



Agents, consumers connect with mobile technology

Part 1: Mobile matters in real estate

Monday, October 22, 2007

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[Inman News](#)

Editor's note: In this three-part special report, Inman News dives into the world of mobile real estate to offer a look at how agents are using various services to connect with clients and streamline their businesses. (Read Part 2, "[Trends in mobile technology](#)," and Part 3, "[Real estate on the go: from GPS to ZipForms](#).")

More than 229 million people subscribe to wireless services in the United States, or about 76 percent of the national population. Globally, an estimated 2.3 billion people subscribe to wireless mobile services -- the world's population in September 2007 was estimated at 6.7 billion, the [Cellular Telephone Industry Association](#) reported.

Wireless users sent about 64.8 billion text messages in the first half of 2006, and sent about 12.5 billion text messages in June 2006. [Telephia](#), a telecommunications research company, reported that 64 percent of all U.S. mobile phone subscribers actively used text messaging as of the first quarter of this year. And Verizon Wireless reported that its users sent and received about 10 billion messages in June 2007.

The enormity of those numbers may be difficult to grasp. But they carry a very clear message: It's an increasingly mobile world, and mobile phones aren't just for talking anymore.

Some real estate professionals are taking that message seriously and are using technology to connect with consumers in new ways. According to a [2007 Realtor Technology Survey](#) conducted by the National Association of Realtors' Center for Realtor Technology, about 28 percent of respondents said they own a smart phone equipped with e-mail and Internet access, compared with 8 percent of respondents in a 2005 survey.

The mobile surge is powering a swarm of real estate technology companies that offer property information via text messages, photo uploads, and mobile-friendly Web sites to consumers while equipping real estate professionals with a range of mobile tools that enable them to drum up leads, manage client interaction, and receive and transmit transaction documents while they are in the field.



Dee Copeland, who leads a real estate team for Keller Williams Realty in Austin, Texas, uses a Palm Treo 650, which is a hybrid mobile phone/portable digital assistant, to communicate with clients, prepare transaction documents, send property fliers and even to open up lockboxes at for-sale properties -- the handheld device doubles as a digital key for a high-tech lockbox used in her market area.

Dee Copeland

A former project manager for Apple Computer, Copeland is very comfortable with technology. But she said it's important to recognize the sometimes lengthy curve of adoption for new technologies, and not to step too far ahead of consumers.

"Instead of being on the bleeding edge, it needs to be on the level of adoption. Some people go very far with these mobile applications. In terms of what consumers are using right now, agents need to stay within that realm," said Copeland, who has worked in the real estate industry since 2004.

A mobile version of ZipForm offers online access to real estate forms, and TopProducer's mobile version offers customer contact management tools, she noted. "You can write contracts from your PDA. You don't have to go back to the office -- you can do it right here, right now."

For property listings, Copeland uses a service by Austin-based Drive Buy Technologies that allows prospective buyers to request property information for a home via text message by entering a code that is listed on a for-sale sign. There are many companies that have targeted this particular technology niche. When a consumer uses the Drive Buy service, Copeland receives that consumer's phone number.

She also uses Buyer Acquire, a service that allows buyers to dial a toll-free number to listen to an audio recording with details about the property. That service also relays users' phone numbers.

Copeland uses another tool, called vFlyer, to transmit electronic fliers to prospective buyers.

"This has helped me to get rid of the brochure box," she said. "I want people to contact me. I want to have their contact information and you do not get that from a brochure box or a (traditional) flier."

Copeland said that if she receives a text message from a prospective buyer then she may choose to respond via a text message because the consumer has already established a comfort level with that medium. The instantaneous nature of mobile messaging enables her to respond quickly when a consumer or client has a question, she said.

It's important to respond quickly to messages from mobile users, Copeland said, as they may be actively looking at the homes in person rather than casually browsing at home via the Internet.

Teens are not the only ones who are "texting" today. A Pew Internet and American Life Project study released in March 2005 found that about 27 percent of adults with cell phones have used text-messaging features within a month of the survey date, 31 percent of cell phone owners ages 28-39 are "texters," and 13 percent of cell phone owners ages 50-58 use text-messaging features. Copeland said that these days, the demographics of text messaging appear to be very broad.

As with other technology advancements, Copeland said that those real estate professionals who don't adjust may risk falling behind.

"Mobile technology is not going to go away. Any agent who doesn't start getting on board in at least understanding some of the applications is losing efficiency in their business and is losing those leads," she said. "If I were to invest money in something, it should be on these types of tools and not on (advertisements on) bus benches and billboards."

Clients of Coldwell Banker Diamond, Realtors, a brokerage company based in Philadelphia, can access property information pulled from the area's multiple listing service -- a database of property information supplied by participating brokers.

Powered by CellSigns, a mobile technology company, the "Diamond Curbside Service" allows the brokerage company's clients to view information for active listings, search for homes by street address or neighborhood, and schedule showings of for-sale properties using a mobile phone.



Kim Rudolph

"It's a wonderful way for the agents to be able to be responsive to their clients," said Kim Rudolph, director of Internet development for Coldwell Banker Diamond. "We need to be able to provide information and deliver it in a manner our customers are using. Text messaging is so instant that (clients) expect an instant response ... they expect someone to be on the other side."

She added, "You really have to have in place a business model that is responsive, and be able to build a relationship with people on the other side of that message. The technology by itself doesn't mean anything -- it's the human element that is going to make it work."



Tom Slupske

The company has 250 agents, and Rudolph estimated that about 75 percent of the agents have signed up to offer the text-messaging service for their clients.

"The old days of an open house and an ad in the paper, waiting for the phone to ring, are long gone," said Tom Slupske, an agent with Counselor Realty in Brooklyn Park, Minn. Slupske uses TaggLine, a service offered by Minneapolis-based Taggart Communications, to automatically transmit property information to consumers via audio recording, text message or photo download.

The system features a toll-free number that prospective buyers can call to hear options on how to receive property information. They are prompted to enter an identification number for the property that appears on the for-sale sign of homes that are marketed using the TaggLine service. If consumers do not want to receive a text message or data file, they can listen to an audio recording for the property.

Slupske said that in addition to advertising the TaggLine service on for-sale signs, he has also used it in print advertising. "Rather than have a lengthy ad, which is expensive, I can run just minimal words," he said, by including the TaggLine phone number and property number.

The service provides subscribing agents with the phone number of each consumer who calls the toll-free number.

Heather Dietrich Feigum, a buyer specialist for Keller Williams Integrity Northwest in Elk River, Minn., who also uses TaggLine, said she follows up by phone immediately when she receives messages from consumers who use the TaggLine system. "Typically they do have more questions," she said, and she learns whether those buyers are already represented by an agent when she calls. Feigum said she has subscribed to the system for about a year. "We've had great results with it," she said.



Heather
Dietrich Feigum



Firas Naji

Agents and their clients in the commercial real estate market are particularly proficient in the use of mobile technologies, said Firas Naji, a commercial real estate broker for Network Real Estate Group Ltd. in Tinley Park, Ill. Naji uses his Sprint Mogul mobile device to access the area's MLS and to keep in touch with clients. "I have a client who strictly replies to me through his BlackBerry," he said, referring to another Internet-capable mobile device, and he said that other clients also use text messaging and mobile e-mail to communicate.

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