

Web sites cater to for-sale-by-owner home sellers

November 20 2009, By ALEX VEIGA , AP Real Estate Writer

(AP) -- Selling a home without a real estate agent can save thousands of dollars in commission fees, but it can also be a painstaking, confusing task.

Foregoing an agent, however, is easier these days thanks to Web sites that help homeowners advertise their properties on the hottest [real estate](#) portals and even walk them through figuring out how to price their home to sell.

Sites such as ForSaleByOwner.com, Owners.com and Fizber.com don't claim to supplant every service a real estate agent provides, but they and others come close to giving a seller's home the same online exposure as one that's marketed by an agent.

That kind of access comes at a price, often in the hundreds of dollars, and probably means the seller must settle for saving only half of the 6 percent cut of the sale that traditionally would be split between the agents for the buyer and seller.

On a \$300,000 sale, that's \$9,000. Not too shabby.

Still, the median sale price for a for-sale-by-owner property last year was \$153,000, while it was \$211,000 for sellers who used an agent, according to the National Association of Realtors.

Homeowners who sell their property on their own may not always tap the

pool of buyers that an agent can in the open market, which could reduce the range of offers. Another factor is that, in many cases, for-sale-by-owner transactions are between people who knew each other in advance, such as family or acquaintances, which could also lead to a below-market price.

That hasn't dissuaded many sellers from going it alone, however.

Historically, for-sale-by-owner transactions accounted for between 15 to 20 percent of the market. The figure tends to go up when the market is hot and it's easier for sellers to go it alone, and decline during a down market because there's a glut of unsold properties.

By-owner home sales have declined this year as a share of all home sales, except in urban areas, according to a survey by the NAR.

Web sites where homeowners can advertise their properties abound, one merely needs to search the phrase "homes for sale by owner" to find several examples.

ForSaleByOwner.com, Owners.com and BuyOwner.com are among the first to pop up in Google search results. But several popular real estate Web sites, including RealtyTrac.com, also offer do-it-yourself home sale tools.

The sites' features and charges vary, but they typically let users create an online ad with details about the home they want to sell, several photos and contact information.

RealtyTrac, for example, lets users post 10 photos of the property and include flyers, a report on sales prices of nearby homes and e-mails with the listing sent out to some 800,000 subscribers. The site charges non-members \$59.95 a month to advertise a property.

Some sites, like BuyOwner.com, up the ante, offering to expose sellers' ads to more potential buyers by placing them onto Web sites like Google Base and Yahoo Real Estate, among others.

For \$299, BuyOwner.com also throws in a few extras, such as access to a toll-free customer support line.

ForSaleByOwner.com, meanwhile, offers packages that range from \$81 a month to a six-month plan for \$809.

Many portals offer to advertise the property on the local Multiple Listing Service, which is a databases of homes for sale compiled by real estate agents. This option can cost hundreds of dollars, but can be worth the price because it exposes their home to agents working buyers.

That's because most homebuyers still hire a real estate agent to lead their home search, and advertising a property on a MLS ensures it is being seen by buyers' agents and picked up by Web sites that tap into MLS data, such as Realtor.com.

Greg Healy, president of ForSaleByOwner.com, says the [Web site](#) advises users who opt for access to the MLS to offer buyer's agent a commission, typically 3 percent of the sales price.

"We just try to be very honest that if you don't ... they won't come," Healy said, noting that sellers who want to save the full commission can do so by finding a buyer who isn't represented by a broker.

Bernard McMullan of Pittsburgh listed his three-bedroom house on the MLS through Owners.com.

"I probably had 20 people come and look at it within the first month of it being listed on the MLS," said McMullan, a police officer.

That brought in a few offers. But he ended up selling the house for \$141,000 to a buyer who was not working with an agent, which enabled him to save on a commission.

"That was nice," McMullan said.

Such so-called flat-fee MLS packages are the best way for sellers to get the same exposure as owners with agents, says Steve Udelson, CEO of Owners Advantage LLC, which operates Owners.com.

"That's the gateway. That's the magic piece," he added.

Owners.com, which has about 100,000 homes listed for sale by owners, offers several plans, including one that's free and lets users post an ad on the site with one photo, which is then posted on Google and Craigslist. Pay plans range from \$79.95 to \$695, with the top-tier package featuring many other options, including a six-month listing on the MLS and Realtor.com.

And despite the portal's emphasis on homeowners selling their homes on their own, the priciest package offers sellers assistance from a real estate agent on certain tasks, such as pricing the home, closing the deal and other paperwork.

Just don't expect them to host your open house.

Write to Alex Veiga at [aveiga\(at\).org](mailto:aveiga(at).org)

On the Net:

ForSaleByOwner: <http://www.forsalebyowner.com>

Owners.com: <http://www.owners.com>

Fizber.com: <http://www.fizber.com>

RealtyTrac: <http://www.realtytrac.com>

BuyOwner.com: <http://www.buyowner.com>

Craigslist: <http://www.craigslist.com>

Realtor.com: <http://www.realtor.com/>

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