

Clicking With Buyers

As Real Estate Web Sites Evolve, So Do Home Shoppers' Habits

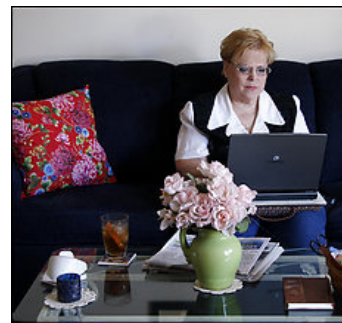
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Cindy Lawson won't venture from her sofa for anything less than a two-bedroom condominium with a parking space and washer and dryer.

In the meantime, she continues her year-long search by scanning the list of Arlington homes in her price range that is sent to her automatically from her agent's Web site. When she sees something interesting, her agent, Brian Block, sends her the full listing. Rarely do they speak on the phone.



"It's nice to be able to stay here and do that," said Lawson, 56, a legal secretary. "Especially something like buying a house that can be really tedious."

Online real estate search engines have become an established part of the home-buying process over the past decade, but such sites are evolving to offer a wider variety of services, in some cases changing the relationships among buyers, sellers and real estate agents.

For example, Trulia allows users to check out a home's surroundings through a street-level view of its 2.5 million real estate listings and discover unadvertised neighbors -- a park or a cemetery, for example. On BestHomeSearchEver.com, buyers can limit their searches to homes that have been on the market for more than three months and may be vulnerable to price reduction; then they can watch a YouTube video about how to submit a lowball offer.

This part of the online real estate market is still in its early stages but is likely to evolve as a younger generation of buyers and sellers look for ways to trade more information about property, said Saul Klein, a consultant to the National Association of Realtors when it developed its Web site, Realtor.com, in the mid-1990s. "In time, it may become commonplace," he said.

On another site, FranklyMLS, real estate agents are encouraged to leave comments about homes they have taken their clients to visit. On the listing for one four-bedroom house in Woodbridge, an agent said: "Nice place. Water issue in bathrooms?????" On a three-bedroom Alexandria home, another agent wrote: "Where's the fridge? Maybe the cockroaches carried it away."

Even negative information about a home can help the sales process if it assures that the buyer knows all of the potential pitfalls in a property, said Frank Borges Llosa, who runs FranklyMLS. "The more information someone has, the more likely they are to make a purchase," said Llosa, who doesn't vouch for the accuracy of comments on the site. "Learning negatives about the house removes the uncertainty factor, which is more of a hindrance than having the information."

Unlike some of its larger competitors, FranklyMLS is a sparse site that relies on keyword searches. It also lacks some of the ease of larger sites that allow users to narrow their search by a number of bedrooms, for example, but it allows real estate agents who have visited a property to add photos to those provided by the seller's agent.

"I don't trust listing agents' photos. They represent only the best side and make it look amazing. It is not necessarily what they look like when you get there," Llosa said.

Real estate agents have fought to control how the listings of their clients' homes are used on the Internet, including in an ongoing lawsuit brought by the Department of Justice. But the National Association of Realtors said that sellers' and agents' growing acceptance of the Internet may have made the point moot. "The policy that we were fighting was adopted five years ago. Things have changed," said Laurie Janik, the trade group's chief counsel.

The group's Web site, <http://www.Realtor.com>, is still the most-visited real estate page on the Web, according to the market research firm Hitwise. But even it is changing: Recently the site added a feature allowing users to narrow their searches by a neighborhood's "hip factor," based on several criteria, including how close it is to four-year universities, the age of residents and how long people tend to live there.

But the Realtors' site is facing ever-increasing competition from smaller sites, such as Roost, which says it has come up with a more intuitive and faster search engine. Since launching earlier this year, Roost.com has added information about listings from more than a dozen markets, including the Washington area, but still doesn't cover the entire nation. HomesDatabase, which is run by Metropolitan Regional Information Systems, focuses on real estate listings in the Washington area. Other Web sites, such as Owners.com and ForSaleByOwner.com, target homes being sold directly by their owners.

Jim Duncan, an agent for Century 21 Manley in Charlottesville, said he resents that some real estate search engines make agents buy information about users who have expressed an interest in a home they are selling. "They're not adding any value to the transaction," he said. "As a Realtor, they charge me a fee to get that buyer back when they haven't done anything. I have an issue with that."

But even as agents seek to control how their listings are used, the information available online has changed the way buyers, sellers and their agents interact.

After placing a home on the market, sellers can grow anxious wondering how home shoppers perceive their place. Another new real estate Web site, HomeFeedback.com, offers to send e-mails to agents who have visited the property, soliciting their opinions.

Tony Hain, a real estate agent who has been using that service for about a year, said that after reviewing the comments, one client decided that his basement unit was overpriced. "You can't change the fact that it is in the basement, but you can adjust the price," said Hain, who works out of Long & Foster's Woodley Park office in the District.

Block, Lawson's agent and an associate broker with Re/Max Allegiance in Alexandria, said he attracts up to 80 percent of his clients through his Web site, which includes a searchable database of Washington area real estate listings. Some clients do much of the work of narrowing down potential homes themselves and then call him when they want to tour a particular property or want to submit a bid on a home, Block said. "These days, our job as a Realtor is to help negotiate the deal, instead of just finding the house for them," he said.

Sharon Kimball and her husband, Bob, interviewed several real estate agents referred by friends after moving to Washington from New Mexico six months ago. While researching an Arlington condo they had visited, the Kimballs came across a blog by Jay Seville, an agent in Re/Max Allegiance's Arlington office, predicting that prices in the area would be dragged down by the opening of another condo building this year.

That insight persuaded them to sign up for Seville's e-mail service, JustNewListings.com, which automatically alerts them when two-bedroom, two-bathroom homes in their area come on the market. They say they have spent 10 hours a week on their online searches, looking at listings, mapping their distance to the Metro, and researching builders and management companies.

"I have looked at hundreds of properties and pictures," said Sharon Kimball, 54, a federal prosecutor. "You can do it all in the middle of the night when you can't sleep."

They are now in the final stages of negotiating the purchase of a two-bedroom condo in Alexandria that they found through Seville's service and hope to move in within the next couple of months.

"It saved us weeks, no doubt, of work in terms of being able to look at pictures and get descriptions and map locations, just sitting right there in your own den," Kimball said. "It helps you narrow the search and weed out the places that you're not interested in."