

Text messaging, podcasts create buzz among home sellers, shoppers

By T.J. Sullivan, Tribune Newspapers:

April 16, 2006

CAN txt msgs make it EZer 2 shop 4 real est8?

Home sellers like Peter Maurer are hoping they will. When the founding partner of a Santa Monica architecture firm put his five-bedroom house in Sherman Oaks on the market in mid-March, his real estate agent, Craig Paul, put more than just a phone number on the sign out front. Paul, who subscribes to a service called CellSigns, also posted a string of numbers known as a "short code" to which prospective buyers can send a text message to request more information.



The sign next to seller Peter Maurer's Sherman Oaks home includes a code number to call for information by cellphone text message. (Carlos Chavez / LAT)

After the query is sent, several brief text messages are automatically transmitted in response from the text messaging service, giving information such as the number of bedrooms, the square footage and the asking price. One message lists the agent's website address and explains how to request a call or brochure by e-mail. Some services, such as Phoenix-based House4Cell, send messages with photos of the inside of the home.

For buyers, it eliminates the frustration of an empty flier box and playing phone tag with an agent just to determine a price. For sellers, it lets them know who, besides the neighbors, have passed by and snagged the listing information. And for real estate professionals, it's a chance to connect with customers on the fly.



A phone shows information on Maurer's home. (Carlos Chavez / LAT)

It also offers a new option for homes that are for sale by owner. If sellers don't want their home phone numbers posted out front, they can communicate through a text-message service.

"This is one of the best inventions in the real estate market that I have seen," Maurer said.

Agents, being agents, are continually looking for new ways to acquire listings and communicate with prospective buyers. Text messaging has joined other innovations, including podcasts, which allow real estate agents to produce audio and video commercials for their listings and zap them to people who request them on the Internet.

Several companies have begun offering high-tech services in the last year. House4Cell launched its text-messaging service in 2005, as did one of its competitors, CellSigns, based near Philadelphia. Likewise, companies focused on real estate podcasts rolled out their products last year too, including RealEstateShows.com, based in Marina del Rey, and the Xsites Network by A la mode Inc., based in Oklahoma City.

The timing appears to be right. "Realtors that were in the hot market didn't need to do anything," said Jeff Turner, president of RealEstateShows.com. "But we are now back in selling mode in Southern California."

Alexander Villa, an agent with Century 21 Prestige Properties in Claremont, said he's trying to adjust to the needs of a more tech-savvy clientele.

"The demographic is changing, and the focus is on the younger crowd," said Villa, the bulk of whose recent business has been with young families buying in San Bernardino County. Villa uses House4Cell on his listings and said he intends to jump into podcasting next.

"Less than a minute from them requesting something I know it, and I call them back," he said. "If I waited until that night, or later in the day, they'd say, 'Oh gosh, that was yesterday.' "

About 134 million American adults have cellphones and about 27% of them have used text messages, according to a study released last year by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, an initiative of the Pew Research Center. CTIA-the Wireless Assn. reported that 7.3 billion text messages were sent in the month of June 2005, up 154% from June 2004. Five years ago, only 33.5 million text messages were sent in June, said John Walls, vice president of public affairs for the association.

Although still relatively new on the West Coast, using text messages to sell homes is more common in the East. Homeowner Jon Thies, who recently completed construction of a new home in Pennsylvania, said he used CellSigns to help market his prior residence this winter in Wilmington, Del. Although the eventual buyer didn't use the text-messaging feature, Thies said the response to it was "awesome."

"We'd be home, and we'd see cars drive by and stop, and we'd look at the CellSigns website and we'd see that they requested the information we put up there," Thies said.

The area codes of the people requesting the information, which are logged in a secure area of the website, told Thies that many of the prospective buyers came from Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Maryland.

But in the age of do-not-call lists, the matter of sharing a cell number with a real estate agent is bound to concern some would-be buyers. Federal law prohibits cellphone numbers from being placed in a telemarketer's auto-dialer. However, when a prospective buyer sends a text message to the code number on a sign, he is voluntarily sharing his phone number with both the company that runs the service and the real estate agent paying for it.

How that information is treated depends on the agent and the company offering the service.

David Wachs, president of Cellit Mobile Marketing, which operates the House4Cell service, said company policy states it will "never, under any circumstances, sell or otherwise distribute your cellphone numbers to third parties." House4Cell agents receive a text message immediately after a request for information is made on a listing. The message tells the agent both the identity of the listing and the cellphone number of the person who requested the information. That agent can then call the person back or send a text message.

"Say the Realtor happens to be in the area," Wachs said. " I'm right around the corner. Would you like me to show it to you? " "

CellSigns co-founder David Geipel takes a different approach. He said anyone who sends a text message through his service is considered to be requesting only information. They have to send a second text

message to authorize a call back.

"To start a conversation with someone ... who does not give them permission is just hounding them," Geipel said.

Agents are well aware of how protective people can be about contact information. It's part of the reason sign-in sheets at open houses have become ineffective tools.

"An individual walking into an open house has a red target on their back as a hot prospect.... I find they're very reluctant to sign in," said agent Paul, with Re/Max on the Boulevard in Encino. "They either give partial or incorrect information."

Information obtained from text messages, however, is accurate and can help both the agent and seller, Paul said, regardless of whether they walk away or seek contact.

"If 20 people have requested information and not one of them has asked for a showing, then something is wrong," Paul said. "Then we have to take a look and see how much we're asking."

Another gadget changing home selling and buying is the iPod and the podcasts it has inspired.

A podcast is content created for iPods and distributed via the Internet. Podcasts can contain simple audio, or a combination of audio, photographs and video. The content can even be played on desktop and laptop computers, which makes them an attractive way for agents to communicate with buyers. A prospective buyer visiting an agent's website can download podcasts about listings and subscribe to future podcasts, which means they will be automatically downloaded whenever the agent produces new ones.

Brent Humpherys, an agent with Re/Max Associates in San Diego who uses the Xsites Network, said Internet statistics prompted him to embrace the technology.

The Home Buyer and Seller Survey released in January by the National Assn. of Realtors said 24% of buyers in 2005 identified the Internet as their first connection to the home they purchased, up from 15% in 2004.

"Calling a salesperson who stands to make a large commission and saying, 'Hi, I'm John Jones and I want to talk about buying a house' is a little intimidating to some people," Humpherys said. "And that's where podcasting comes in. It's kind of the best of both worlds. 'Leave me alone, but I want to hear more.' I think that's what their attitude is."

Turner of RealEstateShows.com thinks podcasts are a concept that will take off once technological advances make it possible for the iPod and other media players to connect wirelessly to the Internet. Although some existing hand-helds, like BlackBerries, already connect wirelessly, they don't handle slide shows and movies well, which makes them impractical for this purpose, Turner said.

That's bound to change though, he said, and those who embrace progress will benefit.

"I can fear the technology," he said, "but I can also understand that I need it."

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<http://www.latimes.com/classified/realestate/printedition/la-re-tech9apr09,0,3373815.story?page=2&coll=la-class-realestate>

From the Los Angeles Times

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