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## Agents keep the conversation going

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### POST, POST;RESPOND, RESPOND

**By Dennis Rodkin**

Special to the Tribune  
Published April 29, 2007

A billboard near the intersection of I-55 and Kingery Highway outside Willowbrook tells a lot -- by what it doesn't say -- about how the real estate business is changing. The sign, advertising Wexford Homes at Stonebridge Woods in Homer Glen, touts the Web address for the development, but offers no phone number.

Drivers who spot the sign can't jump on their cell phones for information on the subdivision; they'll have to wait until they're within reach of the Internet. And that's how JoAnn Sworan, the Coldwell Banker agent selling the houses, wants it.

"I don't think many people pick up the phone and call anymore," Sworan says. "They want to do their own investigating first. If it's 9 at night or 3 in the morning, they can go check it out, and then ask for more information if they want it."

Sworan estimates that she has gotten at least three times as many e-mails as phone calls asking for information about the development, and that those who initially approach her by e-mail are more likely to engage in an ongoing conversation about Stonebridge Woods. "People do not want to be hounded by phone calls from me," she says, "but they don't seem to mind e-mails."

Over the past several years, the Internet's march to global domination has dramatically changed many parts of the home buying process; Chicago-area real estate agents say that has necessarily forced fundamental revisions in their outlook on how to do their job.

When she started selling real estate 16 years ago, Sworan recalls, "I spent the majority of my time in the office grabbing information from the Multiple Listing Service for clients," but now, according to the National Association of Realtors, about 80 percent of home buyers do that part themselves. "We're not the keepers of the information anymore," Sworan says. "Now our job is deciphering the information -- helping people understand the comps and how to do the transaction and getting that property to closing."


It seems obvious that real estate agents would follow the customers to where they are, but several Chicago-area agents say they've learned by trial and error that just being on the Internet isn't enough; they've had to create spaces on the Web that provide real value to customers. Because it long ago evolved from a shiny new toy to a standard tool that most of us use every day, agents have had to make their Web presence more

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"Originally you designed a site to market the agent, to say, 'Choose me and my company,'" says Dean Rouso, a Coldwell Banker broker associate in the La Grange Western Springs office who has three Web sites. ( www.westernsuburbshomes.com, lagrangeareahomes.com, and lagrangeareamls.com.) "The properties you had on your site were secondary to selling yourself," Rouso says of his initial forays into Web sites, almost 10 years ago. "Now you have to have a place where buyers find information they need."

At the very top of buyers' need list, Rouso says, is property information. Which links back to that whole thing with the huge proportion of buyers who start their house hunt online. But it is also the starting point for many of the Web innovations agents are whipping up these days. Merely giving home buyers free access to listings, and then not getting anything in return, would be like hanging a 'Kick me' sign on the agent's back. Instead, agents who are looking carefully at how to thrive on the Internet find ways to make a listings search the entree to a conversation between the agent whose Web site it is and the buyer who landed there.

Go to yourinternetagents.com, for example, and after registering with your contact information, you get free access to Multiple Listing Service listings. Later, even if you marked when registering that you're "browsing" (as opposed to "buying" or "selling"), you'll get a welcoming e-mail from Risa Weiss, the Gold Coast Prudential Preferred Properties agent who runs the site along with her husband, Dave Weiss. That e-mail is the start of a "drip campaign," a regular flow of e-mails about real estate, the market, and the location you were searching in. It's a tool Rouso uses on his sites, too, to cultivate a relationship with potential buyers.

Noting that a site visitor has been checking out homes in Roscoe Village, for example, Weiss can pass along tips on recent sales in the neighborhood, or new developments there. "I just let them know that if they need an agent, I'm available," Weiss says, "but if they say they're already working with somebody, I don't push it."

Weiss says she has 'dripped' to people for as long as two years before they were ready to buy. "By the time I call somebody, they've received so many e-mails -- and they've probably sent me some, asking questions about the neighborhood they're looking in or something -- that they know who I am. I don't believe it when people tell me you can't make a relationship on the Internet. Unlike a lot of people, I think communicating by e-mail breaks down barriers."

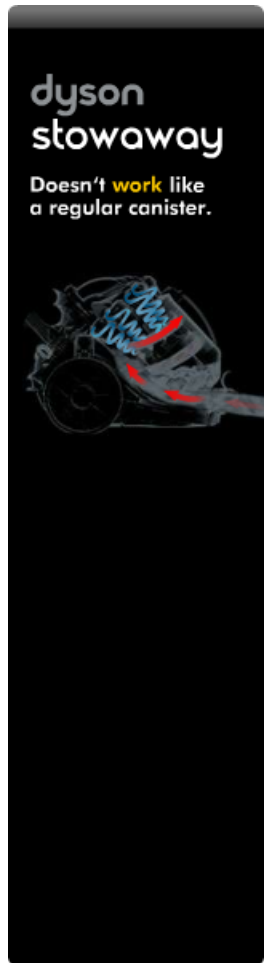
Before moving back to hometown Chicago from Las Vegas in 2004, Weiss spent several years teaching Internet applications to future teachers. She says she learned that many people are better at articulating what they want (in a new home, a homework assignment or a date) when composing at their own speed online than when talking extemporaneously. On top of that, with an e-mail dialogue, both parties can keep a full record of everything that was said.

An Internet-based dialogue is also, Rouso says, a good way for an agent to emphasize his or her expertise and handling of clients. "If I provide you as much information as I can on the schools and the community and demographics and floor plans of properties, you start to feel you can trust me," he says.

That's why Tim O'Keefe, a San Diego-based consultant who helps real estate agents maximize their presence on the Web, says a blog is the prime tool. As O'Keefe, of Spider Juice Technologies, describes it, a blog is the present-day counterpart to the old-time real estate agent who, in the midday conversation at the barbershop or the diner, shared the latest housing-related news of the neighborhood.

With a well-done blog, an agent "can kind of become the host for the city or town or area" that he or she is selling in, O'Keefe says. He advises agents to use their blogs to tell about such stuff as potential zoning changes, school construction, road widening plans, and condo assessment increases -- the sort of local developments that have a direct impact on housing values. "You don't have to tell them the Fed did this or that to interest rates today. They can read that in the paper. You're trying to be a local brand that they will come back to." That's even after they've bought a home and may think they no longer need a real estate agent -- they'll still need neighborhood news, and when, years down the line, they want to sell and move up, the relationship is still alive.

Agents are also sharpening their reflexes because of home buyers' reliance on the Internet. The Internet has made us all info-junkies; although we may be house hunting online at 11 p.m., we don't really want to wait



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until the next day for an answer. Rouso says that's especially true of younger adults who have grown up with technology. "If they e-mail you at 10 o'clock for additional information, they think you should be responding by 10:30," he says. They're also e-mailing other agents, he says, and "what's happening today is that the first real estate agent to respond often can end up being the one they use."

Because of this rapid-response work, Rouso says a mobile Internet device such as a Blackberry has become essential. Weiss thinks so, too: "I don't think anybody ever waits longer than four minutes to get an e-mail back from me," she says.

But Weiss has been surprised to find that one kind of instant-message technology she installed on her site hasn't gotten much use. Her husband installed an "online operator" button on her Web site; visitors can click on it to instant-message her via her BlackBerry. "I thought that would be great for the instantaneous questions from the people who don't want to wait for an e-mail," she says, "but I have not gotten a single message that way."

One Chicago agent has explored new routes for getting word onto the Internet about his listings. "Our basic philosophy is to exploit the Internet wherever possible," says Brian Merrion. With his brother Dan, Merrion runs City Point Realty. He says that unlike most agencies, theirs hardly bothers with print advertising, preferring to disseminate information online as much as possible. He posts all his listings on Craig's List, and re-posts each one every few days in order to keep it at or near the top of the list. They also post their properties at Zillow and Trulia. The idea is to capture the subset of potential buyers who don't start searching through the MLS and other more conventional means, Merrion says, but are inclined to start at new-thinking places.

All of these uses of the Internet are just contemporary versions of business 'farming' methods real estate agents have used for decades. "They're just putting themselves where the clients are, and that's something they've always done," said O'Keefe, the San Diego consultant.

Now, if they can devise a way to send out free calendars via the Internet, agents will have moved pretty much their whole practice onto the Web.

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#### Site index

##### News

- Local news
- Nation/world news
- Opinion
- Columnists
- Politics
- Religion
- Special reports
- Photos
- Video
- Multimedia
- Obituaries
- Health
- Education
- Weather
- Traffic
- TribLocal

##### Business

- Your money
- Stocks
- The Digital Page
- What's ahead
- Business tech
- Technology
- Wireless/Networking
- Columnists

##### Sports

- Chicago Bears Super Bowl coverage
- Bears
- Bulls
- Blackhawks
- Cubs
- White Sox
- Colleges
- High school
- Golf
- Soccer
- Columnists

##### Travel

- Flight tracker
- Travel deals
- Fall colors
- Midwest getaways
- Follow the sun
- Skiing
- Cruising
- National Parks
- Resourceful traveler
- 10 for the road
- GeoQuiz

##### Entertainment

- Arts
- Critics' reviews
- Dining
- Food
- Horoscope
- Leisure
- Lottery
- Movies
- Music
- Theater
- Shopping
- Television

##### Today's paper

- In the community
- Registration
- Subscription
- Contact us
- Send a news tip
- What's in it for you?

##### Classified

- Find a job
- Find a car
- Find real estate
- Find an apartment
- Shopping
- Find a mortgage
- Dating
- Pets
- Place an ad
- How to advertise

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