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Posted on Mon, Nov. 10, 2003

The Mercury News

Real estate riding wave to wireless future

By Daniel Vasquez
Mercury News

Evidence swirls amid Silicon Valley's real estate market that technology will someday turn home buying into a completely wireless and mobile venture.

We're not there yet -- too many technological hurdles exist, including incompatible computer networks, digital signature security issues and the need for reliable paper trails for real estate sales.

But breakthroughs in wireless and cellular technologies point to a day when the real estate world will be entirely wireless. Here are examples:

Tablets

The Motion Computing M1300 Tablet PCs sold by San Bruno-based Criterion resemble an 8 1/2-by-11-inch paper pad that is about an inch thick. But they have the power and memory of a Microsoft Windows-based PC or laptop, without the need for a keyboard. The company's product is designed especially for real estate professionals.

An electronic pen allows users to take notes, write contracts and handle many transactions wirelessly online in real time. Hook up a printer, and paper copies are available.

"The tablet unchains an agent from the office and allows them to do work anytime from anywhere," said Daniel Tealdi, president of Criterion. "We're taking the pen-and-paper format and adding a computer screen. Now agents can do what they always did -- walk, talk and write millions of notes -- while staying online at the same time."

Tablets, which hit the market a little more than a year ago, work like laptops with touch screens. Like laptops, they work with WiFi hot

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spots -- such as those at Starbucks cafes and some McDonald's restaurants -- and can be customized to work with Bluetooth wireless connections and cellular networks. That means they can be connected to Bluetooth-capable cell phones and printers without USB or FireWire cables, and they can go online from anywhere a cell phone's data connection can be used.

Using Criterion's software packages and a service called RED Tablet, agents can access the Internet for listing information, slide shows and video tours. That allows agents to be at an open house in one city while showing clients information on other homes for sale.

Cellular technology

Imagine driving up to a home for sale at any time of day and being able to see listing information and pictures of the interior, all without bothering the owners or their agent.

Neal Schwartz of Coldwell Banker in San Jose says he sells homes faster because his clients are able to view images of homes for sale on his cell phone, which use wireless application protocol (WAP) technology to display Web pages. Other companies are displaying the same information using Java.

``My phone allows me to have an inventory of homes in the palm of my hand," Schwartz said.

Last summer Coldwell Banker began using the WAP format across the valley. It allows buyers and agents in the field to call up information, photographs and virtual tours of homes for sale on screens roughly the size of two large postage stamps.

Schwartz said these cellular technologies and services mean clients save time, because they can easily eliminate homes they don't want to visit.

``Anytime I run into a potential client, I can grab my phone and punch up homes right on the spot," Schwartz said. ``Right now, that gives me an edge over most other real estate agents."

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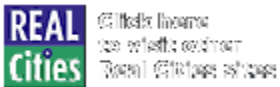
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