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Should MLS go public? Realtors disagree

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When his clients arrive for a house-hunting trip next month, Realtor Toan Doran won't have to take them all over Oahu to find out where they would like to live.

After months of browsing listings on the Honolulu Multiple Listing Service on the Internet, the clients, a military couple stationed in China, have narrowed their search to Hawaii Kai and Kaneohe.

Such precision would not have been possible a dozen years ago, when only Realtors had access to the MLS listings, contributed by Realtors and pooled by local or regional Realtor associations.

The Internet, like it has so many other aspects of business, changed all that. Today, in theory, anyone can view listings for real estate online virtually anywhere.

But not always in practice.

There is disagreement among those in the highly competitive real estate industry about how many listings and how much data from those listings should be made freely available.

In the past, information such as school districts, construction, taxes and selling prices was available only to the Realtors. Web sites typically displayed only basic information such as square footage, number of bedrooms and baths and the year the home was built.

But more and more real estate firms -- including Hawaii powerhouses Coldwell Banker Pacific Properties and Prudential Locations -- allow prospective clients who sign up on their Web sites to browse more-detailed information on their listings as well as those from their competitors.

"The Internet is all about free information ... the days of the agent being the gateway to the information are gone," said Lin McIntosh, president and CEO of Hawaii Information Service, the for-profit MLS subsidiary of the Kauai Board of Realtors and the Hawaii Island Board of Realtors.

Honolulu Realtor Bryn Kaufman, whose Web site, **OahuRE.com**, displays full details from the MLS to the general public, recently ran afoul of the Honolulu Board of Realtors for, among other things, allowing users of his site to see more than 100 results of a search.

"Everyone's battling to get the consumer so you have to give them what they want," he said. "The Realtors have somewhat of a lock on the people's ability to sell their property because you can't list your property without going to a Realtor, and if you're not on the MLS you're nowhere."

The Honolulu board views the MLS, whose approximately 5,000 active listings are contributed by member Realtors who pay \$450 a year for the service, as a contractual agreement among brokers, or a "vehicle through which the members can offer compensation and cooperation to other brokers," according to board CEO Rochelle Lee Gregson.

The board's 10-year-old Web site, **Hicentral.com**, displays listings with basic information.

The Internet has made it more difficult for some Realtors, Lee Gregson said.

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Tina Yuen, PBN

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"You have a far more educated consumer now," she said, noting that some consumers may dismiss a Realtor's expertise in a market or a neighborhood and focus only on what they see online.

But buyers and sellers still need Realtors to guide them through the complicated real estate transaction process to closing.

"The most savvy investors still rely on us," said Doran, a Realtor with Prudential Locations.

Doran noted that studies show that buyers who search online spend less time with a Realtor before making a decision to buy, thereby speeding up the whole process, right through closing.

"When I list a home I would want as many people exposed to it as possible, whether here or in California," Doran said. "Also, as a fiduciary duty to my seller, I would want to expose their property to as many people on the open market as possible."

Lee Gregson acknowledges that the board will continue to be challenged by technologically savvy Realtors like Kaufman, who is a former Web developer.

"He pushes the envelope on the MLS, forcing me to think about the future," Lee Gregson said. "What he's doing is a reminder of what the possibilities are."

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