

# Keys To Better Aerial Photos

Bob Cowen

It's often said that the first photo is the second most important factor in attracting a buyer. Today the first photo is likely to be taken with a drone. To stand out from the other listings, that first photo must be eye-grabbing. The problem is that a licensed drone owner may not be a decent photographer.

The price range for drones with accessories that are used for most real estate listings is \$800 to \$2,000. The material for the FAA exam can be learned over a dedicated weekend and the cost to take the exam is \$150. On top of that, drones are easy to fly (and to crash). So the barrier to entry is low. Thus there are numerous drone photographers from which to choose plus the option of doing it yourself.

Whether flying yourself or hiring someone, much better aerial photos are available.

Here's how to get 'em!

**Wait for real sunlight with no more than 40% cloud cover.**

You want lots of blue sky with few clouds. The light sensors on drones require a lot more light than on DSLR cameras. If you're using a company that takes interior photos as well as aerial photos & videos, insist they take the aerial photos only when lighting conditions are acceptable. There may be charges for additional visits, be sure to ask. While it's easy to replace the sky using Photoshop or Lightroom, there is no substitute for real sunlight on the entire photo. Wait until the sun & sky are ideal!





**Shoot at the right time of day (visit the home multiple times if necessary).**

Direct sunlight on the primary features is mandatory. If the home faces east, shoot the front around 10:30 AM. If there is a pool or another significant feature on the west side of the home, come back around 2:30 to shoot that side with direct sunlight on it. If you're paying someone to take aerial photos for you, insist that they make multiple visits on any listing that warrants it. If you're using a good photographer, you shouldn't have to ask; they should do so proactively. Ask about any added cost.



Facing south-west around 10:00 AM in mid-June. Note the sea gulls on the far left bank, they don't like drones!



Other side of the same home looking toward the north-east at the same time as above.



Wait three hours and you'll get this. Well worth it.



Shot the other side of this home in the morning and this west facing front. The sky is washed-out (sun overpowers the lens) and there are shadows on the front of the home.



Wait a few hours and you get this. Well worth it.



Looking west around 11:00 AM.



Same house looking east at same time.



Return a few hours later. Worth the wait.

**Shoot at 15'-35' AGL.**

You're selling the home, not a roof inspection. Unless there is a pool or beach behind the home that you want included in the first photo, shoot the front of the home without showing too much roof. All FAA licensed drone pilots know the term AGL (above ground level). If the person you've hired doesn't know what AGL is, they're not licensed and you both could incur fines.



You're selling the home, not a roofing job.



A large lake is easily seen while still featuring the home, not the roof.



Yes, sometimes you need to go higher than 35' for the ideal first photo.



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**Draw lines around vacant land.**

A photo of vacant land without lines around the perimeter doesn't usually show what's for sale, just lots of trees or a large field.



Show the buyer what you're offering.





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**Stage & clean up the property.**

Walk completely around the home. Put up the umbrella, put a colorful toy in the pool, put the garden hose away, hide the garbage can, flowers on the front porch, sweep grass clippings off the drive, etc.



Looking towards the south-east. The sunlight was on this side of the house for only about 20 minutes before the neighbor's home (to the right) blocks it. Patience is required. The flower pots on the railing were borrowed from the neighbor. They appeared multiple times in different photos around the home. A large puddle of water was removed from the drive using a leaf-blower.



Removed the pool vacuum, put up the umbrella and moved some plants to the edges of the pool.

### **Hire a student?**

You should encourage entrepreneurs. However, students may not have the time to wait for sunlight or to visit the home twice. Will their schedule allow them to be responsive?

### **Hiring someone: ask for recent references.**

Websites only show “cheerleader” photos. Ask to see their most recent work. Are the photos up to your standards? If not, keep looking. It’s your listing, your reputation and your money.

### **Hiring someone: are they too busy?**

I once saw a Facebook post bragging that their one person drone company was shooting 12 homes on the upcoming weekend. There’s not enough time during the day with an acceptable amount of direct sunlight to do that and still get acceptable photos.

### **Keep videos brief.**

Most videos don’t hold attention beyond 60 seconds; often much less. Photos may be more effective than a video because the viewer can control how long they look at each shot and are not at the mercy of someone who wants to show off their flying skills in a long video. If you create a video of the interior of the home, use a handheld gimbal like a DJI Osmo. Use Vimeo or Google to host your video. YouTube & Dropbox compress the file and may limit the bandwidth when playing it back resulting in poor quality.

### **Having an FAA Part 107 license is NOT enough.**

Anyone flying a drone for commercial purposes must be FAA licensed. However, some don’t always follow the law, subjecting themselves, their clients and others to injury (or worse), financial liability, fines and jail. Although the chances of an accident are very low, ignoring the law (especially after you’ve earned your FAA license) exemplifies bad judgment. The most flagrant and dangerous violation that the

author has observed is flying over moving traffic. If you see even one example of this when you're looking at websites, Facebook and YouTube channels, I would strongly suggest hiring someone else. Some properties just can't be photographed at their best without flying over moving traffic. A safe pilot will explain the situation and may decline the job (obtaining an FAA waiver takes many months). Below are just a few examples of flying over moving traffic in south-east Michigan.



Directly over Telegraph Road, Bloomfield Hills, MI. FAA violation. Taken without adequate sunlight.



Directly over Grand River Avenue in Novi, MI. FAA violation.

Finally, skip the artificial twilight shots. They go far beyond the acceptable practice of sky replacement.

Follow these practices and insist that anyone you hire does also. You'll have much better aerial photos.

**Remember, "the closing begins with the first photo."<sup>SM</sup>**

All photos (except those depicted as FAA violations) were taken by the author. Photos labeled "FAA violation" are published under "fair use" provisions.

Bob Cowen lives in Farmington Hills and worked in the computer industry for 40 years. Combining his love for photography and aviation, Bob founded ProAirVideos in 2014. Using his extensive photographic expertise and the latest technologies Mr. Cowen produces professional quality aerial photos and videos with rapid delivery at very reasonable costs. Six of the homes he's photographed have been selected by Detroit Free Press as the House Envy Of The Week. Bob has spoken at the annual MI Realtors Convention & Expo, at numerous WCR as well as at local and regional office conferences & meetings. Taking his "How to Get Great Aerial Photos & Videos" class earns 1 CE credit. He can be contacted at [bobcowen@gmail.com](mailto:bobcowen@gmail.com) or through his website ProAirVideos.com or 248-987-8468.