

TECH TRANSFORMATION

Coronavirus Could Leave Lasting Mark on How Homes are Sold

Tools Adopted Amid Pandemic Have Lasting Benefits

By Heather Beasley Doyle | Special to Banker & Tradesman | May 17, 2020 | [Reprints](#) | [Unlock Link](#) | [Print](#)



he proliferation of virtual tours and other digital tools could force sellers' and buyers' agents to improve key skills as the pandemic recedes.

For couples who met in person, found each other appealing, and agreed to see each other again, online dating seems strange, maybe even anathema. How could anyone decide whether to swipe left or right based only on technology-mediated impressions?

Since March, serious Massachusetts homebuyers have rapidly made a shift from real-time to online akin to the jump from meeting prospective life partners in person to seeking out potential mates through a smartphone app. As recently as February, many potential homebuyers attended open houses, figured out what they liked, then learned more about the properties to discern which home might be right for them.

Now, as the state appears poised to slowly reopen its economy, many of the adaptations buyers, sellers and agents made as the coronavirus pandemic hit Massachusetts could stick around as technology has become not just a support, but the essential portal into real estate.

Listings Transformed

As of this writing, Gov. Charlie Baker had not yet released all the rules that could govern the real estate industry as the state recovers. However, sellers are still wary of coronavirus transmission from potential buyers, agents say, even as they appear to be returning to the market and cooped-up open house enthusiasts are now browsing homes via real estate websites, possibly planning ahead.

The Boston-area housing market isn't awful, all things considered. The number of listings may be half of what it is in a normal spring but the market for homes listed for up to \$1.5 million remains active, "as if there's nothing else happening in the world," Brian Dougherty, managing director at Compass Boston, recently told Banker & Tradesman.

"The limited inventory that's there has been moving pretty quick," said Nellie Aikenhead, owner of Aikenhead Real Estate Inc. in Arlington.

At the heart of these transactions is a suite of technology – mostly not new – but deployed with fresh force and breadth, from pre-recorded and live-streamed home tours to virtual open houses and online (sometimes interactive) floor plans.

"I want to make sure that they're really serious buyers before they come in" for a showing, said Aikenhead. "My clients are living in the houses or they have been, and they don't want anyone coming in who isn't really seriously considering the property."

**"I believe that the way we conduct business will forever be changed."
– Brian Dougherty, Managing Partner, Compass Boston**

While Aikenhead has long featured detailed floor plans and brochures with her online listings, she only recently began making home tour videos. Now, she requires prospective buyers to view these before offering them the chance to see a home in person.

"I believe that the way we conduct business will forever be changed," said Dougherty. Even once the coronavirus is contained, the question will be "how can we take what we've adapted and ... continue to give people as many pre-buying resources as possible?"

Tools Gather More Buyer Data

One newer resource for sellers is the chance to help create their home's listing materials. About a year ago, Zillow launched Zillow 3D home, a virtual home tour app.

"Historically, one of the challenges with 3D tours was the cost" and the time involved, said Zillow's Vice President of Rich Media Experiences, Josh Weisberg. "Agents would tend to do them only on higher-end listings."

But Zillow 3D can be used from a smartphone; ease-of-use for real estate agents is the goal. Properties listed on Zillow with a 3D tour got more views, more favorites, and sold 10 percent faster.

"That validates our belief that buyers validate that kind of technology," Weisberg said.

More online tools also mean more chances to capture buyer data. Dougherty said that Compass is creating digital listing brochures with turnable pages, with "micro videos" embedded within. Agents can see where buyers' digital footprints are deepest – say, in the kitchen or in the living room – allowing agents and buyers alike to home in on priorities.

Technology has also allowed agents to talk face-to-face with clients throughout a socially distanced home transaction, maintaining the relationship-building process. Dougherty said that he's been talking for weeks with a client in Amsterdam as the man has very gradually pinpointed where, exactly, in Boston he wants to live. He could, potentially, become another client to buy a home, from thousands of miles away, having only seen it online. But Dougherty noted the interpersonal value, the relationship that's developed.

“The most fun part of my job is the relationships that I create,” he said. At times, he added, “we’re like counselors, we help [people] process.”

Maintaining those relationships via WeChat, WhatsApp or Zoom isn’t better or worse, he said “it’s just different.”

Changes Raise the Bar

All in all, the pandemic has created increasingly robust online listings, and made a wider variety of communication tools commonplace; it has ushered in virtual notarization and kept clingy buyers out of home inspectors’ hair. Dougherty contends that it has strengthened real estate agents’ role as information curators and raised the bar for listings.

CEO and founder of Hannover-based Movementum Realty Shawn Moloney agrees.

“No longer are you going to be able to be an agent who puts together a [low-quality] listing,” said Moloney. “I think we’ll be moving into a place where a smaller amount of brokers are going to do a larger and larger volume of business because of that total information gap.”

And as for that initial contact, that in-person open house or showing that can ignite love of a property? Will buyers continue to delve digitally before stepping into a prospective home, or will they want to return to the more analog past?

“From the buyers’ perspective, I think they like going around and looking at a bunch of different places; it gives them a better sense of the market,” said Aikenhead. “But it occurred to me from a seller’s perspective, maybe the sellers don’t want 100 people coming through their house, tracking in dirt, tracking in germs. Maybe they’re going to be a little more selective about how the showings work, and whether or not they allow open houses, and whether they only allow open houses to people who’ve reviewed materials.”

James Sanna contributed reporting.

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