

Realtors join podcasting craze

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Rock bands use them. Pornographers have made them too. Even politicians and governments are joining the craze. So while it may seem unusual at first, it's really only logical that Realtors may be the latest group joining the podcasting craze.

A la mode Inc., which provides Web tools to realty agents, appraisers and lenders, launched the first "propertycast" technology this week, which allows Realtors to develop podcasts that contain information about homes for sale.

Podcasting -- a hybrid term from the MP3 player "iPod" and "broadcasting" -- allows users to download audio files on a regular basis to either their desktops or MP3 players. RSS, or Really Simple Syndication technology, is used to send podcasts to users. Listeners can use programs called aggregators to automatically check for and download new content, and some aggregators will automatically transfer new content to an MP3 player. The technology became popular late last year.

"It allows the agent to record something, an MP3 file, really to their liking that people will be really interested in," said Matt Barr, communications director for a la mode, which provides Web services to 7,500 customers. "People who subscribe to the feeds are the ones (who are) really, really interested."

Barr explained that hypothetically, a user could pick a city he was looking for a home in and then find a realty agent. The shopper could

then subscribe to that agent's podcast listings, and every time there is a new listing that meets his search criteria, it would automatically be downloaded to his MP3 player. Though Realtors have not expressed a demand for podcasting, the company wanted to give them the tool so they could differentiate themselves from other home sellers, Barr said.

"(Y)ou're going to be trying to win listing presentations from home sellers," Barr explained. "You're going to be able to go into a meeting with them and say look ... we have Google Earth, all sorts of other features, virtual brochures and presentations, and you'll be able to reach 22 million people with MP3 players."

Todd Ernst, a Keller Williams agent and a la mode customer from Grant Rapids, Mich., has been beta testing propertycast technology since last week. He said he plans on keeping his podcasts relatively simple, at less than 60 seconds, and will include basic information about the size, age and style of the house in his audio descriptions. He said he believes that the podcasting capabilities could help him gain listings, as Barr said.

"For me to be able to go against John Doe who has 20 more years (experience) than me and has more sales, but I can show the clients, 'Hey I have this multimedia feature on my Web site' ... that's a pretty big caveat," Ernst said.

On Monday he uploaded his first podcast to his Web site. The file was about 90 seconds long and described the neighborhood, materials, design and size of a \$1.6 million home.

Ernst said in the future he may record audio tours of homes, download them to iPods and distribute them to prospective buyers at open houses.

"I know a lot of people, when they come to an open house, they don't want to be buddy-buddy with the Realtor," Ernst said.

It's unknown whether other Realtors are using podcasting yet. A spokesperson for the National Realtors Association did not return phone calls from UPI. But one way to encourage Realtors to use the technology would be to make sure it remains inexpensive and user friendly, Ernst said. While a la mode does not charge for podcasting, microphones and audio software can be pricey. Ernst said he will work with a la mode to find the best microphone headsets that are under \$20, and while he uses professional-grade Adobe Audition software to produce his podcasts, other Realtors will probably need access to a free audio utility such as Windows Media Player.

Barr said he envisions potential homebuyers listening to listings of homes in the car, the office, the gym or the subway.

"That's what podcasting has done across media -- make it more convenient," Barr said. "It's like TiVo for audio. It's natural."

Ernst doubted that people would be interested in listening to home descriptions in their cars -- he said he himself probably wouldn't be "terribly inclined" to do so. But he said while propertycasting may take a few months to get off the ground, "It's coming and we all know it."

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