

The need for autonomy powers real estate sales

By  [Barrie Swart](#)

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According to a recent survey by Gumtree.co.za, 57% of South Africans start their search for a new home online - while only 20% will go straight to an estate agent and 14% will wait for their weekly newspaper.



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It has become apparent that, as Jim Lecinski of Google said, “The sales funnel isn’t really a funnel anymore.” The majority of consumers are self-educating, well-informed and ready to purchase by the time they enter a store or pick up a phone to an agent – they are unlikely to express interest without a clear idea of what they want by the time they make face-to-face contact.

Internet, primary source of research

Today’s consumer is switching between devices, searching, reading reviews, comparing prices, asking rapid questions on social media (and receiving instant answers). Nine in 10 new home buyers rely on the internet as their primary source of research, with real estate-related searches rising 253% in just four years.

This trend has affected the real estate industry in numerous ways. Already battling fierce competition, coupled with tough economic times, estate agents have to find a way to attract customers during the online search phase. They also have to sell to customers who want more options, more knowledge and more choice. To do that, they need the ability to analyse their data – quickly and efficiently.

Platforms that are less agile

While conventional online property platforms are popular, in many ways, they aren’t benefiting property marketers, or their clients. Benefits aren’t necessarily being passed from the platform to their users. For example, tech platforms will develop tools that provide in-depth analytics, access to feeds, means of ways of saving time and money and monitoring staff and ad performance, but instead of putting the power of technology into users’ hands, they keep their cards close to their chests and force their customers to use them as the middle man. It makes it all seem a lot more difficult and mysterious than it is – but it also makes the entire platform less agile for the people who rely on it to sell property.

Relying on a third party to report on rapid changes defeats the purpose of using the internet to advertise properties for sale or rent. A rental deal can be concluded from start to finish within a matter of days and a property can go off the market within the same week it's advertised, so the site should be updated immediately to avoid the frustration of irrelevant enquiries (for both agents and consumers).

Reports should be viewed daily, not monthly, particularly when it comes to leads because the market is so competitive and sellers could demand an analysis of a sole mandate's marketing activities and results at any given time. Waiting for a third party's helpdesk to feed back or update on your behalf is not conducive to the good customer service that most agents rely on as their most important differentiator.

Contractual and technological lock-ins

Another source of contention within the industry is the contractual and technological lock-ins imposed by online platforms. Contracts are typically long and inflexible, which again is not relevant to an industry that can be extremely volatile and sees peaks and troughs. Others use technological means of locking in customers – migrating or uploading their stock or even building microsites for their customers but disallowing feeds from other sources, imposing exclusivity on the agents.

In short, a good property platform should embrace the spirit of accessibility and ease of use of classifieds but maintain the sophistication associated with specialist sites.

The reason tens of thousands prospective property buyers are already visiting a site like Gumtree every single day is because the ads they are replying to are managed by agents directly, and therefore up to date and on the market. The most significant change we've made is to make the entire process easier for the agents themselves – creating a dashboard that puts the power in their hands.

It's an obvious solution. As property buyers are taking house-hunting into their own hands, property marketers should too.

ABOUT BARRIE SWART

Barrie Swart is the head of operations at Gumtree Property. He has spent a decade working in the fields of marketing, media and management in both South Africa and China, holding both an MBA and a bachelor's degree in marketing. Swart was responsible for launching ProTool For Property, a sophisticated property dashboard, that is now being used in South Africa and Mexico.

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