

Game Changers

Homes Open Today



Because open house events are inherently local, HOT is not a national platform, but rather a customizable, scalable program.

Even though most homebuyers start and narrow their home search by combing through virtual tours and online listings, there's still no substitute for stepping over the threshold of a real home. That's why

open houses remain an essential selling tool for members. So to combine Internet convenience with open house impact, the Contra Costa Association of REALTORS®, Calif., built HomesOpenToday.com (HOT) to help members market their events to consumers. With an average of 850 open house events showcased every weekend in the San Francisco and East Bay area, HomesOpenToday.com is already a hit with members of the Contra Costa association and five other participating associations.

As a runner-up in the NAR Game Changer Challenge, Contra Costa received funds to nationalize its success with this product. "By creating a 'franchised' implementation of the existing HOT application, associations can leverage a low-cost, high-impact model to reach consumers," says Michael Seguin, the association's director of technology. "This product is a benefit we provide to members that increases their productivity, decreases their marketing costs, and creates a boundary-less method for searching open homes across MLSs."

What is HOT?

Innovative in its simplicity, HOT is a user-friendly, consumer-facing Web site populated with information directly from the MLS (following the RETS* data standard) that enables homebuyers to look for open houses by a variety of search criteria. REALTORS® need only indicate the dates and times of the open house in their MLS listings. That information is then fed, in real time, to HomesOpenToday.com. "For members, this is a highly visible tool to provide as a part of their listing package," notes Seguin.

Because open house events are inherently local, HomesOpenToday.com is not a national platform, but rather a customizable, scalable program that one MLS (or cooperating MLSs) can launch and market on its own. Associations can host the service under any URL, such as TopekaOpenHomes.com or GreaterDallasOpenHouse.com. Another option is to integrate into the HomesOpenToday.com do-

main, which allows associations to benefit from its existing search engine traction.

Seguin advises that HOT is a member service that runs best as a stand-alone site for consumers or as a widget from a public-facing MLS site. Yet MLSs and associations can implement the open source code—offered free from Contra Costa—any way they wish. The consumer face is IDX-compliant and the application can be tooled to allow members to add special open house information if desired. In addition, CCAR is adding a module to allow for Broker Tour functionality.

The costs and benefits

Initially, the Contra Costa association invested in aggressive marketing and advertising for the site on Google, on public transit, and in print newspapers. Today, that's not necessary. The site can generate more than 150,000 hits daily on a good summer weekend, explains Seguin, and most area practitioners link to, or frame, the site from their own home pages. Although Contra Costa doesn't have advertising on its site, Seguin points out that there are a number of ways that the platform could be monetized, including advertising or by using the system's ability to create real time e-mail messages or custom reports for consumers or agents.

How you can do it

The Contra Costa association spent its NAR Game Changer Challenge runner-up award rewriting and enhancing the open source code for the platform, which it offers free to associations. Small boards without the technology budget or staff to implement the open source code can contract with Contra Costa for a turnkey solution or with any vendor or contractor fluent in the technologies employed.

For more information, contact Michael Seguin, Contra Costa AOR, at alerts@ccartoday.com. ■

*RETS stands for Real Estate Transaction Standard, a common data language spoken by systems that handle real estate information.

MORE ONLINE

Look for more innovative Game Changer programs in a searchable database by category at REALTOR.org/GameChangers.