

Real Estate Agents Go Digital, Wireless

Real estate agents are employing the latest electronic gizmos to keep a step ahead.

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David and Gillian Pommerehn of Canton knew they wanted to buy a home near Annapolis. But they didn't want to make a trip only to find another house for sale that didn't meet their needs. "My husband and I work long hours. So the idea of going down to look at another house that wasn't worthwhile just wasn't appealing to us," said Gillian Pommerehn. "You tend to get frustrated." So when their real estate agent, Shelley Smith, showed them a photograph of the outside of an Eastport home that had just come on the market, they were not overly impressed. That was until Smith later previewed the house for them, taking photographs of the inside with her wireless telephone. She sent the pictures through her phone to the Pommerehns, who then visited the property and made an offer the same day.

More real estate agents are finding that being on top of technology can mean a step ahead in getting clients, selling homes and closing deals. Consumers, too, are using the Internet and technology to shop for homes and mortgages, to communicate with agents and sellers and to better compete for houses in neighborhoods where properties move quickly. Recognizing consumer appetite for such information, the real estate industry has used the Internet to offer limited information on homes for sale. Beginning next year, consumers will have access to more online listing information under a plan approved last month by the National Association of Realtors. Internet surfers will have to provide contact information about themselves before gaining access to the listings. Several industry leaders worried years ago that the Internet would wipe out the need for real estate agents. But the National Association of Realtors has worked to balance consumer and industry needs with the technology. "Perhaps no other industry has adapted so well to the Internet as real estate," said Steve Cook, vice president of public affairs for the Realtors' group. "Technology has not at all replaced the role of the Realtor."

Smith, an agent with Long & Foster Real Estate Inc. in Annapolis, has been using her combination wireless telephone and camera since January. She said having the latest technology helps her - and her clients - stay ahead. "People want things instantaneously," Smith said. "And especially with this market, you have to be able to get the information to them as fast as possible." In the Pommerehns' case, their offer wasn't the only one entertained that day in Eastport. They won out on the bidding and closed in March. But they are convinced that if they hadn't seen the photos of the house's interior, they probably would have waited until the weekend to see it and they would have lost out. "We knew it was the right location at the right price," said Gillian Pommerehn, who had been house hunting aggressively for over a month. "We knew it had a lot of potential and it was worth going and taking a look."

Cindy Ariosa, president-elect of the Greater Baltimore Board of Realtors and vice president and regional manager of Long & Foster Baltimore, said agents have to embrace technology to compete for buyers and sellers. "All the stats show that with all the 'e' business we're getting, the person who responds the quickest is the person who is going to capture the customer," Ariosa said. The percentage of agents who say a Web site and the Internet have changed the way they do business has increased to 64 percent in 2003 from 50 percent last year, according to the national Realtors' group. More than 60 percent of Realtors have a personal Web site, either their own or through their brokerage. Consumers also are increasingly using the Internet to shop for real estate.

The Realtors' national Web site attracted 5.7 million visitors in May. During that month, the average visitor spent an average of 46 minutes on the site and looked at an average of 75 pages. Under the Web listing system getting under way next year, consumers will be able to access more comprehensive information about residential properties. Brokers participating in the nation's approximately 900 multiple-listing services will be allowed to display property listings. Under the agreement approved by the Realtor group last month, consumers must sign a terms-of-use agreement with the brokerage whose Web site they're viewing.

Cook of the Realtors' group points to the Internet as helping to fuel the growth of the real estate industry. He says the number of homes being sold without an agent has remained flat at about 15 percent during the past 10 years, while the number of real estate agents has hit all-time highs both nationally and in Maryland. Mark Lesswing, National Association of Realtors vice president and director of the Center for Realtor Technology, said new technology has made it easier for agents to use fewer electronics that perform several functions. "Instead of carrying three or four devices, they have one

that can give them full service," Lesswing said. "In our survey, we found these devices are becoming more popular and what has fallen off are the use of pagers."

Agents like David Therrien, with Re/Max Classic, are taking the use of technology to a new level. Therrien and his eight-member sales team have developed a wireless mobile system using the Verizon Wireless Express Network to communicate from their cars, offices and homes. Therrien's mobile office is set up in his van. Inside is a scanner, color printer, VCR, digital and video cameras and a fax machine. His team also can draft contracts and receive faxes from their briefcases. Therrien once drafted an offer for a buyer from an Orioles' game. "We ended up looking at what we could do to compete," said Therrien, who said the technology cost \$3,000. "In this market, if you're not on top of the listings as soon as they come on the market you lose out."

Real estate agent Theo Harris with Re/Max Greater Metro has set up a program for his clients that updates listings every four hours. "It's automatic and they don't have to wait for me to do it," Harris said. "It's an edge." Harris estimates that he spends about \$10,000 every three years to upgrade his equipment. "The bottom line is it works," Harris said. "I try to stay ahead with all the changes. You have to in order to maintain a competitive edge."

The Pommerehns can agree that the latest technology helped them find the home of their dreams in Eastport. "I was familiar with the technology," said Gillian Pommerehn, who works for a communications company that represents Sprint PCS, the wireless company that offers a phone and camera combination.

"But I really grew to appreciate it even more because it worked."

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