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Wired for home selling

By Marco R. della Cava
USA TODAY

SAN FRANCISCO — Betty Brachman, a 20-year real estate veteran, used to sell homes the old-fashioned way. She would preview a few houses, call her clients with lavish descriptions, arrange to meet them.

Then they'd take a few weeks to think on it. Call that the Stone Age agent.

In today's San Francisco, with its citizens the most wired and its housing market the most competitive in the nation, multimillion-dollar deals can be struck in less time than it takes to read this story.

So Brachman of Pacific Union Real Estate has gone high-tech. With a vengeance.

For four years, she has had her own Web site, www.bettybrachman.com, which drums up 20% of her business. She's among the city's top agents, with sales averaging \$1.5 million each and a year-to-date total of \$55 million.

Brachman's technological arsenal also includes:

- ▶ A PalmPilot V and Nextel cellular radio phone with e-mail for communicating with her staff of three.
- ▶ A Nextel I-2000 cellular phone for making domestic and international calls to clients.
- ▶ A Sony digital camera to shoot homes.
- ▶ A Hewlett-Packard scanner and color printer. ("I don't know how to use either, but my assistants do.")

Which brings us to another point. Brachman is decidedly disinterested in technology.

She doesn't have a personal e-mail account. She has a fabulous stereo in her million-dollar apartment, but she doesn't fiddle with it. And she frowns at how cellphones often ruin her between-home-showing cruises in her new titanium Jaguar XK8 convertible.

Technophobe, yes. Fool, no.

"My clients are completely wired. That's why I am," she says.

Make no mistake, Brachman is dealing with the elite in the realm of real estate. But the need for all real estate agents to be technology savvy is critical, says Dale Mattison, an agent and regional vice president of the National Association of Realtors (NAR) in Washington.

"I spend half my day online with customers," Mattison says. "Today, thanks to the Net, buyers come to us much more knowledgeable than they ever were. They're ready to make decisions."

To help real estate agents get up to digital speed, the NAR last spring initiated an online training seminar for agents. Over six weeks, participants learn about e-mail, how to set up a personal real estate site and other tips. Once certified, the agents are allowed to list an E-Pro title after their name. About 7,000 agents are signing up monthly. There are 750,000 association-registered agents in the USA.

Mattison notes that the Internet, through sites such as Realtor.com, allows consumers access to the once-private Multiple Listing Service. The result: Buyers ask for details on an average of five homes a week, vs. 1.3 in the pound-the-pavement pre-Net days.

"This is just the tip of the iceberg," Mattison says.

Virtual tours

What lurks beneath the surface is technology that will allow buyers even more intimate home-viewing experiences from the comforts of their chairs.

Homes that offer virtual tours, 360-degree views of rooms and yards, are fixtures in the Multiple Listing Service. With broadband technology, that view could become a crisp video tour controlled by the buyer, says Kevin McCurdy, founder of Bamboo.com, the technology behind the virtual real estate tour that earlier this year merged with Interactive Pictures to form iPix. "The new home buyers of the Internet generation are going to demand more sophisticated virtual tours, and they won't tolerate agents who aren't up-to-date with technology," he says.

McCurdy thinks this is one arena where consumers will remain patient with available technology: "Better to wait it out than fly cross-country and be disappointed."

Prospective buyer Rozan Andrews did fly cross-country to view a San Francisco apartment with stunning views of the bay and Alcatraz. She and her husband, David, who just wrapped up his post as legal counsel to the State Department, first viewed the \$1.5 million Russian Hill property in all its photographic glory thanks to e-mail from Brachman.

"David really wasn't interested in coming out from Washington, but when he saw the photos, he said, 'If it looks like that, we'll buy it,'" Andrews says.

Brachman is quick to reminisce about earlier days. "Twenty years ago, you had two pieces of paper associated with a sale. A contract and a letter from the city," she says. "Today," — she whips out a 3-inch-thick binder — "we measure a deal in inches. It's wild."



By Martin Klimek for USA TODAY

Fool? Nope: Betty Brachman says she upgraded to the technological age because her clients did.

Why the increase in file size? High home prices mean lawyers, she says, and lawyers mean paperwork. And that's just the beginning. "Voice mail came along, and I thought, 'Wow, my life will get so much easier,'" she says. "Now, my time in the car is spent returning 70 daily voice-mail messages."

High-tech aside, Brachman has no doubt what brings success in real estate: "In the end, it's about the quality of the service. Ultimately, buying a house is one of the more emotional things in life. You have to be there for that person. In person."

Realtors

Business: Pacific Union Real Estate

Key technology: Web site

Quote: "My clients are completely wired. That's why I am," says agent Betty Brachman.