, an update announced he was stuck on his fourth conference call of the

day. Once he hung up, we walked to a nearby cafe, where he took a picture of me taking notes to add to his snap story, and then told me about being an early Snapchat adopter, at least real-estate speaking.

Wang long ago figured out that social media is key to reaching his customers— transient professionals who Google-search “real estate agent.” He considers his nearly 100 five-star reviews on Yelp as better than any paid ad (and, of course, he featured a visit to Yelp’s headquarters in his snap stories). He keeps his Facebook curated with real estate news to break up the more bragging aspects: announcements of houses sold and pictures of handwritten thank-you letters from clients. He oversees and coaches ten agents at the brokerage where he works, Sereno Group, and noticed that they would approach him for advice on how to better use Facebook or better negotiate — both Wang’s strong suits. So on Snapchat stories, Wang decided not to target more customers, but to pass on tips to other agents in a profession where he says the barrier to entry is way too low (you take three courses and an exam) and, as a result, is rife with amateurish high jinks.

Like?

He lets out a delicious conspiratorial laugh, like he’s been waiting to be asked that all day. “Oh, where should we begin?”

Like an agent at Wang’s open house who, once out of earshot of her clients — a doctor and a Facebook employee — gushed about their wealth, and that they were willing to pay \$2.6 million (selling out her clients before negotiations even



began). This and other unprofessional behavior gets chronicled in Wang's snap stories, which can stretch to four-minute mini-documentaries.



Sometimes his stories have tangible financial rewards: for instance, he asked his Snapchat followers for referrals for a client who needed to find a good agent in Salt Lake City. Many sent him recommendations, Wang made the referral, and he expects to collect a referral fee once the deal closes. Yet mostly, Snapchat is playing the long game of building influence among his peers. So far, he's "snap-coaching" one agent in Texas who asked for advice. In his daily snap stories, Wang counsels his viewers on the importance of actually reading the fine-print of the contract you're negotiating over (you'll always have an advantage over an agent who comes

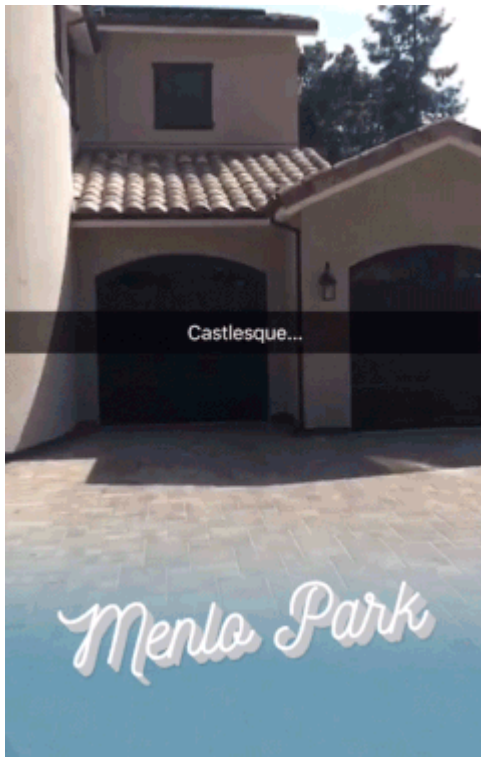
not as prepared) or sending courtesy texts when touring another agent's listing. Even in the heart of the global tech industry, he says negotiations should always be face-to-face, and he is endlessly annoyed by emailed offers from agents he's never met. And sorry startups, no real estate app is going to replace his local expertise.

In his snaps, he skips the social media tendency of dressing up his life as glamorous. Wang instead focuses on how actually a lot of real estate is tedious: like making a run to the hardware shop to make duplicate keys for a property because somebody has to do it. He screenshots a text from a potential client who'd decided to go with another agent, with him texting back, "To better improve, may I ask what were the reasons?"

The rush came in the beginning — like my own TV show. The challenge going in is it gets a little stale. This is the 7th time you've seen me work out. So how do I bring value?

It's a far cry from many of the pompous entrepreneurs, VCs, and realtors I'd been watching on Snapchat over the previous days, who were trying to show off their jet-setting lives. I tell that to Wang (I may or may not have added that I found them "annoying as hell"), and he responds, "I do struggle with that because I have an ego as well." Then he adds, "my coach asked me: 'Alex, do you want to be rich or do you want to be famous?'" And some of the people on Snapchat seem to just want fame. "Unless you're selling at a high volume, I don't respect you giving advice."





Wang's stories on Snapchat usually average about 90 viewers, and that number is fine with Wang, since he gets a high level of engagement. Usually it's other brokers commenting or asking for advice. But mostly he sees the value as building his personal brand. "The rush came in the beginning — like my own TV show. The challenge going in is it gets a little stale. This is the 7th time you've seen me work out. So how do I bring value?" He's considering scripting them more — stop going so off the cuff.

The risk would be losing Wang's trademark humble social brand — at least relative to Snapchat's digital stable of self promoters. After lunch, Wang drives to visit some listings in Los Altos, which are staged to a tee with upscale, minimalist furniture. "It gives them the image they would live like this," he says, speaking of the decor in one basement, though he could just as easily be talking about lives staged for the social media

era. “Do people actually live like this? No way! But at least they have the impression of it.”

