

Why online house-hunting doesn't work

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By Megan Lane

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As a new property-buying season gets under way, the net will again fill with details of houses for sale. Yet few websites are reliable enough to be really useful to prospective buyers. Why have many estate agents failed to see the web's potential as a selling tool?

When my boyfriend and I were searching for a house to buy in east London, naturally we turned to the internet.

We both work full-time, so didn't have the time (let alone the inclination) to trawl around properties and estate agents day in, day out. Besides, this being the information age, it's natural to browse property websites and sign up for e-mail alerts.



The appeal of instant communication is especially strong for someone desperate to buy a house. You want to know everything you can about the market you're interested in, and you want to know it before any other buyers - your competitors - get to find out.

The web seems like the perfect solution - if something comes up that you like the look of, you can simply ring the agent to arrange a viewing.

But what we found was that more often than not, the sites - of estate agencies and umbrella organisations alike - were so out of date that the property had long since gone.

On one occasion, two weeks after we had seen new owners moving into a place we had spotted online, it was still on several websites. And an automated e-mail alert, our first after registering with a site, simply listed every property on the agent's database, regardless of the price range we'd specified.

Nor did many agents have a handle on e-mail. Each time an agent phoned, keen to arrange a viewing, we asked - usually in vain - to be sent photos and details before committing to a long schlep.

Some were baffled that we didn't leap at the chance to see everything they rang about; others sheepishly admitted that they didn't know how to send attachments.

Sellers, too, can find this frustrating. When Dylan Reynolds put his flat up for sale last summer, he chose an agent which runs a popular umbrella site, assuming the listing would go online quickly and accurately.

“ It took ages to get my flat's listing online, and worse, many of the details

Seller Dylan Reynolds

"Unfortunately it took ages, and worse, once they were up, they had the property listed under the wrong postcode. Many of the other details, including dimensions, were also wrong. Despite many calls and visits to the agents, it took weeks to correct. Whenever I complained to my estate agents, they blamed the website staff. I had two viewings in six weeks with that estate agent, before I ditched them."

Surge in online searches

Given that about 60% of people who want to move start their search online, the property industry as a whole has been slow to cotton onto the benefits of the web. While smart agencies update their sites regularly and offer additional services online, for many others, a website is little more than a come-on to get people to make contact.

Technology analyst Bill Thompson says this is unlikely to change while the property market remains buoyant.

"Changing to a new technology takes quite a lot of work and outlay, and if business is booming, they may not see the benefit in doing this. If you get 100 people coming through your doors, and two leave because you can't send an e-mail, this isn't going to worry you unduly. But if the market slows and you get 10 people coming in and two leave, you'll want to do what you can to keep those customers."

Peter Bolton King, the chief executive of the National Association of Estate Agents, says the level of online service depends on the agency and the market served.

"Some are very good and understand e-conveyancing, while many more have yet to grasp that there's nothing more frustrating than using a website which is out-of-date.

"But adopting what I call a clicks and bricks approach to selling is quite an undertaking, something the big chains are in a better position to do. To e-mail out a full set of details if you haven't got a fairly robust computer system can clog up the machine for some time."

Nor has there been a clear leader in the online field to blaze a trail, the likes of Amazon in the book-selling trade, Mr Thompson says.

"I also doubt that this is an industry where the net will eventually cut out the intermediary. People will continue to use it as a research tool - once they find a local agent, they'll then switch to the conventional method of house-hunting."

As for my own search for a house, technology did in the end play a part, but not thanks to estate agents. A friend knew of a house which was not yet on the

SURF FOR HOMES

Nielsen Netratings figures show 1.9m Britons visited a property-related website in Nov 03

Two-thirds of Rightmove's page views are during office hours

Page views on Foxtons' award-winning site have gone up 600% since mid-2002



Properties are snapped up fast

market, texted me the details, and the deal was done even before the For Sale sign was put up.

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I helped develop one of the better-known property websites. The weakness of such sites is that it is the agents who must upload each new property, and of course remove listings that have been sold. Until agents become more web aware and commit more heavily to using it to sell property, such sites will tend to remain poorly maintained.

Lindsay, Scotland

My wife & I got so frustrated with websites here when searching for an investment property that we decided to buy one in Australia. They had virtual tours, plenty of photos, floor plans, and descriptions. The building reports etc were e-mailed to us, documents to sign were faxed, and we got a friend to give the place the once-over. Oh, and the property was listed as "under contract" the day we paid a deposit, and was removed when it was settled. Q. Why can't it be so easy and accurate here? A. Complacency and bureaucracy.

Chris Hurst, UK

I called a London estate agent saying I was interested in a property on their website; they said it had been sold, but they were glad the site was "generating interest". They don't realise that the web can be used for so much more.

Joseph, UK

I moved to the US last year, where realtors use a central system listing most houses. Many have virtual tours and photographs, so you can view a home without having to travel. I was able to reduce my list from 50 to 5 homes without leaving my office. This is economic for the buyer, more convenient for the seller, and helps the realtors also.

Stephen Franks, US

I work for an estate agents (in administration) - properties are left on the internet after being sold so that it appears that the agent has more properties on offer than they really have. As far as e-mail goes, you could wait up to two weeks before a message sent to our branches is answered, and I'm sure we are not alone in this. Estate agents are simply salesmen, they don't understand customer satisfaction.

Anon, UK

I found my French house through the web. I chose a few to look at and then an English agent made appointments at six different agencies in France. Clutching print-outs, I only visited two of them because, on the second day, I bought one of the houses. I can't see how it could have been easier, because I was also looking in Italy and Greece.

Yvonne Gregson, UK

I am afraid that I'm addicted to Foxtons.co.uk. I start to look in my price range, but then find myself looking at the interiors and floor plans of 5 bedroom flats overlooking Hyde Park. My friends call it my "flat-porn problem".

Alex , UK

I registered with 9 agents over the weekend, and was woken up at 6 this morning by a text message telling me there was a e-mail waiting for me detailing new properties. Clever stuff.

David, UK

Of the 12 websites I used when buying my first house, only one was of any use and even then I had to go into the agent's to get a username. They seem to be about 5 or 6 years behind the times. The internet is, however, very useful for researching the area you are looking at (crime, council performance, amenities etc).

Simon, England

After four months of looking, I found my dream home with land online. I searched Beds, Herts, Bucks, Cambs and Essex, and there is no way I could have covered that breadth of estate

agents in person. I moved in 4 weeks before Christmas.

Lucy, UK

The trick is to ignore estate agents entirely and go to the independent websites. I bought my house last year through such a site and found it to be an eye-opening experience. The sellers didn't pay silly sums in commission so I got a cheaper house.

Roger Filius, UK

What especially annoys me is when they put 'Sale agreed' next to an online listing - and then let it sit on the site for months. This means you have to trawl through dozens of listings to spot any that might be relevant. Surely deleting an entry is simpler than just editing it?

Sophy, Cambridge, UK

We bought our property in 2000 after finding it on the web. We were looking in Berkshire and Hampshire - the M3/M4 IT corridor, so it could be that the estate agents there were more net savvy. Problems arise with small firms that want a web presence but do not have the ability to actually make it work for them.

Paul T Horgan, UK

I moved to Scotland from London last year and found the web invaluable. The Scottish system of selling through solicitors' property centres, enabling you to view virtually all properties for sale within a given area, made house hunting very easy, even over a great distance. They're updated weekly so the information is rarely out of date.

Aletia, Scotland

