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Support grows for MLS consolidation

Survey: NAR members differ with MLS execs on ideal size for MLSs

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Support is growing for large-scale multiple listing service consolidation, according to a survey conducted by the National Association of Realtors' Center for Realtor Technology.

About 34 percent of association members stated in survey responses that the ideal size for a consolidated MLS is statewide -- it was the top choice among responses for that question. But most respondents who are affiliated with an MLS stated the ideal size for an MLS is by market area or metropolitan area.

About 53 percent of MLS-affiliated respondents favored the status quo, according to the [2007 MLS Technology Survey](#), while about 19 percent of these respondents said they consider a statewide MLS to be the ideal size for a consolidated MLS. About 12 percent of non-MLS-affiliated respondents said they consider a national MLS to be the ideal size for a consolidated MLS.

By comparison, a [similar survey last year](#) found that 19 percent of members favored a statewide MLS, and identified "MLS reinvention" among the top MLS issues.

This latest online survey sought feedback on topics ranging from MLS data standards and security to MLSs' role in displaying and sharing property listings information. The survey was conducted from March 7 to March 21 and generated a total of 576 usable responses from agents, brokers and MLS-affiliated professionals.

MLS data-sharing and consolidation has been a hot topic in the industry, with the National Association of Realtors and some state and local Realtor groups pursuing initiatives that may serve to shape the future of the nation's MLS system.

The survey "really helps illustrate where members think things should be and where MLSs think things should be," said Keith Garner, managing director of the Center for Realtor Technology. "Hopefully MLSs can see places where they need to change minds or educate members." Vendors and technology companies may find that the survey is useful in identifying industry needs, he added.

A part of CRT's mission is to educate the industry, he said. Statistical differences in responses can "illustrate different mindsets," he said, and illustrate where more education is necessary.

About 86 percent of members said it would be helpful for MLSs to distribute listing data, and 66 percent of respondents said they want listing data to go to Realtor.com, followed by a local MLS site at 62 percent, a local association site at 46 percent, Yahoo! at 38 percent,

Google Base at 38 percent, craigslist.org at 31 percent, Zillow.com at 29 percent, Trulia at 27 percent, and other sites at 11 percent.

Meanwhile, 58.7 percent of MLS-affiliated respondents stated that they send listing data to a local MLS site. Next on the list was Realtor.com at 43.8 percent, a local association site at 23.6 percent, Yahoo! at 12.7 percent, other sites at 12.1 percent, Google Base at 8.4 percent, craigslist at 8.4 percent, Trulia at 6.9 percent and Zillow.com at 4.6 percent.

And 68.7 percent of MLS-affiliated respondents stated that demand has been highest to place listings on Realtor.com, followed by a local association site at 25.4 percent, local MLS site at 25.4 percent, other sites at 22.4 percent, Google Base at 13.4 percent, craigslist at 13.4 percent, Yahoo at 7.5 percent, Zillow at 6 percent and Trulia at 4.5 percent.

Garner said that some brokerage companies are already sending listings information to multiple sites on their own. The survey suggests, he said, that "a lot of our members would like the MLS to be this technology provider."

When asked what additional data they would want the MLS to offer with the listing data, sold data topped the list, followed by photos, tax information, amenities and addresses.

About 68 percent of MLS-affiliated respondents said they include photos in listings sent to third parties, followed by 57 percent who said their MLS includes amenities information, 53 percent address information, 29 percent tax information and 20 percent sold data.

Jim Harrison, president and CEO for RE InfoLink, a Silicon Valley-area MLS in California that is part of a regional MLS consolidation effort, said he is encouraged by the results of the survey that seem to support MLS consolidation and partnering. "It's happening all over the place. MLSs are consolidating, merging, data-sharing. The marketplace needs to listen to the consumers and be responsive to their needs. We need to make sure we're in synch with our customers."

RE InfoLink's board voted last month to merge with the Northern California Real Estate Exchange group, which is expected to unify four MLSs.

Pat V. Combs, president for the National Association of Realtors, said in a statement that she expects MLS consolidation to continue. "Improvements in technology have made it easier for Realtors to expand their geographic territories, which often results in greater demand for data sharing and integration among MLSs. Consolidation among MLSs will most likely continue in overlapping markets and where it's most appropriate. This will help bring down costs and enhance service for many Realtors."

Gary Thomas, who has led a California Association of Realtors effort in California to explore the possibility of a [statewide consolidated MLS or shared MLS database](#) and also participated in a National Association of Realtors effort to [re-envision the future of the MLS system](#), said the separate efforts are complimentary.

The California association's effort includes a study of existing data-sharing and consolidation efforts, and the national association has formed a Gateway Presidential Advisory Group that is studying the feasibility of a national data repository that could include current and historical information on every property in the country.

This information gateway, as proposed, would be participant-owned, he said, and would have a standardized data structure that would "utilize the local association or MLS or some local entity to be the conduit to the gateway from the local Realtor." At this time, the vision for the system does not include plans for a public interface.

Thomas said that CAR representatives have met with participants in the NCREX consolidation plan and in a separate Northern California MLS data-sharing effort called Quattro. The CAR group is also planning to meet with representatives of the Common Database Utility, a common database effort in Southern California.

The state association's study of future options for MLS consolidation and data-sharing shouldn't impact the effort already under way, Harrison said during an MLS session Thursday at the [Real Estate Connect SF conference](#). "I think everybody will continue to do what they're going to do," Harrison said he does expect to see fewer MLSs in the future, and perhaps one or two MLS databases in California.

CRT's MLS Technology Survey did highlight some discrepancies in how those affiliated with MLSs view MLS topics. About 63 percent of MLS-affiliated respondents said MLSs should provide a public Web site to display MLS listings, compared with a slimmer majority -- 52 percent -- of the association's non-MLS-affiliated members. And 44 percent of members responded that MLS public Web sites compete with broker or agent Web sites, compared with 33 percent of those respondents affiliated with MLSs.

RE InfoLink has wrestled with the use of its public Web site for property listings information, Harrison said. Some brokers had questioned the usefulness of the MLS's site a couple of years ago, though he notified the brokers that the site gets millions of page views each week. Consumers "already are going here instead of going to your Web site," and shutting down such sites could mean the potential loss of traffic to MLS members' own Web sites, he said.

Garner said MLS-operated public sites that display property listings information are receiving a lot of attention in the industry. "We are starting to see MLSs putting sites back up now. The pendulum is swinging a little bit. I think the members are starting to figure out that to make a really good Web site may take more resources than they have at times," he said.

About 55 percent of MLS-affiliated respondents said their MLS provides a public Web site with property listings information, the survey revealed.

Several questions in the survey addressed the Real Estate Transaction Standard, or RETS, which is intended to simplify data transfer between MLSs and others. There seems to be "a real legitimate misunderstanding about RETS" by some in the industry, Harrison said, and a need for more promotion and education. A new version of RETS is on the way, he noted, and "it's a huge, monstrous task to evolve RETS because of all the work that has to be done on all the different levels."

About 63 percent of MLS-affiliated respondents said in the survey that their MLS system has a RETS interface, while 93 percent of member respondents said they don't know whether it has a RETS interface. Other results showed some confusion about RETS from members and MLS affiliates, too.

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