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Web tools open new lines of communication for agents

Part 1: Real estate technology buzz

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Editor's note: In an increasingly competitive marketplace, brokers and agents are trying new things to gain an edge. In this four-part series, Inman News offers a look at new tools available for Realtors, including online communication plug-ins, online video and single-property Web site marketing.

Maybe you haven't used [Jaxtr](#), [Jott](#), [Meebo](#), [Pinger](#) and [Twitter](#). In fact, maybe you haven't heard of them.

They are not: alien planets discovered on "Star Trek"; nicknames for illicit pharmaceuticals; new cable television networks; or Pokemon pals.

They are: new ways to communicate.

Instant-messaging, text-messaging, voice-messaging and e-mail-messaging technologies are a hotbed for communications mashups, and these companies among others are supplying the "always on" business of real estate with plenty of tools to instantly reach out and text, call, IM or e-mail someone at all hours.

While these communication tools do offer more opportunities to generate leads and keep in touch with clients, some real estate professionals say that managing all of these communications channels can be a challenge and a time drain.

Jim Duncan, a third-generation Realtor for Century 21 Manley in Charlottesville, Va., who maintains a blog at [RealCentralVA.com](#) and has amassed a collection of 13 e-mail addresses, four instant-messaging addresses and a voice-over-Internet account through Skype.

"I'm always online, for better or worse," he said.

Duncan has been blogging for about 2 1/2 years, and he entered the real estate business about six years ago. He experiments with some of the latest communication tools that he learns about from blogs and other online sources, and he keeps what works.

The new communications technologies can make his work more efficient, though the tradeoff is that he has to work harder to keep up with this expanding communications chain, he said. "I color-code everything I do. I just have to prioritize my tasks."

For the past month Duncan has been testing out a free click-to-call button at his blog site. That service, called Jaxtr, allows people to click an online button to connect by phone, send a text message or send a voicemail message, and it can keep both parties' phone numbers and other contact information private.

"I thought I'd give it a shot. I'll keep it there for another couple months -- it's free," Duncan said. So far he received one contact through that service.

There are many other examples of click-to-call technologies, among them [realPING](#), LivePerson's LiveCall and Google's Click-to-Call. Cendant Corp., now Realogy, announced in 2004 the availability of a LeadRouter system for its real estate brands that converts online information entered by consumers to an automated voice message that is delivered to agents' phones.

Duncan said he has tried Jott, a free service that converts voice messages to a text-based e-mail with a

link to the recorded audio file. So far, he has used Jott to record personal reminders about appointments. "That thing is awesome," he said. "I'm going to keep it as long as they keep it free. Even then it might be so ingrained that I pay for it." That service can also be used to send a text conversion of your voice message to another individual or a group of people.

While Duncan considers himself to be an early adopter for many new communications tools, he said it doesn't necessarily pay to be the first one using them.

"The challenge that we're facing from the technology standpoint is that there is not a critical mass yet for bleeding-edge technology. If only one person in the market has heard of it -- it's cool to be in the leading edge but it doesn't do any good if nobody else is using it. The balance is knowing and using what is new and cool but also knowing and using what everyone else is (using)," he said.

He has signed up for an account at Twitter, a messaging tool that allows users to post short text messages to the Internet from their phones or computers, though he hasn't found a way to integrate that with his real estate business and he doesn't believe it would be useful for his clients. "I don't have time for Twitter," he said.

While instant-messaging has been around for years, there are innovative tools that can embed live chat into existing Web sites. Meebo is one example. This tool allows consumers to ask questions and receive answers in real-time from agents, or the agent can respond later if the agent is away from the computer.

About seven weeks ago, Realtor Kevin Boer of 3 Oceans Real Estate in Palo Alto, Calif., began to test Meebo at his blog site, and he's had a couple of online conversations with prospective clients using this chat tool.

With Meebo, Boer said he logs on at the Meebo.com Web site when he is at his computer to indicate that he is available for live chat via his Web site. He can also see whether there are other people who are currently visiting his site. He said he sees potential for using Meebo to set up a virtual open house in which he is available to chat with consumers online about specific properties.

"Meebo is such a new tool ... I don't think anybody is certain about what the etiquette is. It's a slightly different etiquette online." He said he could choose to initiate an online chat when he notices that there are visitors at his site, though they might be spooked by this approach. Perhaps with an open house there will be more acceptance for Web visitors to be engaged in this way, he said.

He has also put up a Jaxtr click-to-call link on his site, and plans to test out Meebo and Jaxtr for a few months before deciding whether to keep them around. Rather than just toss them, he may push them down further on his blog page so they would have less visibility -- "location is important," he said, whether it's a blog site or real estate.

Most of the people who have used those tools to communicate with him, he said, are other real estate agents. A problem is that the Meebo chat requires the user to be in front of a computer, he said -- as he is often working in the field. Another company, CellSigns.com, offers an IM Connect tool that allows agents to participate in live chats with consumers via their computers or mobile phones.

Like Duncan, Boer said he has used Jott to send himself reminders "and it is brilliant -- it really is."

He has also tried out Pinger, which is an instant voice-messaging tool that allows users to send voice messages directly to an individual or group without ringing their phones. The recipients see a text message that directs them to call a number to listen to the voice message. "That (service) is basically the voicemail equivalent of Jott," he said, though he has shied away from using that to contact clients because their mobile service plan may require them to pay for each text message they receive.

How will all of these competing technology gadgets evolve? "For the next 18 months easily it's going to be the Wild West," he said. "If anybody and their grandmother have an idea to put widgets on blogs having to do with communication, they're going to release it. In the end I think there is room only for two or three communication-based products (on Web sites). I don't anticipate any other blogs having multiple chat platforms available on blogs or multiple call-me platforms."

While many of the new tools are free, he said he wonders whether the tools will be ad-supported in the future or will follow the "cocaine-dealer model: they get you hooked and then charge you." All of these

competing business models are reminiscent of the original dot-com boom, he said. Companies seem to be burning through a lot of investment capital in the rush to develop new technologies. "The free ride has to come to an end," he said.

And while several of the new communications technologies may offer simple ways to communicate with others, "now there are 10 ways instead of three that prospective clients can reach out for me, and I've got to keep track of (all) 10 of them," he said, adding, "That's a tradeoff I'm willing to make."

Jack Fessler, a Realtor for First Weber Group in Madison, Wis., has used a live chat feature at his Web site and tries to respond to any consumer inquiries he receives by e-mail or phone within five minutes.

"If you don't call them back within 20 minutes then they are already on another Web site asking someone else," he said. He also operates a property rental business and gets dozens of calls per day related to that business. "It gets a little crazy sometimes. Most of the time my work phone is directed to my cell phone."

Cecilia Sherrard, a team leader for YouShouldOwn.com real estate team, a part of Realty One Real Living Ohio, is also using a live chat feature on her Web site and has also experimented with IM at her site. The tools haven't been a big lead generator, she said, as most people using the chat feature don't seem to be serious buyers or sellers, and they can be from all over the country rather than from within the state.

Consumers who are serious about a real estate purchase or sale, she said, "are not chatting about it -- they're picking up the phone." But even if the chat feature doesn't lead to business in the short run, Sherrard said it's good for developing a rapport with consumers. "It all helps," she said.

When she is not in the office, Sherrard keeps in touch with her team using a wireless device. "I can be on the beach and (view) my Internet leads," she said. "Technology does come in handy." Even while driving she can be working, she said. While stopped at a red light "I can send a lead to an agent -- a referral at a red light -- literally faster than the speed of light." Her colleagues have a nickname for her: "The Internet Queen."

Time management is a challenge, she said, as consumers expect quick responses. "You must check your e-mail as frequently as you do your voicemail. People don't have patience anymore -- they'll go to the next agent in line," she said.

Some of the new communications tools that are available to agents can be "more of an extra headache than anything," she said, as standard phone and e-mail conversations will usually suffice. "There are great fun gadgets out there but when it comes to real estate I don't think they're all necessary."

Missy Caulk, an associate broker for RE/MAX Platinum in Ann Arbor, Mich., said she has used Pinger but prefers another service from GotVoice.com that sends e-mail notices about incoming voice messages and allows her to retrieve the message via e-mail. This is useful is she is preparing a report at the computer and doesn't have time for a live conversation at that moment, for example, she said.

While real estate agents are known for working at odd hours -- including nights and weekends -- to serve their clients, Caulk said agents have to decide whether the business is going to run their lives. "Are you Denny's or are you Outback Steakhouse?" she said -- Denny's is always open while Outback is not. "I have a life," Caulk said, and she chooses to manage her workload around her personal schedule rather than the other way around.

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