



Technology Warrants a Return to Basics for Modern REALTORS®

By Alan Shafran

RISMEDIA, February 2, 2011—What sells homes—agents or the Internet? With the use of technology becoming increasingly more important to the real estate business, do consumers really need a REALTOR®?

We have all heard the statistics, which indicate that 90% of buyers have been researching homes online for a minimum of six months prior to contacting an agent. A wide variety of information can easily be obtained with the click of a mouse: virtual tours, homeowner's association fees and assessed values to square footage, neighborhood and community amenities and the reputation of local schools.

For sellers, websites such as Zillow and Trulia have made listing and marketing a home as easy as filling out a few online forms. Many sellers are still relying on agents to sell their home; however, since they are aware of the challenges the market is currently facing, will this trend continue when the market rallies?

When I got my license back in the late '80s, the tools at my disposal included a pager, business cards, print advertising in the local newspaper and one central computer for the entire office, where a staff member would manually enter listing information, sales and price changes. Our local REALTOR® association would actually print out a monthly MLS book, with weekly inserts to show updates. Back then, buyers needed us to find available properties and sellers needed us to market their homes. We were essentially the gatekeepers of all the information.

Over the past 20 years, I have been lucky to witness some of the most radical changes our industry has ever seen. My passion for real estate and ability to succeed has always been enhanced by my passion for technology, which began with the purchase of a Brother high-end typewriter/word processor that memorized form letters. Since that time I have focused on utilizing every tool available to me as an agent, and have watched the Internet change our world. The last decade has been particularly memorable for me; I co-founded and worked as the president for ShowingSuite.com, and, as the #1 agent for Prudential California Realty, I have grossed over \$1 billion in real estate sales.

Wow, what a ride! I give you my history because as I speak to new agents and other industry leaders, there appear to be a few common questions and concerns that are addressed to me. "What is the latest and greatest technology? Where should I market? What applications, phones, and computers should I use?"

Fast forward 20 years and buyers are contacting us to set up showings for a small number of homes, in a specific price range and neighborhood. They are well-informed and pre-qualified. Sellers are contacting us with questions about our pricing and marketing strategies for their home, as a result of research they have conducted in their spare time.

Does all of this mean that REALTORS® will become obsolete? That depends on the effort we apply to advance our knowledge, develop our skills and re-define our role as agents. In today's constantly changing and demanding real estate market, agents have to be pricing masters, home stagers, project managers, marketing professionals, transaction coordinators and negotiating experts. To succeed, we

have to educate ourselves about all of the technology the consumers are using and then combine that knowledge with our own specific set of skills.

I will be writing several columns in the coming year, and my goal is to deliver “Boots on the Ground” information about exciting technological advancements and the latest trends in real estate.

For starters, let me address the question above. More than ever before, our role as agents is to act as consultants for our clients, educate them about all of the options and strategies available to them, discuss the various costs and effects that result from implementing each one, and in the end, help them decide on the best course of action. As consultants, we should help our clients use what works best for them, not just what we understand or have available to us.

Technology is an extremely effective tool, but it is only a tool and there are limits to what it can achieve. That being said, as agents, we should constantly analyze what our clients use and approach each transaction from their point of view. By researching our competitors’ websites, and the latest advancements in technology, we can refine the level of service we offer and ensure that we are indispensable to our clients on an ongoing basis. For example, which websites have the best search functions? Which have the most comprehensive information about sold comps? Which have the most pictures? Best virtual tours? We should never forget to ask each client which sites they like the most, so that we can teach them to use their favorites more efficiently.

Technology makes day to day tasks easier but nothing replaces the human touch. The future of the industry lies in the basics that have always been critical to success. As technology improves, people skills will become progressively more important. There will always be a need in this business for agents who have the ability to have a real-life conversation, knock on doors, coordinate open houses and make phone calls.

A focus on providing a positive experience for our clients is the best marketing campaign we can create for ourselves as agents, and actual face-to-face networking will always be vital to success in real estate. Having conversations, collaborating with our colleagues and attending networking events will always be an essential strategy to match buyers with the perfect neighborhood and property to fit their needs. I believe that our clients will also continue to appreciate it when we take time out of our day to talk to them, share our insights and expertise about the community, explain market trends or pass on our knowledge about service providers.

Most of us have the latest iPhone or Droid packed with a dozen applications to simplify our lives, but real estate is a relationship industry. Like my partner in ShowingSuite.com, Rick Bengson always says when emphasizing the importance of communicating with people, “The best feature of my phone is that it makes phone calls.”

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