

REALTOR AE

THE BUSINESS JOURNAL FOR REALTOR® ASSOCIATION EXECUTIVES

SPRING 2013



Weigh Your Options

Which tech channels are your best bet?

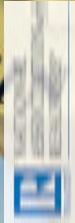


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Are You Listening?**
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Enhance Volunteer
Participation**
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Video How-to**
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Plus: Embrace the Cloud • Train or Hire? • RPAC Solicitations





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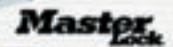
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The RAE editorial board reviews each issue and provides critical feedback, proposes story ideas and industry contacts to interview, and stays in touch with fellow AEs nationwide to scout out new programs and products to share with the AE community. To join the editorial board, write an article, or contribute information, e-mail Carolyn Schwaar at cschwaar@realtors.org.



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Cover image by Nick Rotondo, ©2013.

AEC Chair

Tech “Aha” Moments



Mark Allen, RCE, CIPS, CRS, is CEO of the Minneapolis Area Association of REALTORS®. Contact him at 952-988-3134 or marka@mplsrealtor.com.

Hello from Minnesota, where we are still waiting for spring to arrive. Anybody want to join me back in sunny San Diego, home of this year's AEI Institute? And what an event 2013 AEI was! I was so impressed with the excellent work the AEI committee and NAR staff did.

As this is the technology issue of *REALTOR® AE* magazine, I went back to the committee and asked them what their tech “aha!” moments at AEI were this year.

The committee used this cool Web tool called Basecamp to manage their interaction in the digital world. It's an amazing project management tool, keeping everyone on the same page for planning and production. The communication via Basecamp, throughout the year, helped the committee connect and thrive as a team. It is a tech tool your association should explore. Read more about virtual collaboration on p. 18.

The AEI mobile app started the conference on a solid tech footing. It worked great for planning the day, reviewing handouts of the speakers in all tracks, and distilling great information for those back home—even for sessions you were not able to attend. The mobile app was instrumental in AEI becoming almost totally digital (i.e., paperless)! Handouts, session evaluations, and even the silent auction bidding were all handled electronically. One final mobile app comment; Take a peek at the rebranded and revamped realtor.com app, which is much cleaner to use.

Some RPR enhancements that are coming out for AEs look super cool, committee members said. Read more on p. 9.

Speaking of consumer engagement, check out www.nartools.com. It is an online ad generator provided by NAR to help state and local associations

customize advertising materials from the NAR Public Advocacy Campaign.

But with all the new tools and gadgets, it's not just about teaching members about tech tools and apps, we need to teach them where to find resources. For example, when an AE at the conference asked a speaker which wireless router they should consider, the speaker suggested reaching out to a resource in the community that has experience in wireless routers, such as the local high school.

In another session, speakers Dawn Kennedy and Breanna Vanstrom talked about using data to objectively measure success of association programs and services. Not every program is going to work for your entire membership, they said; “target your programs to individual demographic segments and objectively measure success.”

Josh Linkner's presentation on the creative process discussed how we need to risk failure to achieve breakthroughs. If we all felt less fearful of failure, we might try more things and experience more breakthroughs. My personal comment: Too many associations fear failure. This is at least partially a product of association leadership, who, by nature, are prone to being risk-averse.

Great big thank yous to Marc Lebowitz, AEI Chair; Steve Volkodav, AEI Vice Chair; Pat Breme, Laura Burns, Isaac Chavez, Laura Crowther, Sheila Dodson, Brenda Florida, Maranda Herrington, Tessa Hultz, Carol Culpepper Seal, and Albert Tran, first and foremost for planning a most excellent 2013 AEI for us all to experience and enjoy, and second, for helping me with the content for this column.

—Mark Allen, 2013 Chair, AE Committee

MORE ONLINE

Visit the AE Committee page at REALTOR.org for more on AEC activities in 2013.



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REALTOR® AE magazine



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Fair Housing Investigation Spurs Association Action

A little over a year ago, Ryan Conrad, CEO of the Lehigh Valley Association of REALTORS®, Pa., got a phone call that made him clear his calendar and convene his executive committee: Twenty-four members were on the verge of being prosecuted

for Fair Housing Act violations as part of an undercover testing project by the Fair Housing Council of Suburban Philadelphia.

“We immediately went into crisis management mode,” says Conrad. “The results of the testing were not good and we felt strongly that one alleged violation is one too many.” In fact, the report concluded that 73 percent of the time, testers posing as home buyers or renters experienced disparate treatment by REALTORS® either in person or by phone. “I was really surprised by the results,” recalls Conrad. “It was like a bomb was dropped on us.”

Alan Jennings, executive director at the Community Action Committee of the Lehigh Valley, the organization that requested the fair housing testing, demanded a meeting with association leadership and their attorney. He warned that the testing findings were so bad it would make national news. Conrad, who had been on the job for only four months at that time, convinced Jennings to sit down with him first to talk.

Jennings assured Conrad that his or-

ganization wanted, above all else, to correct the behavior they found among the REALTORS®—and not just gain media attention for their own organization. “This set the stage for everything going forward,” explains Conrad. After a series of eight meetings with Jennings that included association leadership, the Allentown chapter of the NAACP, area community organizers and pastors, and the mayor of Allentown, they outlined a plan forgoing prosecution in favor of education.

“We felt it was really important to come to the table with constructive solutions,” says Conrad, who worked with Fred Underwood, the NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF REALTORS® director of diversity and community outreach, to flesh out the education program that had as its goal reinforcement of a zero-tolerance policy on noncompliance with the Fair Housing Act.

The plan includes:

- A broker-pledge action plan, whereby all brokers are asked to sign a pledge reaffirming their commitment to fair housing. They receive a certificate to hang in their

office and are e-mailed fair housing-related materials, such as topics and scenarios, to talk about at monthly agent meetings.

- A fair housing publication for consumers on their fair housing expectations and rights.
- The formation of an association diversity task force, made up of minority members of the association to address issues as they arise and monitor education efforts.
- A local Allentown fair housing promotional event.
- A fair housing awareness event to highlight how the association and its members are advocates of fair housing.

Since the launch of the action plan last November, more than half of the association’s brokers have signed the pledge, and both members and brokerages have requested more information on fair housing, especially the actual scenarios of Fair Housing Act violations from the initial report.

Some members in LVAR leadership were initially defensive about the testing findings and being “targeted” by community groups,

notes Conrad. But when the education plan was positioned not as an admission of guilt, but as a reaffirmation of REALTORS® core beliefs in fair housing, leadership had no trouble buying in.

"Agents are on their toes more," says Conrad. "They are wondering if they're being tested and we get regular calls from agents who say, 'I think I'm being tested. What do I do?'" Resources for members are posted on the association's Web site.

"Agents ... are wondering if they're being tested and we get regular calls from agents who say, 'I think I'm being tested. What do I do?'"

Conrad frequently details the survey's findings at brokerage visits. The specific fair housing violations included instances where white buyers who specifically requested to live within the city of Allentown were shown properties in the more white suburbs, whereas minority buyers, who requested to live outside of the city were shown properties in minority-dominated downtown Allentown. In other instances, minority buyers were shown fewer properties than white buyers with the same needs and minorities were asked for identification and financial qualifications more often than white buyers. Agents also were alleged to have violated fair housing rules by sharing their personal opinions of the quality of the Allentown schools and the level of crime in the city to white buyers but not to minority buyers.

In the end, no agents were prosecuted and the impact on the public perception of REALTORS® in the area was minimal, says Conrad. "But this could happen anywhere," he cautions. To help other organizations get out in front of this issue, Conrad has been speaking at other associations in his state and he offers all REALTOR® associations his fair housing materials on request (contact ryan@lvar.org). ▲

Cindy Doll Receives Terry McDermott Leadership Award

Cindy Doll, CEO of the Pismo Coast Association of REALTORS®, Calif., is the recipient of the Terry McDermott community leadership award, presented during the AE Institute in March. This award was created to honor an AE who has shown outstanding leadership and commitment in helping others outside of regular association duties.

During the past nine years, Doll has served as a foster parent to about 20 teens with emotional and often behavioral challenges. Doll provides love, discipline, and guidance as she serves as a positive role model. "There was a point several years ago that I felt compelled to become involved in foster care," says Doll. "Because I enjoy teenagers—for some unexplainable reason—I went through the steps to become certified with a local foster care agency."

These children have come first on Doll's priority list, and many have maintained contact with her long after they moved on.

"Learning that I had been selected to receive the award was quite a surprise, and

has been a humbling experience," says Doll. "The best part has been bringing attention to the need for foster care and for mentoring teenagers. My hope is that others will find it within themselves to begin mentoring teenagers in their local areas because the need is great."

Doll plans to donate the \$500 McDermott Award to her foster care organization, the Family Care Network.

"I would like to thank all who are involved in some type of community service," says Doll, "because it is people like you who make your local areas a wonderful place to live." ▲



Cindy Doll

NAR Merges Global and Commercial Divisions

The NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF REALTORS® in March announced an organizational change designed to enhance the visibility and priority of its commercial and international areas. NAR has combined its Commercial Division with its Global Services Division in a move that mirrors what some state and local REALTOR® associations have done already to emphasize how these two specialties can work together. "The structure of NAR's new Commercial & Global Services Group shines a deliberate spotlight on residential and commercial sectors worldwide," says Janet Branton, senior vice president of Commercial and Global Services. "Cross-border investment, in both commercial and residential, is not a fad—the world is getting smaller and globalization will continue to shape the industry as a whole." ▲



Briefing

LOCAL, STATE & NATIONAL PROGRAMS

The Immeasurable Value of Good Neighbors

In its 13 years of honoring REALTORS® volunteer and community service work nationwide, the *REALTOR® Magazine* Good Neighbor Awards have inspired dozens of state and local associations to launch their own recognition programs.

Associations of any size can launch a Good Neighbor Awards program and then nominate local volunteer heroes for national recognition, says Sara Geimer, manager of NAR's Good Neighbor Awards. "It's great publicity for local boards when one of their members is selected for the national award," Geimer notes. Recognizing and promoting members' community service work also builds awareness for the charities themselves and inspires others to contribute to and get more involved in the community.

"We make a big deal of all of our state Good Neighbor Award winners and they garner media coverage in their local dailies for themselves, their business, and their charity," says Eric Berman, communications director at the Massachusetts Association of REALTORS®, which established its Good Neighbor Awards program in 2004. All state Good Neighbor winners are entered to win the national *REALTOR® Magazine* Good Neighbor Award, Berman says. In 2010, Wendy and John Rocca from Watertown, Mass.,

won for their work sending care packages to American soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan. The deadline for the national Good Neighbor Awards is May 20.

Winners of the Missouri Association of REALTORS® Good Neighbor Awards receive a \$2,500 grant for their charity, along with statewide recognition in the association's publication. In Iowa, the REALTOR® association's Good Neighbor Awards recently honored the work of member Jane McCune for her 10 years in volunteer recruitment, fund-raising, and building projects, including Habitat for Humanity.

On the local level, the 1,100-member Greater Manchester/Nashua Board of REALTORS®, N.H., established its Good Neighbor Awards program in 2002 and donates \$1,000 to the winning member's charity.

For local and state associations interested in establishing their own Good Neighbor Awards program, NAR provides an easy-to-follow starter kit on REALTOR.org/gna (click "For Media and AEs"). If your association already has a local or state Good Neighbor Awards program, please submit the details (deadline, number of winners, and grant amounts) to NAR for inclusion in a national database where associations can share ideas and resources. For more information, contact Sara Geimer at sgeimer@realtors.org. ▲



Find Good Neighbors in your Community:

Enter Your Members by May 20

REALTOR® Magazine is seeking nominees for the 14th annual Good Neighbor Awards, which recognize REALTORS® who impact their communities through volunteer work. Five winners will be recognized at the 2013 REALTORS® Conference & Expo in San Francisco and will

receive travel expenses to attend the show and a \$10,000 grant for their community cause. Volunteer work might include affordable housing initiatives, youth mentoring, homelessness prevention, or anything else that makes a community a better place to live. Postmark deadline is May 20, 2013. For more information and an entry form, go to REALTOR.org/gna, or contact Sara Geimer at sgeimer@realtors.org.

Small Board Takes On Federal Agency

The 110-member Sequim Association of REALTORS®, Wash., proved itself a formidable foe to the state Department of Ecology when it came to local property owners' water rights. This past fall when a state rule was proposed that would change, limit, and charge fees for the amount of water residents could use on their property, the REALTOR® association asked, how do you plan to inform residents of these new rules? The state's answer? It wasn't going to inform residents.



With the help of its state association, the REALTOR® association took it upon itself to launch an educational campaign. Because of its informational Web site (www.sequimwater.com) and the \$6,000 spent on developing and sending 24,000 postcards (pictured above), the residents, citizens, and local REALTORS® became aware of the pending rule. Largely due to the REALTOR® association's efforts, local residents had the opportunity to seek answers and provide feedback and alternative solutions to the rule makers. While many of the provisions of the rule, which went into effect Jan. 2, are still controversial, and real estate development in the area has slowed, the REALTOR® association remains committed to representing the interests of local property owners to lawmakers and keeping residents informed. ▲

AT AEI



AEs attending the AE Institute, March 18-21, spoke with *RAE* about their latest successes and challenges.

Brenda Roney, RCE, AE, Carteret County Association of REALTORS®, N.C.

“The future of the MLS is our biggest challenge right now. Unlike a lot of industry leaders, I don’t think it will go away, but I think it’s going to be a different animal. What the MLS becomes will have a great impact on all of us.”



Jason Yochim, EO, Saskatoon Region Association of REALTORS®, Canada

“Technology is a very big challenge for us and I think one of the biggest challenges in the industry. At the street level real estate is unchanged: properties need to be shown, deals need to be negotiated, but it’s how technology gets us there. The rapid rate of advancement makes it a challenge to keep up with. I feel members fall into three technology camps: the early adopters, the late adopters, and those who will never adopt technology. I refer to technology as natural selection; it’s unfortunate that some great members are not going to be in this business much longer because of their unwillingness to adapt to technology.”



Wayne Edwards, CAE, director of professional development, Illinois Association of REALTORS®

“The challenge has been adapting to a range of new technologies so that you can attempt to serve a broader range of members. We have a much wider range of member needs right now in terms of the delivery of an education product, for example, one group wants live classroom education, another group wants it online or self-study. Then we’re trying to blend some of those challenges with the state laws that we have to work with in terms of CE or prelicensing requirements. We have rolled out a free webinar a month on a different subject each month, which has been very popular.”

Ultimate Reality in REALTOR® Safety Training

Members of the Northern Wasatch Association of REALTORS®, Utah, attended a unique REALTOR® safety class at a one-of-a-kind facility designed to simulate real-life situations.

The Swanson Tactical Training Center, just a few miles from the association office, is used by law enforcement agencies for public safety and self-defense training.

“Practice is really the only way you’ll know how to react under stress and fear,” says Randy Benoit, an association member on the education committee that developed the course. “Using the talents and facility,

we have developed real-life situations where REALTORS® learn how to detect a threat, how to reduce or eliminate that threat by proactive activities, and then, how, in a real-life situation, to protect themselves and escape.”

The Swanson center is a massive city under one roof—about the size of a super Wal-Mart—encompassing a bank, school, hotel, and several full-size homes. Along with state-of-the-art simulators, the facility also has physical training areas, classrooms, and a pepper-spray training lab. For members with a concealed weapons permit, there’s

the opportunity to train on the use of a handgun in a simulated environment.

The first eight-hour training course, held March 8, included

classroom training on threat detection, planning, and response. The optional hands-on training included actual physical contact with an instructor posing as an attacker. Dressed in protective gear, the instructor simulated an attack and allowed REALTORS® the first-hand opportunity to see what they would do—and should do—to escape an attacker. Students are allowed to strike, kick, and basically do everything in their power to escape the attack.

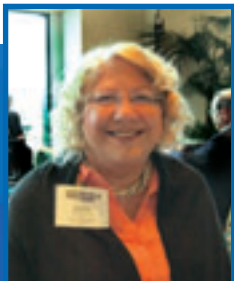
“We hope that this training is never needed,” says Scott Lalli, association president, “but by providing this education, we will have prepared the REALTOR® family member for danger if it happens.” ▲



Briefing

NAR NEWS, AE VOICES

AT AEI



Jeanette Newton, CEO, Dulles Area Association of REALTORS®, Va.

"We've been fortunate to have a lot of very well-attended public policy forums lately; they're coming in droves. We've had a variety of issues come up, including the funding of the controversial Dulles Metrorail project, tax issues, and a new mapping system in Loudoun County. We invited very knowledgeable county officials to come in and talk to members and we've had to turn members away because our room only holds 80. Any free informational program that can be offered to the members is very valuable."



Sue Blumhoefer, AE, West Central Association of REALTORS®, Minn.

"A big challenge for us is getting members involved in the legislative issues. Right now state lawmakers are talking about a sales tax on commissions and services and we need members to get involved, respond to calls to action, and talk to their local legislators. But it's a challenge to get the word out. We have 310 members in a very large territory. Our call-to-action response is less than 10 percent. It's not that they think it's the association's job to do something about these issues, it's that they just aren't aware of these issues. We've been countering this by doing office visits. We're going to all 90 offices in our association, and legislative issues are the first topic we talk about and we have seen some progress."



Robert Conwill, MLS administrator, Jackson Assoc. of REALTORS®, Miss.

"A really big success for us is our new statewide public site that we launched in March. Seven boards are providing data for this and more are joining every day. It's been a really good benefit for our members because it's a public site and the data comes straight from the MLS and the leads go directly back to the members. One challenge for us, however, is keeping up with going mobile. Everything is going mobile today, and quickly. That's going to be the next hurdle for us. We are working with vendors to get the mobility worked into our MLS technology and we're seeing a lot more demand for it."

Connecticut Launches Mobile MLS App

The Connecticut statewide MLS (CTMLS) launched its real estate search app in April to both REALTORS® and the public. The app, called CTreal Mobile, is available free in the Apple App Store and on Google Play. Homes data is drawn directly from the MLS and updates when the MLS is updated, according to CTMLS's

Web site (<http://ctmls.ctreal.com/ctreal-mobile>). Key features include GPS tracking; map search; share listings via social media, text message, and e-mail; open house search; and driving directions. ▲

NAR Push Supports Commercial Members

The NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF REALTORS® is launching a renewed effort to serve its growing contingent of commercial real estate practitioner members, now at 75,000. To provide enhanced commercial real estate information services, Xceligent, a REALTOR Benefits® Partner, is building a national public marketing platform for commercial real estate listings online called CommercialSearch.com. This new commercial property and business listing portal pulls data from REALTOR® commercial information exchanges nationwide. Commercial property listings on NAR's CommercialSource.com along with their individual account holders, will be transferred to the new national public marketing site, CommercialSearch.com.

In other commercial developments, local associations are encouraged to apply for an NAR Commercial Innovation Grant in 2014. These grants will assist REALTOR® associations with funding for game-changing ideas that benefit or add value to commercial real estate professionals locally. For more, contact NAR Commercial at NARCommercial@REALTORS.org. ▲





Ann G. Drum, CEO, Gaston Association of REALTORS®, N.C.

"Our upcoming housing fair is the most exciting endeavor we've undertaken lately. As soon as we heard about the grants available from My REALTOR® Party, we knew we wanted to host a housing fair for consumers because it's something we never had the money for in the past. The event is June 1 and we plan to have all the answers to buying a house under one roof, with seminars as well as exhibitors from local banks, mortgage companies, builders, and free space provided for nonprofit organizations offering housing grants and related information."



Myra Jolivet, VP of Public Affairs, MLS Listings, Calif.

"I think for all of us relevance is the biggest challenge today. That's going to be a keyword for a long time for associations and MLSs because there are so many changes in the marketplace and those changes bring about new business practices and models for the people we serve. And for the MLS, changes include the need to keep up with the evolving browsing habits by consumers and new consumer expectations. The key to unlocking this challenge is getting to know members and consumers more by surveying and other methods. There is no such thing as too much data. We all need to know our target audiences better to meet tomorrow's challenges."



George Postlethweight, RCE, CEO, Southwest Indiana Association of REALTORS®

"Our greatest challenge in the last six months has been establishing a new regional MLS among 13 founding associations. It's a different type of getting together; it's developing a new board of directors independent of the associations. The regional MLS will have 5,000 members to give us better buying power for MLS services; an economy of scale was the business model behind it. A recent success was our leadership training and membership meeting featuring NAR past president Charles McMillan. We got very positive feedback from members and we were very proud to have him down here."



Cathy Maxwell, EO, Lethbridge and District Association of REALTORS®, Canada

"One of the greatest challenges I face, and that I see with a lot of the AEs that I've met here, is the governance. We have very successful REALTORS®, who are good at what they do but when they get into the directorship role they don't know how the big machine works and it's a challenge to gracefully and respectfully teach them about governance. Big ideas and enthusiasm are great, but you also need good governance to make the association flow properly. We're a small board, so we don't have a leadership academy. I lean on my fellow area AEs to share leadership training resources and tips and tricks. We all want the same thing."

NAR Launches Tech Edge Conference

The NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF REALTORS®' new day-long technology conference debuted in Fairfax, Va., on April 12 and will travel to seven cities throughout 2013. The conference is designed to teach attendees about cutting-edge technologies that are changing the real estate industry and how they can harness these to do more business.

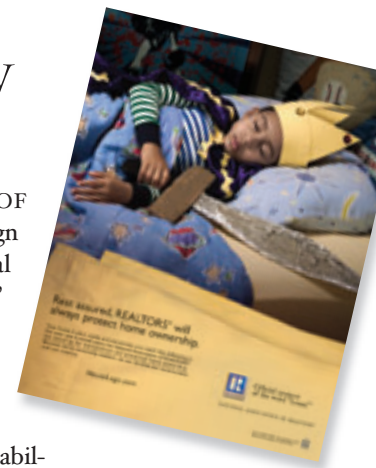
Session presenters include NAR's Nobu Hata, director of digital engagement; Bill Lublin, CEO of the Social Media Marketing Institute and Century 21 Advantage Gold; and Amy Chorew, vice president of platform development at Better Homes and Gardens Real Estate. For more information and to register visit www.epronar.com/nar_tech_edge.cfm. Media and non-NAR members are welcome to attend.

NAR Tech Edge will take place in San Francisco on July 24; Boca Raton, Fla., on August 7; Columbus, Ohio, on September 7; Parsippany, N.J., on September 23; Chicago on October 9; and Springfield, Mass., on October 18. ▲

Customize NAR's Advocacy Materials

The NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF REALTORS® Public Advocacy Campaign began in February with the national launch of the new commercial "Dreams," which underscores the value of home ownership from a child's point of view. NAR's national advertising efforts are now focused on the advocacy issues that affect REALTORS® and their clients' ability to buy, sell, and own real estate. The newest campaign assures consumers that NAR is working hard to protect the dream and reality of home ownership for our families and our future.

State and local associations can generate their own customized versions of "Dreams" campaign materials online at the NAR ad generator, www.NARtools.com. ▲



Briefing

LEGAL

AE Use of R Marks

A question posed by AEs from time to time is whether and how the REALTOR® marks may be used to identify AEs and other association staff.

The National Association's constitution identifies eight classes of membership in the association, but only two of these classes—member boards and board members—are authorized to use the REALTOR® marks. Moreover, among board members, only REALTORS® and REALTOR-ASSOCIATE®s (not Institute Affiliate members) are authorized to use the REALTOR® marks to identify their membership in the association, for example on their business cards, advertising, and so on. "Member boards" refers to local and state associations that are also authorized to use the REALTOR® marks, subject to certain requirements.

AEs should not describe themselves as REALTORS®

The NAR constitution recognizes that association executives are eligible for a category of membership identified as Individual Membership (AEs have to apply for this membership; it's not granted automatically). Although individual members who are engaged in the real estate business as defined in the NAR constitution can use the REALTOR® marks, neither the association itself nor its association executive are a part of the real estate business as defined in the constitution. As a result, the constitution makes the point expressly that association executives, even if they attain individual membership, are not authorized to call themselves REALTORS® or use the REALTOR® marks in a way that identifies them as REALTORS®.

The right of associations to use the REALTOR® marks differs from the rights granted to REALTORS® and REALTOR-ASSOCIATES®. Associations can allow staff members to use the marks when done so in connection with their employment, so long as the use is in reference to the association and not the staff member as an individual. For example, association staff can use the association name and the REALTOR® marks on their business cards, but they should not identify or refer to themselves as REALTORS®.

Another issue is the use of the REALTOR® marks on association executives' lapel pins. Just as members are authorized to wear REALTOR® lapel pins to indicate their membership in the association, so are association executives authorized to wear an association executive pin to identify themselves as being affiliated as an executive with the association.

For more on use of the REALTOR® marks, visit REALTOR.org, and search "REALTOR® marks." ■

—Mike Thiel, NAR associate counsel

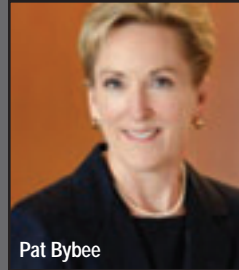
In Memoriam

Pat Bybee, RCE, respected and influential MLS executive, was killed in a car crash on March 13 outside of Boulder, Colo. Bybee was president and CEO of Metrolist, the largest MLS in Colorado, for 27 years before leaving in 2011. Bybee joined the REALTOR® organization in 1974 as MLS administrator for the Scottsdale Board of REALTORS® and was the association executive of the Eugene Board of REALTORS®, Ore., from 1978 to 1984. She was inducted into the NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF REALTORS®' Dr. Almon R. (Bud) Smith, RCE, AE Leadership Society in 1998. Bybee, 61, lived in Littleton, Colo., with her husband, Vern Bybee.

The Patricia J. Bybee Memorial Scholarship Fund has been established at the Burns School of Real Estate & Construction Management at Denver University. The fund will be used to support deserving students at the Burns School who are pursuing real estate management careers at the undergraduate or graduate level. To donate to the fund, make checks out to Burns School University of Denver (with a note or memo that says Patricia J. Bybee Memorial Scholarship Fund) and mail to: Dr. Mark Lee Levine, Professor, Burns School/Daniels College, University of Denver, 2101 South University Blvd., Denver, CO 80208.

For more information on the scholarship, call 303-871-2142.

Ashton Welch, RCE, former executive vice president of the Montana Association of REALTORS® before



Pat Bybee

retiring in 2005, died March 14 at his home in Concord, N.H. Welch had been battling COPD for several years. Welch was inducted into the NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF REALTORS®' Dr. Almon R. (Bud) Smith, RCE, AE Leadership Society in 2001, and served on the editorial board of *REALTOR®*

AE magazine. He was a member of the REALTOR® family for nearly 20 years, starting out as government affairs director and later executive vice president of the New Hampshire Association of REALTORS®. Welch, 70, served in the New Hampshire House of Representatives and was also a professional photographer. Welch is survived by his wife, Carol, four sons, and thirteen grandchildren. Memorial donations may be made to the Coe-Brown Northwood Academy Development Fund, 907 First New Hampshire Turnpike, Northwood, NH 03261, or the First Congregational Church of Concord,

Development Fund, 177 North Main Street, Concord, NH 03301.



Andrew Wooten

Andrew Wooten, 50, a safety instructor for the NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF

REALTORS®, and a frequent state and local REALTOR® association safety presenter, drowned Feb. 26 in a tragic accident when he was caught in a rip tide off the coast of Mexico near Cozumel. Wooten

was the president of Safety Awareness Firearms Education (S.A.F.E.), and had been in the safety and security industry for more than 24 years. Wooten was serving as an instructor for a real estate continuing education Seminar at Sea, sponsored by the Emerald Coast Association of REALTORS®, Fla., when he died. ■



Ashton Welch

Congratulations University of Chicago AE Graduates

These AEs below earned their Certificate in Nonprofit Management from the University of Chicago in a program sponsored by the NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF REALTORS®. The program will sunset at the end of 2013. Pictured, from left to right:

- **Sandra Carroll**, RCE, Berkshire County Board of REALTORS®, Mass.
- **Guyla Greenly**, RCE, Wyoming Association of REALTORS®
- **Colette Lang**, Gallatin Association of REALTORS®, Mont.
- **Carol Platt**, Osceola County Association of REALTORS®, Fla.
- **George Postlethweight**, RCE, Southwest Indiana Association of REALTORS®
- **Shelley Specchio**, Northern Nevada Regional MLS, Inc.
- **Robert Wigton**, Nevada Association of REALTORS®
- (Not pictured)
- **Shane Allen**, Harlingen Board of REALTORS®, Texas
- **Karen Dumond**, RCE, Massachusetts Association of REALTORS®
- **Margaret Heise**, Southeast Minnesota Association of REALTORS®
- **Holly Moskerintz**, NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF REALTORS®
- **Jenny Pakula**, RCE, CAE, Oregon Association of REALTORS®
- **Jamie Ridge**, Suburban REALTORS® Alliance, Pa.



Congratulations New CAEs

The following REALTOR® association executives have earned their Certified Association Executive designation (CAE) from the American Society of Association Executives.

Ryan Conrad, RCE, CAE, CEO, Lehigh Valley Association of REALTORS®, Pa.



Jennifer Pakula, JD, RCE, CAE, V.P. of Legal Affairs and Business Development, Oregon Association of REALTORS®



Angela Shields, RCE, CAE, President/CEO, San Antonio Board of REALTORS®, Texas



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To BLOG

or Not to Blog?

Take a look at REALTOR® associations' blogs from around the country and you might begin to question what a blog is after all and what it should be.

In about 2007, when REALTOR® associations first launched blogs, the platform was rich with potential. Association blogs would facilitate an ongoing digital dialogue between members and leadership on issues affecting the industry and their businesses. It would broaden associations' understanding of who was willing to engage with them and what members were excited and worried about. Yet, for many associations, that promise fell short of expectations. Several respondents to *RAE's* recent blog survey said they've closed their blogs due to lack of member interest.

Association blogs were going to offer a new relatively unstructured form of communication where members and staff could write about anything, at any length. But for many, it was

precisely this formless feature that caused the downfall. Over time, the blog space morphed into a content dumping ground of press releases, product promotions, and leftover newsletter articles. It's no wonder—writing original and interesting content is difficult and time consuming. And it's especially disheartening when your carefully crafted opinion piece on local market pressures doesn't get a tenth of the page views of the Facebook photos of your board president dressed as Elvis for the RPAC fund-raising talent show.

It's enough to make you wonder: Is a blog worth it? You're not alone if this question has come up at your association.

In fact, *USA Today* reported last year that

Continued on page 14

by Carolyn Schwaar



An effective long-form blog can serve as a uniting hub for scattered social media posts. It's the home members are funneled to from other outlets—and who knows how many other outlets you'll be using in the future.

A. The Orange County Association of REALTORS®, Calif., maintains a regularly updated member blog at <http://blog.ocar.org>.

B. The Emerald Coast Association of REALTORS®, Fla., maintains a weekly updated member blog on the Wordpress platform at <http://ecarhotsheet.wordpress.com>.

C. The New Hampshire Association of REALTORS® maintains a blog at nharpulse.com.

D. (p. 16) The Cleveland Area Association of REALTORS® maintains a regularly updated member blog on the front page of its association Web site at www.cabor.com/articles.

E. (p. 16) The Massachusetts Association of REALTORS® maintains a regularly updated member blog featuring videos at www.themarreport.com.



D

Continued from page 12

with the growing allure of social media, more companies are replacing blogs with easier tools, such as Facebook and Twitter, that require less time and fewer resources. Surveys show fewer companies are blogging (down from 50 percent in 2010 to 44 percent in 2012*); instead companies are investing more resources at LinkedIn's company pages and on YouTube channels.

But before you abandon your blog—if you haven't already—take a hard look at the pros and cons, including what blogging does better than other platforms and whether you realistically have the resources to do blogging well.

BLOG PROS

If you struggle to keep your association updates within the character limits on Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn, then you realize the benefits of long posts. It's impossible to engage your audience, establish credibility, and sway reader opinion in 200 characters or less.

An effective long-form blog can serve as a unifying hub for scattered social media posts. It's the home members are funneled to from other outlets—and who knows how many other outlets you'll be using in the future. Your blog is yours, where no one can change the format, forcing you to redesign and repost (Facebook), suddenly charge you for features that used to be free (LinkedIn), or go out of business taking your data with it (Storylane).

Plus, fresh content is essential for search engine optimization success. Your regularly updated blog is likely to show up more often than your Web site in searches for industry-related information.

A blog enables an association to disseminate information and viewpoints that are picked up and shared by news outlets. Once upon a time, it wasn't considered journalistically credible to quote a blog; today it's common practice. Several associations in our blog survey said their blog is routinely quoted in local and even national media.

But the biggest benefit of having a blog, association blog survey respondents said, was "the ability to communicate in a more personal tone to members." The second most noted benefit was "the ability to explain issues or topics in-depth to members," which isn't possible on many other social media platforms.

According to HubSpot, companies with blogs attract 55 percent more Web site visitors, get 97 percent more inbound links, and have 434 percent more indexed Web pages than blog-less companies.



E

BLOG CONS

Blogging isn't for every association—and this has nothing to do with your association size. It takes commitment and consistency, likely over the span of at least a year, to bear fruit. Blogging takes time and resources—more than you may have originally thought. The hardest part isn't coming up with content, blog survey respondents said, it's finding time to write it. Then that content also has to be published and shared on social media. After that, you have to monitor and respond to comments, not to mention comment on other blogs in order to promote your own. Which brings us to the second most cited hurdle of association blogging, according to our survey— attracting traffic.

PLAN BEFORE YOU LEAP

The likely reason most of the estimated 95 percent of blogs that are abandoned within months of launch fail is poor or nonexistent planning. If you didn't have a thorough blog strategic plan when you created your blog two or three years ago, don't feel bad. Who knew you'd be using Facebook for business and communicating with your leadership team via LinkedIn. The very nature of technology makes it hard to plan around.

But launching a blog takes the same planning as launching any other association program. You're no stranger to strategic planning, so we won't list here all the elements your blog business plan needs (visit REALTOR.org/rae for 20 questions to get you started), but make sure that your blog is filling a real need and that you frequently reassess your plan to ensure that it's meeting its goals.

If your association blog is tied in with your marketing or communications programs, ensure that the time and resources allotted to it are realistic and that it's included as an element of every outreach campaign.

Because content is key, map out a weekly plan for your blog posts. AE respondents in *RAE's* blog survey said the most popular blog posts are those that provide housing stats, explore industry issues and trends, highlight upcoming events, and offer technology and MLS tips. Most of all, member-written posts offering peer-to-peer messaging get the highest views and shares.

Ultimately, if you lack the staff, time, and leadership buy-in to consistently maintain a quality blog, then other social media outreach platforms may be a better fit. But if you are in a position to make the most of this unique and branded online environment, you could benefit from enhanced communication and engagement, delivering tremendous value to your membership. ▲

*Source: the Center for Marketing Research at the University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth, 2012.

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ANALYTICS

Are Talking. Are You Listening?

By Doug Devitre

What hits, clicks, shares, and likes reveal about the way you communicate with members.

We tell ourselves (and our leadership) that we are doing everything we can to promote a call to action or get the word out about an association event. But if we can't prove it with data (or are using the wrong analytics), then our communications and marketing efforts risk becoming irrelevant.

Online analytics can reveal a surprising amount about the communications we send out via e-mail, Web sites, social media, and texting: how many readers, from which groups, how long each reader spent with the content, how many shared the content, how many clicked through to the video, and much more. If you're not paying careful attention to these numbers, you could be wasting a lot of effort.

You may think if you increase the effectiveness of any 10 channels by even 10 percent that you'll as much as double your reach. But the reality is that you must focus on increasing the effectiveness of your highest-priority channels since that's where you can gain exponential results due to the compounding effect on other metrics. The payoff will be a higher adoption rate of member services, a filled house for your next big event, or an increase in membership satisfaction.

So how do you know which channels to focus on?

When you choose a marketing channel to promote your next opportunity, class, or offer, carefully consider the metrics you can use to measure the campaign's success. Following are the most telling metrics, listed by channel, as well as advice on how to improve each one.

WEB SITE

A high "bounce rate" signifies that your Web site may not be retaining visitors. It means people visit, look at it, and leave quickly. Find the bounce rate in your Google Analytics. Anything higher than 50 percent means your site may need improvement. Maybe people visit, can't quickly find what they're looking for, and leave. Maybe they clicked through from your

newsletter and what they found wasn't of interest. Maybe they visited to see what's new and found only stale content. One easy way to reduce "bounce" is to make sure click-through links (i.e., "read more online," "find it on our Web site," "register online") have correlating content. You should also supply fresh content regularly with new blog articles, videos to watch, or by adding a comments area to keep people engaged.

Another important metric to watch in your Google Analytics report is "new" versus "returning" visitors, and how these two segments behave on your site when they get there. When you have a very high percentage of new visitors, it means your site is not attracting returning visitors (those who view your site regularly). Regular visitors are more likely to notice and participate in all of the other offerings on your site. Once you hook them, keep them hooked by maintaining a regular supply of fresh content.

Another telltale statistic is the conversion rate from an offer page (any Web site page where you're asking visitors to actually register for or buy something). This number, which is equal to how many bought or registered divided by the number of people who saw the page, lets you know how well you convinced visitors to actually commit or how easy the sign-up or purchase experience was.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media "engagement" is how many times someone in-



Analytics dashboard from Google.



Analytics dashboard from Chartbeat.

Not sure how many members are viewing your e-mail, Web site, or MLS with a mobile device? Analytics can tell you.



Analytics dashboard from Unilizer.

teracts with each of the social media channels by liking, commenting, tweeting, sharing, and so on. As engagement goes up, so does your reach. Each platform (Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, LinkedIn, Google+) offers its own set of analytics, but there's also a growing array of social metric dashboards (*chartbeat.com*, *unilizer.com*, and *hootsuite.com*, to name a few) that supply real-time data from multiple accounts and provide a report that demonstrates which social channels are working and which aren't.

Facebook offers additional tools to help improve your reach, including paid "promoted posts" that push posts higher in recipients' news feeds and keep them promoted longer. These are effective in increasing reach and click-through rates, some REALTOR® associations report.

E-MAIL

E-mail deliverability is always a priority in association communication plans. Getting your e-mails past the server and software maze, through the blacklisting and junk mail filters, and into recipients' inboxes is harder than ever. But you can increase the likelihood that your e-mails are not blocked, returned, or put in the spam folder.

One important step is to find your e-mail sender score. Like a credit score, a sender score is an indication of the trustworthiness of an e-mail source, compiled through data aggregated from 60 million mailboxes at a variety of ISPs, spam filtering, and security companies. This is the same type of data that mailbox providers use to determine whether to accept or reject e-mail. Check your sender score for free by entering your IP address at *senderscore.org*.

Once the delivery rate increases, the "opens" rate goes up, resulting in more clicks. And when there are more clicks, more members take action.

VIDEO

The video attention rate (how long visitors spend watching your video) is the best metric for video efficacy. A simple number of views can be misleading because it counts someone even if they view a five-minute video for five seconds, then leave. YouTube offers built-in analytics for your videos, but there are other services you can subscribe to (e.g., Google Analytics event tracking) that will track the reach of your video across multiple channels. Improve the attention rate of your videos by (in the video itself) asking provocative questions to gain interest or using an interview format featuring members. (*See more video tips on p. 20.*)

MOBILE

Not sure how many members are viewing your e-mail, Web site,

or MLS with a mobile device? Analytics can tell you. A variety of tools, including Google Analytics, can reveal what kind of device your members are receiving your communications on and whether the mobile users spend more or less time reading than computer users. This can be a real eye-opener for how you format and design your messages.

BEYOND THE NUMBERS

If you really want to know what's happening with your visitors—not just by the numbers—consider the variety of Web site add-on services, such as *clicktale.com* and *crazyegg.com*, that enable you to actually record what individual visitors are doing on your site, including their mouse movements, clicks, and scrolls. Mouse movement is strongly correlated with eye movements, so it's an excellent method for analyzing your site's usability. Are visitors clicking on a logo or picture that's not a link? Make it one. Are they scrolling several times up and down the page? Then they probably can't find what they're looking for.

More sophisticated services (*Optimize.ly*) enable you to deploy several versions of the same Web page, collect data on users' interaction with them, then pick the winner (the one with the highest conversions, longest staying time, etc.).

IMPROVE YOUR AIM

We know the days of just putting your message out there are long gone. Some members respond to one type of communication and some to another. Today most of your members are on one social network; tomorrow they'll be on something new. The constant struggle to hit this moving target isn't going to get easier, but at least with analytics, you can improve your aim. ▲

Doug Devitre is an association management consultant and author of "It's Either Now or Never" and the "REALTOR® Association Social Media Performance Guide." Contact him at <http://DougDevitre.com>.



Let's Meet

Technology to enhance volunteer participation

By Masha Zager

REALTORS®' jobs often involve spending lots of time on the move, so bringing groups together for meetings and events is always a challenge for association executives. Today, technological tools, which are cheaper and easier to use than ever before, can help address that challenge—although, according to the AEs we spoke to, these tools are a long way from providing a complete solution.

TECH TOOLS FOR MEETING PREP

Traditionally, association staff prepared members for board or committee meetings by distributing large packages of papers, including minutes of previous meetings, along with relevant reports and articles. Today, much of this preparation can be done online. For example, the Houston Association of REALTORS® makes information available to board members on a password-protected page of its Web site, according to Robert Hale, the association's president and CEO. The Chicago Association of REALTORS® goes even further. Not only does it distribute meeting materials electronically, but it also supplies board members with preprogrammed iPads so they can access the materials conveniently at, or before, the meeting. Barbara Matthopoulos, senior director of communications and media relations for the Chicago Association, says the iPads were a great investment. They saved the costs of sending all those documents by messenger and express mail; even better, they saved staff from last-minute scrambles to replace lost documents and from having to “run around figuring out who has what.”

Associations also post meeting material to cloud storage sites, such as Box, Dropbox, and Google+, which all have mobile versions for access anywhere.

TECH TOOLS FOR MEETINGS

Lengthy, deliberative meetings are still held largely on-site. This is because many REALTORS® enjoy the networking opportunities, and also because large-group, free-form discussions—which are typically the most productive—are difficult to manage with conferencing tools. However, limited-purpose meetings benefit from Web conference and teleconferencing tools. Not only do associations save on providing refreshments and paper, they can free up their meeting spaces to rent out. More important, members save time and gas money on participation, which boosts their willingness to participate. For example, the Long Island Board of REALTORS® uses GoToWebinar (about \$49 a month) presentation software for follow-up meetings, says Beth O'Connor, director of technology training for the association. The instant polls in GoToMeeting are useful when a committee must approve a decision.

GoTo recently added a feature called HDFaces, which combines screen sharing, audio conferencing, and videoconferencing. Meeting participants can share as many as six high-resolution videoconferencing streams (so they can see six other participants) while they view the presenter's screen. O'Connor expects to use this feature more for training than for committee meetings, but she hopes it will become



Online

Install the Web conference or collaboration application on volunteers' machines—which also includes paying for it if there's a fee—and set it up for them.



er free option is Google+ Hangouts featuring video conferencing for up to 10 people (participants must be signed up with free accounts on the Google+ social network, but there's nothing to install). Also explore

MeetingBurner, which is free for up to 15 participants and includes screen sharing and a phone-in line.

If you're just looking for a screen-sharing tool—ideal for online technical support via remote control, walking members through documents, or conducting webinars—check out Mikogo (free), join.me (free), and Screenhero.

Brunner says telephone conference calls are good for quick discussions and single-issue meetings, especially where one person is briefing a group on the progress of an initiative. Listeners can ask questions, but no one tries to hold lengthy discussions. Brunner says, "Ambient noise ... continues to be a frustration, particularly with larger groups. All we can do is remind people to put themselves on mute." VAR uses Conference Plus, a service available through a contract with the NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF REALTORS®.

TECH TOOLS POST-MEETING COLLABORATION

Associations use a variety of tools to facilitate discussions and work outside formal meetings. In Houston, the Young Professionals Network and the leadership trainee group collaborate and interact using private Facebook pages, and association volunteers generally share documents via such file-sharing programs as Dropbox and Google Drive. The Virginia Association of REALTORS® hosts private Facebook pages for a variety of groups. At the Chicago Association, Basecamp, a Web-based project management program, works well to organize documents for larger committee initiatives. Matthopoulos says, "Basecamp is user-friendly even for members who don't use this type of software."

Sometimes the best approach is the lowest-tech of all: scheduling meetings only when necessary. Matthopoulos says she tries to limit meetings to discussions of strategy or outreach and to handle routine matters without meetings. Committee members, too, have gotten better about canceling meetings that they think are unnecessary. As Matthopoulos puts it, "They're volunteering their time, so it's our responsibility to make their time as effective as possible." ▲

widely popular with members. "It changes a meeting completely," she says, explaining that visual cues help people know when they have the floor to speak.

To bring a single outside presenter to an on-site meeting, some associations turn to videoconferencing for a significant reduction in travel cost and time. The Houston Association of REALTORS® has Apple TVs in most boardrooms and uses free or low-cost videoconferencing programs, such as FaceTime or Skype, if the board is meeting with an out-of-town consultant. Hale prefers this approach to flying in a speaker for 30 minutes and says a Skype presentation can be as good as or better than being there. However, there are still glitches. For example, things might not go well if the visiting speaker calls in from a location without reliable broadband. Scott Brunner, former CEO of the Virginia Association of REALTORS®, recalls an occasion when the association leadership could hear a speaker via Skype, but he couldn't hear them. Problematic, to say the least.

Yet, video meetings (and the tech tools that enable them) are becoming more popular, in part because Web cams are now imbedded in most laptops and tablets today, and the necessary software is easier to use and often free. Plus, many Web conferencing offerings are bundled with additional collaboration features, such as document sharing, virtual whiteboards, private chats, and the ability to record a meeting.

Take, for example, Anymeeting.com. It has a free version that includes capacity for up to 200 audio participants (6 video participants), screen sharing for anything on your screen (PowerPoints, Word documents, Web sites, etc.), and the capability to sell tickets to your webinars. It's a cloud application, so there's nothing to install and there's a mobile version, too.





Lights, Camera, Action!

How and why to make association videos.

by Carolyn Schwaar

Why should I make videos?

How many online videos have you watched in the past month? According to comScore, which measures online engagement and use, 85 percent of Internet users watch online videos. The fact is, video is exploding as the fastest-growing online medium. It's a powerful tool that builds credibility, conveys information better and faster than text, is low-cost, and is infinitely sharable via social media. According to the Web site Mashable, some estimates put the open rate for a video newsletter at two to three times higher than for a text-based newsletter. Video provides a familiar user interface for site visitors—there's no navigating, scrolling or clicking—so they can't get lost. Video is also ideal for mobile devices.

What should I make videos about?

Type "REALTOR association" in the YouTube search box and you'll find a wide range of videos. AEs say the hot topics are local legislative issues, housing market reports, a monthly president's message, benefits of membership, and MLS training videos. Videotaped courses and classes posted online make effective companion pieces or replacements to live education. The Houston Association has more than 60 videos in its YouTube "Consumer Knowledge Series." Funny videos are also popular. Check out the Oregon Regional MLS's "Will it Melt?"* video testing to see if a lockbox key will melt in a car on a hot day. This fun clip received more than 1,200 views. In comparison, the MLS's "Adding a New Listing to RMLSweb" video got 420 views.

**search "RMLS melt" on YouTube*

What type of camera do I need?

There are so many choices and price points for cameras that selecting one can be tough. The general rule of thumb is to avoid any model with more features than you'll actually use.

The basics to look for include ports to hook up the camera directly to your computer (Mac or PC), an external microphone jack, and the ability to record at least two hours of footage. You'll likely spend at least \$300. Cameras with better video quality and more manual controls start at around \$800. On the other hand, some people prefer the personal, casual style of using a smart-phone camera. Although this informal style may be engaging for your charming president's monthly chat, the low quality of the video could come across as too amateurish for legislative or economic updates.

What other equipment do I need?

Once you launch into video production, there are a variety of accessories that make a big difference in your video quality: lapel microphones to capture better sound, interchangeable lenses for wide angle and zoom, studio lighting, and a green screen for replacing the real background of a video with a digital one.

How do I edit the video?

Video editing isn't as complicated as it sounds, thanks to today's software, such as Final Cut Pro, Adobe Premiere, iMovie, Windows Movie Maker, or Camtasia Studio. But if editing intimidates you, services abound to professionally edit your video for as little as \$100.

Where do I post the video?

YouTube is the easiest and most popular home for association videos because members are familiar with it and your videos will show up in a Google search. Besides, YouTube is the number-two search engine in the world. Gather all of your videos in your own YouTube channel and link to them from your social media channels, where you can encourage sharing and discuss the content. If you post them on your own association or MLS Web site, put them on the front page.

How do I prove the value of my video investment?

You know videos are popular with members, but you'll need to prove it to your board (with measurable results) to justify the expense. Google analytics can track page views of your videos, and YouTube's analytic can also provide more details, including how long people watch your videos before exiting. Compare video views to text-page views for like content to see if video is working for you.

Are there any legal and copyright issues I should be aware of?

The same rules of copyright and privacy you follow regarding your Web site content apply to your video content. Some additional tips: Don't incorporate copyrighted movie clips into your video, don't use copyrighted music, and make sure you have written permission to film members at events and classes.

Video Technique Tips

- Best camera placement: Level with the subject's eyes.
- Ideal video length: Three minutes.
- Best resource: *How to Shoot Video that Doesn't Suck*, by Steve Stockman
- Shoot approximately 80 percent close-up and only 20 percent wide.
- Shoot extra footage to be edited in between interviews: people working at a desk or walking down the hall.
- Proper video panning at events is holding the camera on a shot for 8 to 10 seconds, then pan to another spot in the room, hold for another 8 to 10 seconds, and so on. ▲

Train or Hire?



The downside of training is that you foot the bill for developing skills your employee may take elsewhere.

The skills it takes to run a successful REALTOR® association are deep and constantly evolving. Today's associations need social media expertise, consumer marketing know-how, and political skills they

didn't need just a few years ago. And who knows what new talent you'll need in the next few years? So how do you keep up: train existing employees, train yourself, outsource, hire freelancers, share resources with other associations? Whether you look inside or outside of your association for the solution that fits best, plan now to stay ahead of the skills curve.

TRAIN EXISTING EMPLOYEES

Human resource experts often advise to hire for the person, not the skill. This means, ideally, that you'll hire someone with the smarts and motivation to learn whatever new skill is necessary. Training existing employees builds loyalty because when the association invests in their continuing education, they feel valued. The downside of training is that you foot the bill for developing skills your employee may take elsewhere. Hire from outside, and you benefit from someone else's training expense.

SHARE WITH ANOTHER ASSOCIATION

Borrowing staff on an as-needed or regular basis from another REALTOR® association is a cost-effective solution for everything from government affairs to professional standards to technology. Associations can share the bill for freelance or contract help as well, since the products they need are often very similar.

TRAIN YOURSELF

For single-staff associations, AEs have to take on new responsibilities that often require training. Typically, AEs teach themselves the ins and outs of new technol-

ogy, for example, or attend state or national association-sponsored training in leadership or professional standards. But occasionally leadership may not fund a required course or seminar. To ensure tomorrow's training in whatever new skill is required, establish AE professional development as an item in your budget.

HIRE FREELANCERS

Outside independent contractors can be an effective solution for both short-term projects and long-term programs. Finding the right contractor at the right price isn't easy, but online job boards like Craigslist and freelance-worker sites such as *Guru.com* are a good place to start. Although recommendations from friends and colleagues are typically the most reliable way to find quality freelancers, use caution to avoid any perceived favoritism or conflicts of interest.

OUTSOURCE TO EXPERT COMPANIES

When you need more work done than just a few freelancers can take on, consider outsourcing to a specialized company. Associations take this route for newsletter production, for example, which includes writing, designing, and selling advertising.

SEEK OUT TALENTED VOLUNTEERS

Members abound with skills that associations need. From training members on using social media to organizing fund-raising events, volunteers are the most cost-effective solution, although not always the most reliable. Plan on supervising volunteers more closely than hired help. ▲

Which Option Is the Best?

To help you decide between training and hiring, weigh the pros and cons by asking yourself these questions:

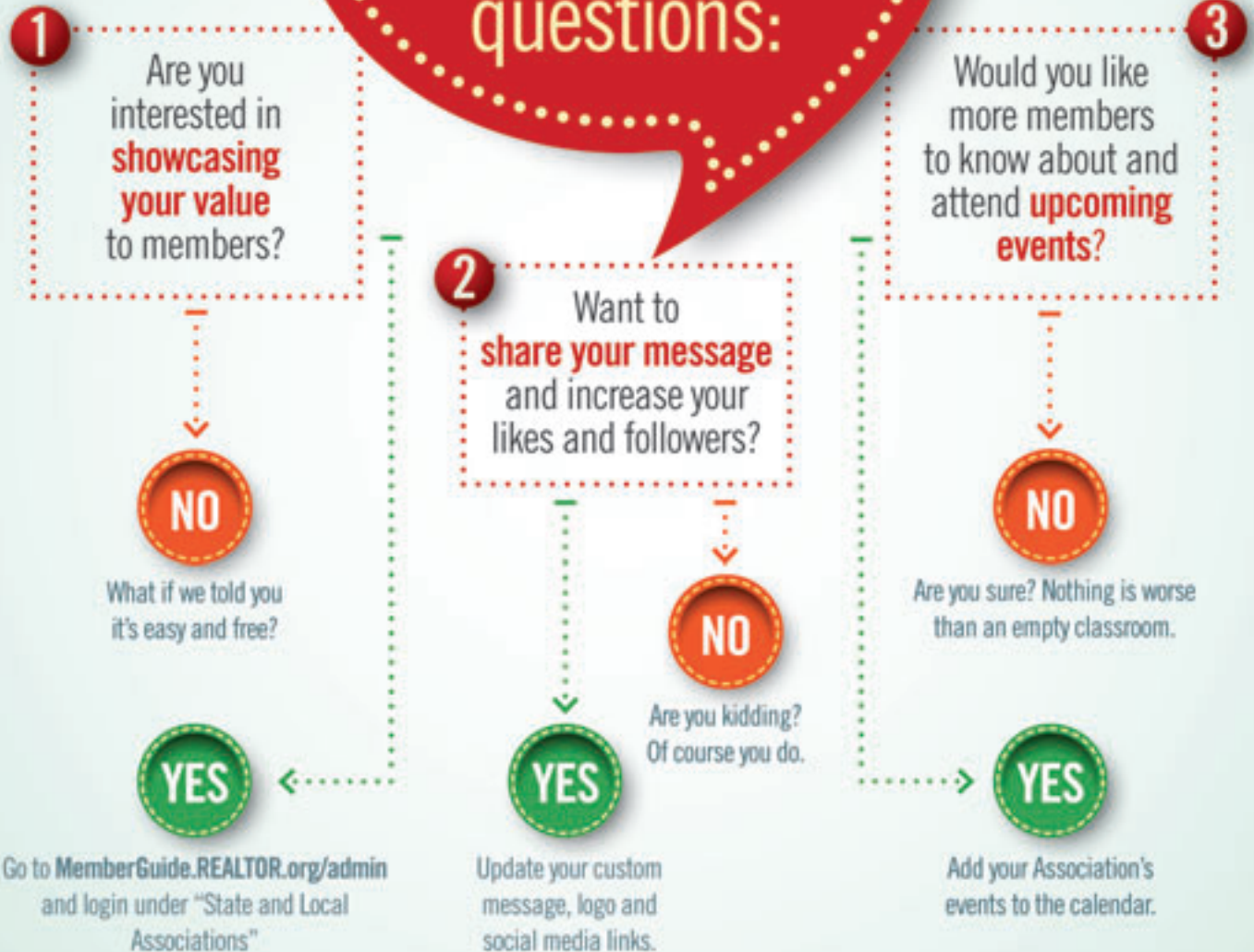
Q. Is the required skill for a one-off project or a regular association func-

tion? Contract out or share staff for a one-off or occasional project if the cost is less than training internally. But if the new skill will be needed for your association's day-to-day operations, competitiveness, or value, then consider training staff as an investment.

Q. Even if you're willing to learn a new skill (or a staff member is), do you have time to perform the new task or is it replacing an old one? If you have neither the skills nor the time, outsourcing may be the viable answer, but note, managing outside staff is a time-consuming task in itself.

Q. Will training alone result in the required skill, or are talent and experience also essential? Often you can hire someone with years of accumulated expertise for a fraction of the cost of training yourself. Remember, some skills require aptitude that not everyone can learn.

Associations: Ask yourself these simple questions:



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NATIONAL
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Soliciting RPAC Investments from Staff



Ralph Holmen is associate general counsel at the NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF REALTORS® in Chicago. He can be reached at holmen@realtors.org.

A question raised from time to time by AEs and other association staff involves soliciting association staff to contribute to RPAC. Most members and AEs involved in RPAC are aware that federal

law permits solicitation of RPAC contributions only from members of the so-called solicitable class, and most are also aware that the solicitable class includes members of NAR and their immediate family. But people often overlook the fact that executive and administrative personnel of NAR, and its state and local associations, may also be solicited to make RPAC contributions in the same way, and to the same extent, as REALTORS® are solicited for RPAC.

There is, however, an important distinction between types of staff. Executive and administrative personnel of associations who may be solicited are individuals paid on a salary (rather than an hourly) basis and who have policymaking, managerial, professional, or supervisory responsibilities. The requirements of the Fair Labor Standards Act can be used to distinguish between personnel who may be solicited and those who may not. This means that those employees who are “exempt” (that is, not entitled to receive overtime pay) are included in the solicitable class, while other employees who must be paid for overtime (“nonexempt” employees) may be solicited, but only in the more limited manner described below.

As noted, executive and administrative association employees may be solicited for RPAC in the same manner as REALTORS®. That is, they may be solicited an unlimited number of times using any form of communication. As with REALTORS®, however, all RPAC contributions from staff must be voluntary. In particular, association staff may not be required to contribute to RPAC as a condition of employment or entitlement to employment privileges or benefits. And all the usual requirements of soliciting contributions to RPAC apply equally to soliciting association executive and administrative staff. For example, the usual “disclaimer” notice must be included on all written solicitation materials provided to association executive and administrative personnel. In addition,

because a portion of each RPAC contribution is provided to the state PAC in which the contribution is made, all solicitations must also comply with the requirements of state law regarding soliciting state PAC contributions. Thus, even though solicitation of executive and administrative association personnel is permitted under federal law, AEs should be sure to confirm that state law also permits such individuals to be solicited, or to determine and comply with any unique requirements and duties that may apply to solicitation of such association staff.

Nonexempt association employees (those other than executive and administrative employees) may also be solicited to make RPAC contributions, but federal law narrowly limits how they can be solicited. For these employees, there is enhanced concern for explicit or indirect management pressure or coercion to contribute, and the federal restrictions outlined below are intended to reinforce the ability of such employees to contribute in a truly voluntary fashion. Three specific requirements are imposed:

- Nonexecutive and administrative association employees may not be solicited for RPAC more than two times per year;
- They may be solicited only in writing and by mail addressed to their home addresses; and
- The association soliciting such employees must establish a custodial arrangement operated by a third party that allows such employees to make anonymous contributions. The association must also inform employees being solicited in this fashion of the custodial arrangement and of their opportunity to make anonymous contributions via that custodial arrangement, and further inform them that their employer may not be advised of those who do not make contributions.

A custodian appointed to fulfill this function will typically be a bank or other financial institution. The custodian operating the custodial arrangement must

Federal law narrowly limits RPAC solicitation of nonexempt association employees (those who must be paid overtime).



Communications that do not explicitly request a contribution may nevertheless be deemed a solicitation if they encourage support of RPAC or facilitate making contributions.

keep records of contributions made and deposit those contributions in a separate account. The custodian must provide to RPAC (or the state PAC as RPAC's agent) information about contributors, including the identity of contributors of a single contribution in excess of \$50 or annual aggregate contributions in excess of \$200, and transfer the funds received to the same. Conversely, the custodian may not provide to the employer (the association) information about the identity of contributors of amounts of \$50 or less or aggregate contributions of less than \$200 in a single year. Note that if an association chooses not to establish and operate such a custodial arrangement, however, RPAC solicitation of nonexecutive and administrative personnel is prohibited.

Soliciting RPAC Investments from Affiliates

Another RPAC solicitation question is whether affiliate members may be solicited for contributions to RPAC. Many local associations include in their bylaws one or more categories of "affiliate membership" for individuals or firms involved in business activities related to, but not directly engaged in, real estate, such as mortgage brokerages or title or property insurance firms.

Even if an association's bylaws provide that such firms qualify for membership (not individuals within the firm, but the entire firm), those firms, because they are in most cases incorporated, are not allowed to make RPAC contributions because of the prohibition against PAC contributions by corporations. If, on the other hand, an association's bylaws provide for individuals employed by, or associated with, such firms to hold individual affiliate membership in their own names, then they may be solicited for and make contributions to RPAC. Note, however, that these individual affiliate memberships must be established in the bylaws as a bona fide category of membership.

More specifically, Federal Election Commission regulations provide that such individuals are deemed members for purposes of RPAC solicitation if they are obligated to pay dues (of a meaningful, and not purely nominal, amount), or if they have some other "significant organizational attachment to the organization." Examples of such a "significant organizational attachment" include the right to vote directly or indirectly for at least one individual on the mem-

bership organization's highest governing board; the right to vote directly for organization officers; the right to vote on policy questions where the highest governing body of the membership organization is obligated to abide by the results; the right to approve the organization's annual budget; or the right to participate directly in similar aspects of the organization's governance. Individuals that hold a membership that satisfies these criteria may be solicited as often and as aggressively as desired, in the same manner as REALTOR® members.

Conversely, as noted above, affiliate members who are corporations, or affiliates who are not permitted to be solicited for RPAC because their status as members does not satisfy these criteria, may never be solicited to, or make a contribution to RPAC. But corporate affiliate members, or other affiliate members whose membership relation with the association does not satisfy the criteria described above, may contribute to, or make financial resources available to, the association for use in connection with RPAC administration or fund-raising, such as assisting with the costs of a fund-raising event or providing a "prize" to be used at an RPAC auction or raffle (where otherwise permitted by law.)

Another related issue raised in connection with soliciting RPAC contributions is what constitutes a "solicitation." The Federal Election Commission takes a fairly broad view of what constitutes a solicitation. Communications that do not explicitly request a contribution may nevertheless be deemed a solicitation (and therefore subject to the requirements and restrictions described above) if they encourage support of RPAC or facilitate making contributions. Facilitating contributions would include providing information on how individuals may contribute to the RPAC, such as by including in the communication an address to which a contribution could be sent.

Conversely, however, general information about RPAC is not a solicitation. This kind of information would include how much had been contributed to the RPAC in a given period, how many contributors had contributed to the RPAC, the federal candidates supported by RPAC, that RPAC funds are used to support candidates for federal office, or that only certain individuals may be solicited for contributions to RPAC. ▲

RPAC Fund-Raising Programs

Through RPAC's fund-raising programs, which include the RPAC Partnership program, associations can find a variety of resources to ensure successful fund-raising, such as conference grants, customized marketing brochures, and recognition ribbons. Find these and more at REALTORactioncenter.com.

Small Board

Embrace the Cloud



Amy DuBose, RCE, 0-PRO, is the association executive with the San Marcos Area Board of REALTORS®, Texas. She can be reached at 512-396-5478 or amy@smabor.com.

As an AE for a small association, I am my own IT director. I make sure our computers and software are

up-to-date and working properly, which they usually are. But a few weeks ago, my assistant's computer went down, and along with it went all of our association files (e-mails, membership details, financial accounts, everything). Our saving grace? Our data backup in the cloud.

If this had happened a few years ago, we would have been in a really bad place. But because of our cloud storage with iDrive, I was able to retrieve all of our data rather easily.

We've all heard of the cloud: that space in the Internet where we can store data and access applications. But for REALTOR® associations, especially small ones, there is a growing array of cloud tools that can save us a lot of money and time (and headaches!).

STORAGE AND BACKUPS

For my association, cloud data storage was a lifesaver. I recovered my association's files quickly and with a lot less hassle than traditional tape storage, which can become corrupted over time. I'm pretty confident that the storage facilities are kept secure and my data is safe. Sure, we're hearing more about hacking and cyber terrorism, but iDrive certainly has far greater security resources available to them than I do, and a strong motivation to focus on security.

For my association I've found it's cheaper (at around \$10 a month) to use a cloud backup service than to buy backup drives, update backup software, and manually do the backups. Carbonite and iDrive are among the most popular easy-to-use and cost-effective tools.

DOCUMENT SHARING

I recently started using Dropbox (online file sharing) to share large files with my members. For example, instead of new members taking a CD or binder full of paper with them after orientation, I send them the

link to my shared orientation file on Dropbox. From there, they can download as many or as few of the files as they like, which saves me in paper, toner, copier wear-and-tear, plus staff time to assemble. Best of all, Dropbox is free (for the base storage level).

TIME SAVING

I create a lot of documents—from program plans to meeting agendas—that require committee members' input. I used to e-mail Word documents to committees, then incorporate all of their individual feedback. Pretty time-consuming. Today, however, using the cloud application Google Docs (free), I post one Word document online, in one place, where all committee members can access it and edit it. It also allows me to track the changes, so I can see who is making what alterations. So, instead of e-mailing people to death, one by one, round by round, we can all convey our thoughts in one place, whenever we want.

Another easy cloud tool to keep everyone on the same page is Google Calendar (there are other cloud calendar apps too, like Microsoft Outlook and iCal). We use Google Calendar for our association calendar and have it posted on our Web site. It's very easy to update, and members like that they can sync events from our association calendar (such as education, training, and other events) to their own personal Google calendars with one click.

Amanda Piltz, director of technology for the Scottsdale Area Association of REALTORS®, says, "Our staff calendar, facilities calendar, and CEO's calendar

There are firms that specialize in shifting your files and applications from an in-house solution (backup drives and software) to a cloud-based solution.





are all Google calendars, allowing our entire staff to be aware of each other's important events, meetings, and appointments, both on and off the road."

STAYING CONNECTED

Automatic syncing of all my devices—smart phone, tablet, home computer, office computer, and laptop—is one truly beautiful cloud feature. Say I take a photo at an event with my smart phone; I don't have to fumble around with uploading it to my computer once I get back to the office, because it's already there. All of my devices are synced, so the photo arrives on my office computer (and my tablet, and my home computer, and my laptop) moments after I take it. It's the same with documents I create on my tablet at home—they're streamed to my office computer as I'm creating them.

Apple products are probably the easiest to sync because iCloud is a built-in feature, but there are plenty of ways to sync your home Dell to your office HP to your Android smart phone and your Windows tablet. Check out Google Drive, Dropbox, SkyDrive, SugarSync, Amazon Cloud Drive, or Microsoft Skydrive.

Guyla Greenly, avid Apple user and AE of the Wyoming Association of REALTORS® says, "I use notes on my iPhone a lot so it syncs to my iPad and my Mac at home. I keep my phone with me instead of a notebook and make notes. It syncs to my iTunes and when I get back to my office, all of my notes are waiting for me, plus, they are backed up on my phone, iPad, etc."

CLOUD SOFTWARE

One especially cost-effective cloud advantage is using applications, such as word processing or accounting applications, online instead of buying the software or software upgrades. All your computers need is an operating system and a web browser. So, you're not only saving on the cost of the software and upgrades, but on computers themselves, since you don't need one with so much power. Google Docs is especially favored for this benefit, but there are literally hundreds of online apps for managing projects, day-to-day finances, HR duties, and so on.

MOVING TO THE CLOUD

If you think your association needs a more advanced cloud solution, considering hiring help. There are firms that specialize in shifting your files and applications from an in-house solution (backup drives and software) to a cloud-based solution.

Jeanette Newton, CEO of the Dulles Association of REALTORS®, told me about her experience with this task. "Everything is now in the cloud," she says. "We no longer have a server in our office. It was pretty seamless. All of our files and e-mails are backed up by the Cloud Exchange Server. We still have our file software on our desktop, but every document we create is stored in the cloud. High-speed Internet connection is a must and I would highly recommend hiring a professional to set it up."

The thing I like best about cloud technology is that it doesn't matter if you're with a large or small association; anyone can use it. So don't be afraid of the cloud. Embrace it. You never know what you will find and how it will help your association. ▲

NAR's Second Century Ventures Invests in Cloud Tech

The NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF REALTORS®' venture capital fund Second Century Ventures has become a strategic investor in Symform, a cloud backup service. "This investment in Symform will give REALTORS® access to electronic data management resources they can use to organize and protect the information of home buyers, sellers, and investors in the real estate transaction," says Dale Stinton, SCV president and NAR chief executive officer.

Unlike traditional data center storage, the Symform Cloud Storage Network encrypts, shreds and globally distributes data to the excess local drive space of its subscribers. This technology provides a secure and high-performing cloud backup system. Customers join the Symform network by contributing space and, in exchange, receive free cloud backup.

With approximately 4.7 million existing-home sales completed in 2012 alone, each with its own contact, contracts, and supporting documents, the need for effective data backup solutions across multiple platforms is evident.

"Symform's unique decentralized solution is particularly suited to the business needs of NAR's members," says Symform CEO Matthew J. Schiltz, who is the former CEO of DocuSign. "Our cloud storage offerings will allow REALTORS® to safely and cost-effectively back up real estate transaction data and help them organize that information to best serve their clients."

Forbes magazine published an article online in December 2012 that outlined Symform's unique business model, and described how it's overcoming reliability and security concerns and reaching an untapped small business market. Read it at Forbes.com/sites/danwoods/2012/12/04/can-symforms-p2p-cloud-storage-platform-really-work.

AE Profile

MLS of the Future

In her more than 30 years working with and leading MLSs, Merri Jo Cowen, RCE, e-PRO®, has witnessed the industry transform from listing books to mobile apps. She is the CEO of My Florida



Merri Jo Cowen is CEO of My Florida Regional Multiple Listing Service. Contact her at 407-960-5301 or CEO@mfrmls.com.

“Those MLSs that adapt and make decisions based on what is best for their respective members will be among those that define the MLS of the future.”

Regional Multiple Listing Service, a consortium of 15 REALTOR® associations and boards that represent about 32,000 members. She is also the current president of the Council of Multiple Listing Services, serves on the National Association of REALTORS® MLS Issues and Policy Committee, and was named one of the 100 most influential real estate leaders by Inman News. Here she shares her insights with *RAE* on the future of the MLS.

Q1. What is the single biggest issue facing the MLS industry today?

The biggest challenge is use of the listing content provided by our participants, specifically: how it should be used, who can use it, and how to identify unauthorized uses. This issue goes way beyond participants' right to distribute listings where they choose. It's a technological challenge to find reliable tools to track data licenses and unauthorized uses; it's an organizational challenge to allocate the resources; and it's a philosophical challenge, complicated by the varying opinions of participants and volunteer leadership. There are no easy solutions or crystal balls. It will require much diligence from the industry.

Q2. If you could re-create the MLS industry from the ground up in an ideal world, what key features would it have?

After letting go of the notion that we could please everyone, I would start with the need for data standardization across the board. In other words, full adoption of the RETS standards for all service providers who want to play in the real estate listing sandbox. That alone would give participants the freedom to use their listing data more easily and it would allow for less stressful provider changes, more innovation by third parties, and a much easier transition to regional MLSs. When I say “regional” I'm not saying that there is no room for statewide MLSs or multistate MLSs. If I were in charge, I would lay the groundwork for consolidation (I absolutely believe that the economy of scale in larger organizations allows for top-notch services and products to participants and subscribers) but I can't see one national system meeting the needs of everyone. What I

can see is that by clearing a few technological obstacles for consolidation, we'll see a natural progression toward change the industry needs.

Q3. What's your response to pundits who say the MLS as we know it will soon become irrelevant?

I absolutely do not believe that the MLS is heading toward obsolescence or irrelevance, but I do believe that the MLS as we know it today (900-plus MLSs) is ripe for change. We must address the key issue in our industry: the data. Without rules to govern use and content requirements, without data licenses and standards, without an organized structure for brokers and agents to enter listings into a database, we are looking at chaos. If not the MLS, then who? Will the MLS of the future look different? Absolutely! Will there be casualties as MLSs resist change? Absolutely. There will be changes, and those MLSs that adapt and make decisions based on what is best for their respective members will be among those that define the MLS of the future.

Q4. A dizzying array of vendors sell what could broadly be termed “MLS add-ons.” What types of offerings are most useful?

There is no way that an MLS can incorporate every product in the market, but the innovation and technological advances that we see daily among these vendors bring more opportunities to brokers, agents, associations, and MLSs. Electronic appointment setting, integrated public records, and a robust mobile application, to start with, are the key technology components that will provide the functionality users need. When we look at other tools, our focus is on bringing value to users; features that will make their work easier. In Florida, we offer a transaction management platform, enhanced statistical products, and services that help users connect potential buyers with financing options. And our door is open to licensing data to third parties who want to offer more tool options to our user base. We've picked a few not-so-successful products. But when making decisions on additional MLS options, ask yourself, will this tool offer something that isn't easily and affordably attained elsewhere—not based on fluff, but based on value? ▲

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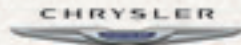
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