

Web site provides a new forum to market open houses

HomesOpenToday.com links directly to MLS data

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A Realtor association in the San Francisco Bay Area is using technology to promote a very low-tech real estate marketing tool: the [open house](#).

The Contra Costa Association of Realtors has launched [HomesOpenToday.com](#) as a new venue for members to advertise open houses to the public.

Real estate professionals may debate the usefulness of open houses in selling homes, though surveys have shown that they are still popular among home shoppers. The National Association of Realtors' 2006 Profile of Home Buyers and Sellers found that 47 percent of buyers visited open houses during their home search.

"The open house, I'm told repeatedly, is a dead phenomenon -- a dead form of lead generation. Yet people still hold them," said Michael Seguin, director of technology for the Contra Costa Association of Realtors who created the Web site. Most prospective home buyers are starting their property searches online these days, he added, and the site may help real estate professionals reach a broader audience of home shoppers and agents alike.

HomesOpenToday.com, which launched in October, is the brainchild of Larry Spiteri, 2006 president for the Contra Costa Realtors group, who suggested that association members should have a way to publish and control open-house information in the digital domain.

"He came to me with a problem, not a solution," said Seguin -- adding that he savors such opportunities as a technologist.

So Seguin created an interface with the association's [multiple listing service](#) that pulls open-house property information directly from the MLS for display at the new Web site. The MLS information updates every hour.

MLS members can post the date and time for the open house at the HomesOpenToday.com Web site, and that information is instantly accessible to site users. Members do not need to retype property information that has already been entered in the MLS.

The Web site also features property descriptions, photos, maps, driving directions and agent profiles. Users can search for open houses within a specific price range or a specific number of bedrooms or bathrooms for the entire MLS region.

Seguin said there are active discussions to expand the Web tool to service other MLS areas, and the Contra Costa Association of Realtors is a member of an effort to combine several Northern California MLSs into a single, massive regional MLS called NCREX. The tool, he said, "was built to service the nation -- we are in negotiations with other entities to get this licensed."

The Web site can accommodate any MLS that uses a common real estate data standard known as RETS (Real Estate Transaction Standard), he said. Seguin affectionately dubbed a couple of the software tools he built for the Web site "R2D2" and "C3PO" -- named for the droids duo featured in the "Star Wars" films.

Many Realtors continue to publish open-house information in local newspapers, and Seguin doesn't expect the Web site to change that in the short term. "My members have been very well served by their relationship with newspapers in the past. There's always room for another channel to publish information."

The Realtor association is promoting the new Web site, which is also referred to by the acronym "HOT," to the public with an ad campaign, and has also promoted the site to its members through bulletins and announcements at its Web site.

About 1,500 members have used the Web site so far out of a total association membership of about 4,000, Seguin said. There are sign attachments promoting the Web site that are available to members, he said, and members can also request a personally branded Web address for the site that they can use in their marketing materials. The site has been creeping up the Web search-engine rankings, Seguin said, and there are typically about 300 open houses per weekend listed at the site.

Mark Ross, broker for Ross Co. Realtors who has used the HomesOpenToday.com Web site, said he started using the site about a month ago, and so far he has confirmed that at least one open-house visitor found the information at that Web site.

"I am using it for all open houses," he said. "I think it's in its nascent stage. It'll take awhile for it to catch on. I think ultimately it will be a successful tool -- (but) not as successful as Craigslist has become. I'm finding an awful lot of savvy buyers are using the Internet. This is a pretty innovative tool, I would say. It also helps agents not rely solely on print ads."

Ross said he continues to advertise in print publications, though he has shifted his ad spend from about 50 percent print and 50 percent Internet to 25 percent print and 75 percent Internet. Many open-house visitors still respond to print ads, he said.

Open houses seem popular among prospective buyers who have already contacted a real estate agent, Ross said. He estimates that perhaps 80 percent to 90 percent of the prospective buyers at open houses are already represented by an agent or have at least contacted an agent.

While Ross is a fan of open houses -- he conducted five last weekend -- he also realizes that some agents are not. "Open houses seem to be fading a little bit in popularity in the industry because it's very time consuming," he said. He tends to limit his open houses to about 90 minutes apiece. "The three-hour open house I think is a waste of time. If you shorten it up it creates a sense of urgency."

Other Web sites have been used to promote open houses -- Realogy's OpenHouse.com Web site promotes open houses held by the company's own offices, for example.

Seguin said that HomesOpenToday.com formerly required users to enter contact information to view more detailed property information, though now the site is fully accessible without any registration or contact information. The site does provide contact information for real estate professionals if consumers are seeking additional information about a particular property.

Members of the Realtor association can host the information from the Web site to their own Web site with proper attribution, he also said, and there are several new features for the Web site in the works.