4 How your brokerage can make the most of Internet Data Exchange

To take full advantage of IDX, you MUST have a Web site that displays IDX data. There are several ways to get one; each described more fully below. CMLS will identify third parties that are qualified to assist you in developing a Web site for your firm. (See Appendix D for details).

Use your imagination! This is the really important part of Internet Data Exchange. If you can think of a way to provide an innovative service to consumers using IDX data, try it out (so long as it doesn't break the rules). Ideas that have been tried on other real estate Web sites include:

o   Gathering consumers' e-mail addresses and property interests and sending them periodic updates on new listings that match their criteria. (Be mindful of any state and/or federal "do-not-spam" laws.)

o   Allowing consumers to perform a mortgage payment calculation using the list price for the listing they are looking at.

o   Allowing consumers to save listings to their "favorites" folders, so they can get back to favored listings quickly on subsequent visits. (Note that you cannot continue to show consumers a listing after it is sold. If a consumer tries to view a "favorite" listing that has since gone off the market, your site must inform her that the listing is no longer available. That's a good time to suggest that she call your firm to find out what happened to the listing. Maybe it just expired or was cancelled.)

Services brokers may investigate in the future include automated brokerage, loan application, and others. Note that the regulatory climate surrounding such services is still being determined. As the rules are clarified, you'll have a leg up on your competitors if you already have a robust Web site with IDX data.

4.1   DOING IT YOURSELF

If you are a fairly sophisticated designer of Web sites, and particularly if you have experience building, maintaining, and accessing databases on the Web, you may want to build your own IDX Web site. Refer to Section 7 – Technical Implementation Guide.

4.2   WORKING WITH A WEB DESIGNER

Most brokers do not possess the resources or staff required to perform the tasks identified in the Technical Implementation Guide. If you want the maximum amount of control over how your Web site looks and works, you will want to engage a Web site design and maintenance firm. They will use the instructions provided in the Technical Implementation Guide to build a Web site for you according to your specifications.

4.3   SAMPLE SITES

Still can't figure out which approach you want? Check out examples of Web sites. CMLS lists the Web sites of brokerages who display IDX data. The list is available at www.carolinamls.com. Look under General Information, then IDX.

Vendor Template Programs:

There are low-cost means for real estate firms to have a Web presence using the IDX data. Many Web site designers provide "template" Web sites. These are sites where the "search engine" and "user interface" are the same from broker to broker, but the branding on the Web site is unique to each broker. The brokers' sites may look very different, but if you perform a search and look at resulting listing data, you'll note important similarities. By making the databases the same or similar on multiple broker Web sites, the vendors of these services can dramatically improve the pricing of their services. The cost for this kind of service is $1,000 or less up-front and $1,000 or less per year to maintain. You could reasonably expect a custom site with the same characteristics to

cost $10,000-$15,000 to build and several thousand dollars a year to maintain. Note: The costs above contemplate a simple Web site. Add-ons can rapidly increase the cost of your site.

Many Web site vendors have expressed a desire to work with our members to provide affordable Internet Data Exchange Web site solutions. For a complete list of Web site vendors, visit www.carolinamls.com, look under General Information, then IDX. This list is provided as a convenience for CMLS members and is not an endorsement of any of these Web site vendors. CMLS is not responsible for the services rendered by any Web site vendor, listed or otherwise.

4.4   QUESTIONS YOU SHOULD ASK WEB SITE DESIGNERS BEFORE SIGNING UP WITH THEM.

CMLS strongly advises you to ask questions, many questions, before signing up with any Web site provider, including the vendors identified in Appendix D. The questions you ask at the beginning of the process will go a long way toward preventing disputes down the road. Before you contact any Web site designer, look at other Internet Data Exchange Web sites. Use them as you would imagine a consumer using them. Because your competitors' Web sites are available to you 24 hours a day, you have an unusual opportunity to see what they're doing before choosing your own course. If you can't or won't search the Web yourself, have a few agents in your office do it. Have them report back to you on features they think are valuable.

Before you begin discussions with a Web designer, ask for the Web addresses of other brokerage sites they have built. While nothing prevents you from working with a designer that has no previous Internet Data Exchange experience, you may find it more economical to work with one who has.

Here are a few important questions to ask Web site designers. This list is not exhaustive. Use your business common sense.

What are the set up costs for the Web site? Most Web site designers will want some kind of up-front fee to create your Web site. Find out exactly what steps the designer will take during these initial stages.

What is included in the up front fees? Find out if the package you are considering includes the complete design of a custom Web site, or if it only includes certain "template" elements. Find out how much control you have over things like the graphic design of your site, the color scheme, etc.

Can I integrate the Internet Data Exchange site with my existing Web site? You may already have a Web site and a Web site designer who has been doing a good job maintaining it. You may just want to incorporate the Internet Data Exchange piece into that existing site. If you want to keep your existing designer, have him/her contact other designers who have Internet Data Exchange experience and help you select one who is best for you.

What are the maintenance costs and how frequently are they due? Most Web site designers will charge you a monthly or quarterly maintenance fee. You should find out what you are receiving for this fee. At a minimum, it should include automatic updates of the Internet Data Exchange listing data on your Web site, preferably daily, but at least once every 72 hours according to the Internet Data Exchange Rules & Regulations (Appendix A).

Is a hosting fee included, or is it payable separately? Once a designer creates your site, it will have to be "hosted" on a computer connected to the Internet. Your designer may include the cost of hosting in the maintenance fees, or you may have to make separate arrangements for hosting. **If the designer will host your site, ask for the Web address of another site they host. Visit this site and make sure that it loads quickly. Consumers will hate your site if it runs slowly.**

What is the vendor's experience with Web-based databases, real estate Web sites, etc., and with whom have they worked? CHECK THESE REFERENCES! If they have built other broker Web sites, visit them. Make sure they work, that they look good, and that they are fast (consumers hate slow Web sites).

Does the maintenance fee include periodic changes to your site? You will want to change information on your site, things like firm special events, salesperson of the month, etc. Find out whether such changes are included in any maintenance fee, and how much additional changes will cost.

Does the maintenance fee include access to statistics about who is visiting your Web site and when? Critical to any marketing plan involving the Internet is an understanding of who is visiting your Web site and from where they are being referred. There are software packages available that will track activity on your Web site and provide important answers to these questions. Will your Web site designer provide this information to you? Is the cost included in your maintenance?

How much personal interaction will you have with the designer, or is it all online? Any face-to-face? How much? Any phone? How much? If you are accustomed to face-to-face or telephone customer service, you may find it difficult to find among Web site designers. They are creatures of e-mail. If this is important to you, you'll want to discuss it with candidate designers in advance.

Where is the designer located and how will you communicate with them?

What is the cost for additional work and features? If you see something on another site your designer has created, he/she should be able to tell you how much it would cost to add it to your own site. **Do not assume that a feature will appear on your site just because it appears on another site your designer created for another broker. The other broker may have paid a premium price for that feature.** The contract you write with the designer should list all the features you want and indicate their price. (If you're asking for a novel feature, the designer may hesitate to give you a price up-front. This is not unreasonable, and you'll have to negotiate the best deal you can.)

Discuss changes you will probably have to make. Find out how much they will cost:

Change an agent name

Add a link

Add a banner

Add a Web page

Will you own the domain name? If you are paying the designer to register your domain name, it's important that the designer commit to registering it in your name. You will be putting this address on all of your marketing materials from here on out. You don't want the designer to take it with him/her if you choose to work with a different designer.

Does the Broker own the site content? You will want to be able to take your Web site design with you if you choose another designer down the road. Seek provisions in your contract that will guarantee this. Note: this is probably only applicable to "custom" site content. If you buy a "template" package, the Web site vendor will not relinquish any rights in the template or the search interface to you).

Who is the designer/vendor? Is it a corporation, sole proprietor, LLC? Who will deliver on the promises the salesperson makes if that salesperson leaves? It's important here, as in every business deal, to know with whom you are dealing.

How soon after you sign a contract will your Web site be up? It is important to clarify all parties' expectations here.

Ask the designer why they deserve your business. There are many options out there. Make the designer explain why they are the best.

Encourage the designer to contact CMLS. You may encourage the vendor to contact CMLS to talk about what's entailed in an Internet Data Exchange Web site if they have any questions. They will provide better cost estimates if they know more about MLS's systems and the rules and regulations of the program. You are

encouraged to provide any potential designer the Internet Data Exchange Rules & Regulations (Appendix A) for reference.