

Real Estate Sites Lack Consumer Focus RISMedia, Inc.

TIME TO GIVE HOME BUYERS AND SELLERS WHAT THEY WANT

Once upon a time, long, long ago—say the late 1990s—the real estate industry discovered the Internet. Typical real estate Web sites sold the agent or broker with a smiling photograph and a claim to 50 or so years' experience helping people buy and sell homes.

Flash forward to today. Consumers don't want to see your face and resume. Yet, that's still what they get from many real estate Web sites.

Kaira Sturdivant Rouda is typical of the new breed of real estate marketer. Chief operating officer of Real Living, a Columbus, Ohio-based national real estate firm, Rouda married into the business her father-in-law founded in 1956. She is a former vice president for marketing at Stanley Steamer International, the carpet-cleaning giant, and her expertise is in "branding."

When her husband, Harley Rouda, Jr., acquired RealtyOne, the Cleveland firm and his own company, HER Realtors, had their own Web sites. But both merely presented properties for sale. "We did a lot of brand essence workshops," she says. The result was a merged giant with 130 offices and 4,000 agents nationwide, and a much more consumer-focused Web site.

RealLiving.com is a feature-laden Internet portal. "What we're trying to say is that real-estate is not about us and the industry, but what the consumer wants," Rouda says. "To me, the Internet is where everybody's starting. There's no such thing as an online and an off-line customer. All of our focus has been about putting out helpful tools and engaging content to make the connection between the agent and consumer as strong and deep and long-lasting as possible. But the consumer is in control."

MyRealLiving 2.0, launched in April, is drawing 2,000 new members a month. Buyers are able to virtually "flip" saved property cards and add personal notes, share properties and events with family, friends and agents, and bookmark articles that help in the process. Sellers can track online views of their properties.

The online faces are not just those of agents'. "Consumers want to see a reflection of themselves," says Rouda, so the site features "consumer lifestyle shots."

The key to the Web nowadays "is engagement. We've got 25 people in our IT department always developing, creating, moving things forward. We meet every week to talk about what each of our teams can bring to the Web.

"For a while, there's been a myopic focus on lead generation that led a lot of brokers awry, because consumers aren't leads to be generated, they're people looking for houses. So for us, it's always been about having them tell us when they want to be engaged with an agent, how they want to use our site and to make sure we're not creating any roadblocks in the way of them getting information."

Internally, the changing Internet environment has created another challenge, as older agents try to adapt to the new environment. "Change is always hard," says Rouda. "There is so much training around [RealLiving.com] now because it is such a deep site. We have a great professional team that created learning tools to get agents up to speed."

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