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Realtors Go Digital | Gone Are The Days Of Paper Forms; Say Hi To Realty 2.0

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Is it time for agents to drop the pen?

As far back as the '60s, tech giants like IBM were touting the ability of computers to create a "paperless office." That dream has proved elusive for many -- and perhaps none more so than real estate agents, whose work involves countless listing brochures, disclosure forms, offers and contracts.

But agents say things are finally changing. It turns out Realtors just had to lose the office in order to lose the paper. The arrival of smartphones and tablets like the iPad and its competitors are allowing many agents to shift toward an entirely paperless way of working -- and many are rushing to embrace the new era.

"It absolutely is possible to be totally paperless. I'm meeting someone for the first time tonight, and I've got my disclosure form on my iPad, and I've got a stylus for them to sign, and I can email them a copy and it goes right back to me. It's 100 percent possible," said Deb Agliano, an agent with Re/Max Andrew Realty Services in Medford and specialist in training other agents in technology who goes by DebOnTheWeb.

The iPad may be less than three years old, and its competitors even younger, but already studies by market research firm Forrester Research calculated that almost 20 percent of American adults owned a tablet by the end of 2012 -- double 2011's total. With usage numbers skyrocketing, associations, MLSs and other technology vendors are rapidly adapting to offer mobile app versions of important technology and forms.

In turn, this has made previously existing technology like e-signature programs much more accessible -- unlike smartphones, tablets have big enough screens to clearly display documents. And unlike laptops, their touchscreens can record signatures using a stylus, and many don't require a wi-fi connection to reach the internet, making them much more useful while an agent is showing or touring homes with a client.

That web accessibility also makes them useful for other core tasks for agents, like creating listing presentations. "Since the buyers are doing everything online, I can't see going to a seller with a piece of paper," said Agliano.

'You Need To Adapt'

Listing agents have been among the quickest to convert. Sven Andersen, who leads The Anderson Team in Winchester, said he and the rest of his team have completely converted to paperless transactions for their listings, and they demand nothing less from the agents they work with.

"If you have a buyer, and you want to do business with us, you do it this way. If you're a buyer's agent and you write an offer on one of my houses, we take the offer, put it in DotLoop and mail it to you electronically. And if they say, 'I don't do it that way,' well, we do. You need to adapt to how we work if you want to do business with us," he said.

Once agents and their clients make the leap, Anderson said, they usually become converts. "Once they figure it out, they go, 'Wow, that's a slick tool!'" he said. "We had a 92-year-old woman [electronically] sign a contract with me to sell her house. There's no difference in it."

Larger brokerages are not only trying to use technology to help their agents go paperless, but to leverage the advantages their greater resources allow into a more permanent connection with consumers.

Coldwell Banker, for instances, uses a suite of programs called HomeBase which serves both as a customer relationship management and transaction management system for agents but also as a document storage system for clients -- forms and paperwork are uploaded to the system so they can be accessed by both agent and client during the transaction, and Coldwell encourages the new homeowner to continue utilizing the system to store important documents related to their home.

"As a consumer we give you access [to HomeBase] so you can continue to upload any information that has to do with your house, in this one platform that helped you throughout the transaction. You can upload [contractor's] quotes, receipts, anything, so you have this platform that follows you throughout your homeownership. It's part of doing business with our company," said Angela Stamoulos, director of education at Coldwell Banker Residential Brokerage. Providing a permanent tie to Coldwell's brand may encourage consumers to choose their agents again for their next home purchase.

Having options like that can make a difference in a deal. "I had a multiple bid situation and I had offers coming in, and one of the agents had done it electronically, and it was nice and clear and you could read everything, and the other had done it by hand and faxed it to me -- which goes to my email -- but the difference, even to the seller [was apparent]," said Agliano. "One of them really presented well, and one seemed old-school."

With tech savvy brokerages leading the way, many agents are now feeling the pressure to go paperless. It hasn't been an entirely painless transition for many, however.

Sam Schneiderman, principal broker at The Greater Boston Home Team and president of the Massachusetts Association of Buyer's Agents, said his goal for the year was to convert his office to a paperless one, but he was finding the process slow going.

"Some of the programs are too bulky. It's too many pieces. The iPad doesn't store documents well, and you don't just want to be carrying around all your docs on your iPad, so you need cloud storage as well. You have to build out a whole system," he said. "There are too many options and no standardization yet."

Even so, most agents agreed that the biggest sticking point for agents who want to transition to a paperless transaction weren't their fellow agents, but their other partners in the deal -- banks and attorneys. The closing itself often still requires reams of paper.

"I think some of the holdup is the banks," said Agliano. Many banks won't accept electronic signatures for documents related to short sales. "They'll allow you to do some paperwork electronically, but some of it still has to have a wet-ink signature."

Attorneys, too, seem stuck in the paper realm. "I just hung up the phone with an attorney who wanted two original signatures and copy of a document, and I said to him, 'We don't do originals anymore!' And there was dead silence for about 30 seconds," said Schneiderman.