



REALTOR® Safety: Keeping your Technology Safe and Using Technology to Keep you Safe as a Real Estate Agent

By Tracey Hawkins, Safety and Security Source

Agents are known to love technology. However, you may not always take the extra steps to protect your technological investments. You may not realize how technology can help you stay safe as well. There are many free and/or affordable options on the market that are designed to help you protect your investments and to work safely. You simply just have to do your homework on your options.

The number one way to keep your smartphone hack-proof (and all of the client information and e-mails secure) is to require a password for use. Do not use easy to remember passwords like 1-2-3-4, or 2-5-8-0 (straight down the keypad) or personal information, such as your birthday or the last four digits of your phone number. Those kinds of passwords are easy to figure out so you want to make the password harder for someone to figure out and use against you. It's an extra step but one that can potentially save your business and sanity.

Alexis Moore, a high-tech investigator, a licensed real estate Broker, and the Vice President of Blackstone Realty Group in California, stresses three golden rules to technology safety:

1. Keep technology locked up literally and virtually. For instance, don't leave laptops or tablets in the car visible or out at an open houses.
2. Install a tracking device on valuables (see below).
3. Install the same anti-virus software and protections as you would on your home or office PC on your phone. Smartphones are susceptible to the same viruses as computers. Moore emphasized that since agents rely on phones and laptops as everyday business tools, a virus can have a devastating financial impact on your livelihood.

Apple has created new technology to protect iPhones called Activation Lock. David Bakke, Editor at Money Crashers Personal Finance and technology expert with a strong knowledge of the real estate industry is excited about the new product often noted as an iPhone "kill switch." Activation Lock will be released in late 2013 and according to Bakke, the device allows owners of an iPhone to erase all information from their smartphone and turn it off from a remote location (if lost or stolen). The only way the device can be reactivated is by entering the user ID and password.

Bakke also recommends agents should consider storing documents on a safe cloud platform to keep information on laptops safer. Cloud platforms often offer transaction and form management features in addition to electronic storage.

Over the years I have researched some dynamic technology products on the market that cover cell phone safety/security, technology security to protect your valuables, and personal safety products that protect you while you work.

Surprisingly, there are a number of safety and security apps or web-based programs on the market. Do your research and determine which features are most important for your business. Do you use your cell phone for business? Do you e-mail and receive client financial documents from your smartphone? Do you carry your laptop with you and use it for work? Do you show or host open houses alone. Most agents answer "YES" to many of these questions.

Smartphone Safety

Agents are multi-taskers. You take phone calls, answer emails, text, juggle busy schedules, are in and out of your car all day and often times start early in the morning and end late at night. Sometimes the everyday things we do can be a danger to ourselves without even realizing it – like texting and driving. There are devices that utilize Bluetooth signaling to automatically prevent your phone from operating while the car is moving, unless you have a hands-free device. Such devices work on most cell phones and cars. A key feature is to look for a tamper-free safe driving system that reports removal, deactivation or other misuse by text or email to a designated administrator. This is especially helpful if you have team members or agents working for you (also great if you have teenagers).

Another option for keeping the information on your smartphone safe if it has been lost or stolen is to install a tracking device on it. A tracking device can also be installed on laptops and notebooks. Key features to look for in a good tracking device include:

1. Remote storage and/or secure cloud storage options.
2. Encryption feature with a permanent delete (quarantine) option.
3. Anti-theft features which remotely locks or wipes data from a missing/stolen device, and tracks the device via GPS, Wi-Fi, and phone signal. A bonus feature is that some can remotely take picture through the device's camera to catch any thieves in the act of using the device.
4. Real-time internet threat protection to block dangerous text links and keep agents safe online while uploading a new listing to their property website and blocks dangerous links sent to agents.
5. Offers a private cell number with a local area code but does not link to the agent's cell number. Privacy during this information age is fleeting. If you have researched some of the info-based websites, you know that you can enter a phone number and find out personal information about anyone. Utilize the service that offers a local number, with a local area code, not affiliated with your actual cell number. That makes it impossible to track you in that manner. It works with all carriers.

With the significant investment we make in technological tools it is a financial and business set-back when your laptop, smartphone, net/notebook, purse, camera has been lost or stolen. There is amazing technology on the market that can act as an electronic "leash." These devices signal when you wander a preset distance from your property, i.e. 60 feet. You can also get "last seen" GPS information. Many of the units are portable and can fit in a wallet or on a keychain.

Also invest in an encryption product for your laptop hard drive. If it's lost or stolen, the thief can't gain access to your confidential data or your client's data.

Personal Safety

I was fascinated to know that there is a clever GPS enabled ring that broadcasts your location if you signal for help. This device allows you to push a button when you feel threatened while at a showing or during an open house. Your emergency contacts then receive a text with your location, a GPS map link, and your medical history. It can also provide up-to-the minute location tracking. Your contacts will be able to call 911 for you and provide pertinent details.

If you prefer not to wear locator jewelry, you can still provide your location, in case you need to signal for help, while working or hosting an openhouse. There is a web based application that sends alerts and text messages to your contact list when you signal that you are in danger. You can record critical information that law enforcement officials will need to locate you, including client info, your vehicle description and showing information. You also have the ability to drop digital "bread crumbs" when working.

Knowing there is technology out there designed to keep you safe on the job and knowing your options and what works best for you will help you to make well informed decisions on what you need to maintain your personal safety.

The REALTOR Benefits® Program, NAR's official member benefits program, provides exclusive access to special tools, products and services that help REALTORS® grow their business, save time and money, and gain a competitive edge. Many Partners also offer resources and products that can help keep agents as well as their client's information and property safe in addition to the exclusive benefits they each provide to members of NAR.

- DocuSign, zipForm®6 and Relay® help you keep your virtual information secure yet readily accessible when using their systems as part of your real estate transactions. For example, DocuSign exceeds national security requirements for e-signatures, Relay® allows users to control visibility and access to vital transaction documents and zipForm®6 offers integrated and secure real estate document storage.
- Rackspace®'s hosted email service offers a secure and branded alternative to free email accounts that could compromise your sensitive information.
- Take advantage of the 20% discount Sprint® offers on select accessories that allow you to keep your hands on the wheel while you're closing a deal. Sprint® also offers customers the innovative Drive First app which sends calls to voicemail and silences email and text alerts when a vehicle reaches 10 mph.
- Liberty Mutual® Insurance, a long time NAR partner, established the Liberty Mutual Research Institute for Safety offering innovative car and home safety tips to help you stay safe whether at home or in your car.
- Keeping your client's property secure is easy when you utilize the SentiLock system. Their NXT lockbox has been tested and passed North American security standards and their SentiCard® automatically disables itself after a number of invalid authentication attempts.
- Technology partners Dell, Lenovo and HP can provide you with the products you need to keep your electronics stored securely including cases, locks and more. Dell also offers options for hardware and software security too.
- REALTOR® Team Store® offers a REALTOR® branded emergency mobile device charger so you can be sure you're never left with a dead battery again.
- Visit NAR's REALTOR® Safety website at REALTOR.org/Safety for more tips, articles, videos, and webinars and visit NAR's REALTOR Benefits® Program homepage at REALTOR.org/realtorbenefits for information on safety products and exclusive benefit options.

POLL QUESTIONS:

1. Have you used or are you seriously considering any technology related safety/security products?
2. If so, have you ever had to utilize it in an emergency or crime prevention situation?

Source: Tracey Hawkins aka "Tracey, the Safety Lady" is a former real estate agent and has been teaching agent safety over the last 18 years. In 1995 Hawkins founded Safety and Security Source in Kansas City, Missouri and presents on topics including personal, home, auto, and real estate safety. She conducts training on these topics and more during webinars, expos, and live seminars around the United States. Hawkins was recently chosen as one of Kansas City's Most Influential Women.

This article is part of the NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF REALTORS® 2013 REALTOR® Safety article series.