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ONLY IN THE WORLD-HERALD

Saying 'for sale' in new ways



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Justin Pogge of P.J. Morgan Real Estate uses social media to beef up his reach. "You need to work at it, think outside the box," Pogge said.

Real estate agents get the word out with giveaways, tasting tours and the use of social media

By CINDY GONZALEZ
WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

An Omaha family landed its dream home recently, and the real estate agents who helped find the place got an unexpected prize of their own: \$10,000.

The Brent Blythe Group of CBSHome got the cash from a fellow Realtor who dangled the reward to agents who brought buyers to homes his team listed. If the house sold, the connecting agent's name was entered into a lottery sponsored by Troy Trumm of Keller Williams Realty.

Trumm said he's gotten such good buzz from his "agent incentive program" that he's going to do it again next year.

"Not only have I been selling more homes," Trumm said, "but I am getting them sold faster."

Though some bristle over hefty agent bonuses that could be off-putting to buyers, most agree that enticing marketing tactics are necessary to draw traffic to properties in today's crowded and sluggish real estate market.

Recent numbers from the Omaha Area Board of Realtors showed a 19 percent drop in the number of homes that went under contract last month compared with the previous month — 766 versus August's 943.

Mike Riedmann, president of residential sales for NP Dodge, said that while September typically reflects a seasonal slide, the level of decline last month surprised him. He suspected that a better-than-expected August (usually slowed by back-to-school distractions) made for a slower-than-expected September.

"Normally we get a drop-off in August where this year we had a kick up," said Riedmann. "So maybe August borrowed some of the sales we normally would have seen in September."



Brent Blythe, left, and Troy Trumm with the \$10,000 incentive that Trumm used to draw agents to homes he had for sale. The Brent Blythe Group of CBSHome got the money.

He and others said that historically low interest rates and an oversupply of homes continue to create an extraordinarily good buying climate. Factors including low consumer confidence, however, may be delaying large purchases.

Lisa Ritter, the new president of the Omaha Area Board of Realtors, attributed some of the September setback to families still settling into the school year routine rather than house-hunting. She was pleased, though, that residential sales so far in 2011 are above last year's levels. That is a feat, Ritter said, given that the now expired federal stimulus tax credit sparked a rush of home-buying in early 2010.

In the first nine months of this year, 7,871 homes had gone under contract. During that same time frame last year it was 7,683.

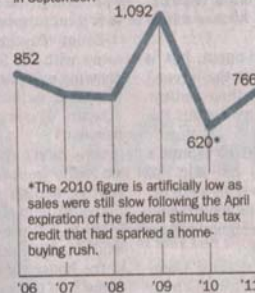
Ritter suspects that home prices are bottoming out — houses on average sold last month for less than in the previous September, \$160,788 versus \$168,738. Ritter doesn't anticipate much more of a dip but said home-owners must be prepared to price accordingly, or lower, if they want to sell.

Despite a self-described conservative forecast, Ritter is optimistic about the local housing market, which has not been as hard hit as other regions. And she said, "I am putting my money where my mouth is" by opening a new Re/Max Results franchise in the Regency area. She expects to expand her team of four.

Ritter and other agents recognize the value of stepping up outreach and marketing strategies.

OMAHA AREA HOME SALES

Number of homes signed to a contract in September:



*The 2010 figure is artificially low as sales were still slow following the April expiration of the federal stimulus tax credit that had sparked a home-buying rush.

SOURCES: Omaha Area Board of Realtors; Great Plains Multiple Listing Service

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Ritter

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Homes: Agents learn to get creative

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Ritter recently hosted a beer-tasting tour for agents at a house she's trying to sell. Others similarly host wine and cheese gatherings to attract agents who then become familiar with the home and share information with clients.

Some agents now offer a different twist on the "virtual tour," which allows people an online overview of the property. In the more elaborate "walk-through" version, Riedmann said, a customer is led, sometimes by a narrator, in and out of each room and down each staircase.

Topher Perkins and Dianna Lewis tried a silent auction with hand-painted road signs (for a more personal touch) to lure people to a home they were trying to sell over the summer. Customers were encouraged to slip a bid into a tin box, with a promise the highest bidder that met requirements would be contacted.

Justin Pogge of P.J. Morgan Real Estate uses social media to beef up his reach. By posting information on Facebook or Twitter, he makes his pitch — instantly — to more than 1,000 friends at once who then can easily pass it on to their friends.

Sometimes Pogge targets a special group, sending a note only to people he knows have a soft spot for a particular neighborhood. He said he's sold about 20 homes in the past two years to Facebook friends, mostly of younger generations.

That doesn't mean he doesn't appreciate blending in old-school marketing. Recently Pogge posted fliers at businesses around a South Omaha house he was selling. One caught the eye of a car dealer owner who ultimately bought the property.

"Times are tougher," Pogge said. "You need to work at it, think outside the box."

Joe Valenti, president of CBSHome Real Estate, said he's leery of bonuses for agents, saying they might create the per-



CINDY GONZALEZ/THE WORLD-HERALD

Dianna Lewis and Topher Perkins tried a silent auction with hand-painted road signs to lure people to a home they were trying to sell over the summer. Customers were encouraged to slip a bid into a tin box, with a promise the highest bidder that met requirements would be contacted.

ception that an agent is steering clients to certain houses out of self-interest.

"We're not anti-agent, but it should be a plus for the buyer," he said. "I would rather the buyer get that incentive versus the agent."

In the case of Troy Trumm's \$10,000 drawing, he said he checked legalities with state officials. Participating agents and their brokers also signed off on pay arrangements.

Nebraska Real Estate Commission Director Greg Lemon said that an agent would have to disclose a bonus if compensation was guaranteed with a sale, but that was not the case with the Trumm chance drawing.

Trumm said he has seen agents offer airfare and \$500 selling bonuses, but he wanted something different. The lottery idea came from an out-of-state agent as Trumm did a bit of "competitive intelligence."

"Some agents probably think

I am crazy," he said. "The point is to generate conversation."

Brent Blythe, who walked away with the \$10,000, said the drawing was part of a fun agent-mingling gathering hosted by Trumm. The winner had to be present.

"We didn't expect to win — we really went for the PR," said Blythe, adding that good relationships help sell homes.

It was Blythe's wife, Lesa, who actually brought the buyers to the house that put the team's name into the tumbler. She was not even aware of the lottery until later, Blythe said, and would have shown the house to her clients regardless because it fit their needs.

Today the \$10,000 remains unspent, as the winners remain somewhat shocked.

"We never won that much money," Blythe said. "We thought, 'This can't be real.'"

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