

Making real estate more social and mobile

How does your Web site look on a small screen?

By Leslie Mladinich

Thursday, August 7, 2009

SAN FRANCISCO — Real estate professionals, especially agents, need to embrace the consumer use of mobile apps and social networking sites, according to analysts and product developers who predict standalone Web sites will become passé, and mobile apps will be more popular as smart phones become less expensive.

Two sessions Thursday at the Real Estate Connect conference in San Francisco focused on putting mobile apps and social networking to use.

Greg Sterling, principal of Sterling Marketing Intelligence and analyst of mobile communications, offered statistics that pointed to how pervasive mobile use among consumers is becoming. Even though e-commerce is only 3.5 percent of all U.S. retail purchases, according to 2009 U.S. Census Bureau figures, 58 percent would use the Internet to research an electronics purchase, according to 2008 Nielsen research.

Forty-one percent of homebuyers will use the Internet to research property, says a Trulia-Harris Interactive poll.

The Internet-in-your-pocket phenomenon becomes even more valuable as potential buyers canvas neighborhoods. According to Opus research, out of 603 consumers 20 percent said they would buy a smart phone in the next year and 21 percent said “someday.”

In five years, 39 percent of respondents said the main way to get on the Internet will be a combination of PC and phone, according to Opus research.

“This is a really critical platform to be conscious of to get your information out in the market,” Sterling said.

However, Sterling cautioned about going out and hiring someone to make an app. First, take into consideration whether your Web site is attractive and effective on a smaller screen.

“Make your site look good in the browser rather than making an app,” he said.

The California Association of Realtors claims to be the first Realtor association to roll out its own mobile app for the iPhone. And Zillow’s iPhone app, launched at the end of April, has been downloaded 700,000 times, said Spencer Rascoff, Zillow chief operating officer.

Zillow’s app is available only on the iPhone, but there are plans to make it available to other platforms. When it considers what phones to make its app available to, Zillow looks at the consumer market, how many real estate professionals and Realtors use it, and the GPS capabilities. One million Realtors use Zillow every month on the PC platform, said Rascoff.

“We care about what real estate agents use,” he said.

For Realtors who know the Web is vital to business and are thinking about creating a Web site, don’t start from scratch, said a panel on using widgets, video and other features.

Peter Yared, CEO of Transpond (formerly iWidgets), says his company has created Web sites for customers such as CBS News and Time Inc., but they complain that nobody stays at their sites once they are on them.

“It’s hard to get people to Web sites. Most Web sites are flat,” he said. “It is really where the Web was in 1996 and 1997.”

Businesses are more reachable by creating a Facebook page so users can “fan” them, or posting on Twitter simply because these are interactive sites that promote word of mouth.

“The whole idea is to get people to follow and fan you,” he said. “Put yourself where people are.”

Animoto Productions, which produces online slide-show videos that stream well on Web sites, and Scripps Networks Interactive, which has led the design of Web sites for shows such as HGTV and The Food Network, confirmed that personalizing content and customizing sites with features that show your personality and skills may help drive people to your business.

While forum members seemed responsive to the ideas, some said these topics need more thought before real estate professionals dive in.

“You have to go back and do research if buyers and sellers need it as a channel to do what they do,” said Robert Press, director of customer experience at Sotheby International Realty’s corporate office. As far as using Twitter and Facebook, Press said he sees social networking and business purposes as “two different tasks.”

New direction for Move

Realtor.com to be destination site for property information

By Matt Carter

Friday, August 7, 2009

SAN FRANCISCO — With a new chief executive officer at the helm, Move Inc. is looking to evolve Realtor.com from a site known primarily for its comprehensive listings to a destination site for property information, in order to attract consumers through the entire “homeownership life cycle.”

Move will not only aggregate property information from multiple listing services (MLSs) and public records, but help real estate agents and brokers market themselves to consumers by “adding value” to that data, Move CEO Steve Berkowitz said at the Inman Real Estate Connect conference this week.

The slowdown in many housing markets has created a much longer “transaction window” for homebuyers and sellers, Berkowitz said, and additional opportunities for real estate agents and brokers to market to them.

“The world is moving beyond what’s for sale at any one time,” Berkowitz said. “We can give Realtors a way to market on homes that are not for sale.”

Sellers are monitoring market conditions before putting their homes up for sale, and buyers are sifting through the wealth of data available to them in search of the best deal. Once they find a home, the difficulty of obtaining financing may also lengthen the transaction window.

Even homeowners who aren’t planning to move anytime soon are interested in property values, taxes, and other related news and content that affects their home and community.

Move wants to meet all of these consumer needs, allowing the company to better serve its real estate professional and advertising partners, Berkowitz said in a recent conference call with investors.

Berkowitz elaborated on those plans in a one-on-one discussion with Inman News founder Bradley Inman before an audience of several hundred real estate professionals in the Grand Ballroom at the Palace Hotel in San Francisco.

Since taking the helm at Move in January, the former Ask.com CEO said he’s been “drinking from the fire hose” — immersing himself in the company’s operations through discussions with managers. Now, he said it’s time to implement changes by “turning the fire hose on them.”