

Staff Writer

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The old adage, "what you see is what you get" works for today's homebuyer and seller, not to mention all the real estate agents, brokers and lenders in between. But protocol no longer has buyers jumping into cars and shopping till they drop – often touring homes that don't meet their needs or budget. Now homebuyers are making educated decisions with just a click of the mouse by touring homes online.

"The Internet is my (virtual) office," said Mari Rozett, owner of Mari Rozett Realty in Discovery Bay. "I work inside my home, and that's how I get most of my business. When I'm looking for a home, I personally don't want to drive there or talk on the phone. I want to do my research first. I feel a lot of home buyers today feel the same way."

According to Rozett, people with busy lives can save hours of travel time and fuel costs just by surfing real estate sites online. "For example, some people want to buy a home in Discovery Bay on the water for \$500,000. They just don't know that there are no properties on the market for that amount. They can save time by finding this out on the Internet. It saves them time and money."

Brian Sharp of Sharp Homes in Brentwood said the Internet connects agents with homebuyers and sellers through a partnership, rather than using them as dictators.

"We call them 'the empowered consumer,'" said Sharp, who's been in the business for nine years. "On our Web site, we show floor plans, multiple pictures of the inside and outside of the homes, the tax bill for cities that have additional taxes such as the Mello Roos tax in Antioch, school scores and maps, the CornFest, restaurants and golf courses. What I'm trying to do is give buyers as much information about the homes; it's like giving them a walking tour."

He said virtual tours on Web sites began in the late '90s, and were mostly used to showcase high-end homes. "I did mine on every home, regardless," said Sharp. He says many of the hits to his Web site come late at night or in the wee hours of the morning, "Because that's all the time they have," he adds.

In his experience, Sharp says homes sell 75 percent faster with photos and virtual tours than homes without a visual listing. "People are going to take the path of least resistance, and they're going to respond visually. The Internet strips away all the fakeness."

Help U Sell agents are using similar tools as agent and broker-assisted sellers. They offer full-service Web exposure of homes for sale. Ben Cerruti of Help U Sell in Brentwood realizes how vital this tool is to consumers.

"It narrows down their search," Cerruti said.

"You'll still go around and view homes, but you plug in your parameters and up pop your

choices. Many times realtors will cherry-pick their own preferences, and some are biased on what properties pay a higher commission. The Internet offers a tremendous service, and as years go by, more and more people will become familiar with these Web sites."

Presently working on a new Web site, to be up and running in about two weeks, and unrelated to his Help U Sell business, Cerruti is personally designing a site for retired folks who are looking to buy or sell in the Summerset homes arena.

"There are no retirement indexes on the Internet right now," said Cerruti, who feels this is a grossly underrepresented community in East Contra Costa County. His goal is to feature links from all the local realtors on the site, because it's not about the sale; "it's about getting the word out about the homes that are available in this active adult community."

Rozett, who's been a broker for 20 years, admits that a virtual tour, whether it's 180 degrees or 360, is not the same as going to see the home, "but it gives you an idea if this is something you'd like to see in person."

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