Going Paperless:
New tools simplify the “paperless” trend
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Introduction

A new trend in the real estate industry has agents kicking a bad habit—the use of an overabundance of paper. Gone are the days when every note, report and client inquiry is written down on a legal pad and then filed away as hardcopy. Professionals are moving away from traditional offices and embracing the trend of “going paperless.” While data storage and sharing will always be a major component of real estate, the tools to archive and track communication are evolving.

What is the reason behind the movement? Efficiency is the answer for many real estate professionals. According to Cary Sylvester, a speaker at the 2011 Inman News Real Estate Connect conference, paperless real estate provides an avenue to get back to what matters—customer service.¹ The technology that enables this transition can be simple to use, from tablet computers to the smartphone in nearly everyone’s pocket. New mobile applications and computer software are being released regularly, all of which help give the trend momentum in the industry.

But despite how it sounds, going paperless doesn't just mean using less paper. It involves several key aspects, from transaction workflows to sharing and storing files. Going paperless is a real estate trend all professionals can embrace, even if there is a knowledge gap with regard to how to use the technology.
Why going paperless has become a priority

Mobility and technology aren’t unique to real estate. According to the Pew Internet & American Life Project, a division of the Pew Research Center, 63 percent of adult cell owners use their phones to go online. That figure is growing rapidly, and a majority of the public is firmly entrenched in their cell phones on a daily basis. The study found that 21 percent of all adult cell owners do most of their online browsing via their mobile phone, instead of the traditional desktop or laptop computer.

Paperless real estate is designed to appeal to that population. In today’s society, an added importance has been placed on mobility and technology. Sharing, storing and communicating data online have quickly become prominent parts of many businesses. Professionals are jumping on the paperless bandwagon, and for good reason. More consumers expect this level of mobility and accessibility, and companies that provide it gain a considerable advantage on the competition.

Going paperless has gradually become an essential part of business evolution within the commercial and residential housing industries. Consumers are increasingly mobile, and it is necessary for real estate agents to mirror these habits. Not only are they browsing, but they’re shopping too. Lab42, a market research company, recently found that 66 percent of consumers prefer web-based retailers to their brick-and-mortar counterparts. Not only that, but 73 percent also do at least half of their shopping online.

Paperless is practical for you and your clients

Paperless real estate can work because it is simple. Kerry Melcher, a Phoenix-based real estate agent, sat down with Meg Herbert of Inman News and explained why that notion was the driving force behind her decision to go paperless. Melcher elaborated on the idea that file management with paper isn’t a precise science.
On the contrary, a paperless office meant she was more organized and financially sound because all file storage was streamlined with technology. Instead of researching new printers to buy and digging through stacks of documents, Melcher helps clients with the swipe of a finger.

Going paperless is both practical and energy efficient. Real estate agent Kristina Wise wrote that using iPads as a ubiquitous tool throughout her business is the epitome of a “green” philosophy. Instead of printing paper documents, mailing contracts or driving hundreds of miles to close a deal, Wise and her team are doing it all online. This is both sustainable and actionable.

**Clients embrace the growing trend**

This trend works for the real estate industry because it benefits professionals and consumers. Both parties support mobility and technology, and it was only a matter of time before new strategies to communicate and share became viable options.

Mel Oliveri is a New Jersey-based Realtor, although his brokerage is almost entirely focused around the Internet, making online business the norm. The firm has nine agents, and they all work from home regularly. A number of Oliveri’s clients love paperless real estate, and the venture into new territory is often lucrative. One client—a flight attendant—viewed a property the day before a trip to China. Instead of losing the sale, Oliveri worked around the client’s schedule by conducting an online meeting with her to look at comps. She was hooked on the home, and Oliveri later sent an email for e-signatures to begin the purchase process. The house closed in 45 days.

The paperless trend works because it can be tailored around clients’ routines. In today’s fast-paced world, few people want to build their schedule around other people. Mobile technology simplifies the process, and allows any client to field a competitive offer from anywhere in the world.
How to correctly use paperless technology

Given all the advantages a paperless workplace provides, it was only a matter of time before more real estate agents started to adopt the trend into their own business. However, the industry is heavily focused on paper. Making the switch could feel like a daunting task, but great tools and software exist to make the transition simple, even for a paperless Luddite.

Two devices that simplify the process are the tablet and the smartphone. The tools of choice for many real estate agents are Apple’s iPad and the iPhone. For Krisstina Wise, agents at her brokerage, called The GoodLife Team, are required to own an iPad before starting their first day. Mobile devices have come to dominate most industries, real estate included. According to Wise, this is because it is a mobile business by nature and all real estate agents need to learn—and invest—in the correct tools to make it all work.

Starting with the basics: The beginner’s guide to paperless tools

Every real estate agent looking to go paperless can acquire the right devices and software. These tools will be the difference between adopting the trend successfully or barely scratching the surface of its potential.

Paperless technology can demonstrate significant ROI, and ease numerous internal processes. Organization is a prime place to start, and the best way to do that is with a scanner and a strategy to convert paper files into PDF form. According to Colin Ryan, a real estate technology writer, high-quality scanners should replace fax machines in all real estate offices.
When it comes to software, Adobe Acrobat is invaluable. It allows users to upload, create, convert and edit PDF documents, so agents can compose vital documents and share them electronically. All current paper files can be scanned and saved virtually, removing the need for cabinets, desks, printers and ink.

Mobile applications crucial for any paperless agent

Devices and software are just two pieces of the paperless puzzle. Mobile applications are what set a great real estate agent apart from the pack, and there are several that stand out as excellent options.

At an Inman News Real Estate Connect conference in San Francisco, real estate professionals took the stage to talk about mobile apps that ease the process of going paperless. One tool—called Evernote—is a note-taking app that allows users to write down anything—from client requests to confidential documents—and access them from another device at any time. Another app is called iAnnotate, and it is designed so agents can create listing presentations and share them with a client on a tablet device.

These tools, and many more, take advantage of cloud computing. The “cloud” is an online storage platform where users can securely upload documents, photos, videos and music and access the account from any Internet device. The accessibility enables agents to use Evernote on their phones and pick up right where they left off on the computer back at the office.

Several mobile apps based around cloud computing are a must for a paperless agent. For example, Dropbox is a file-sharing site where users can send large documents safely to clients, all online. The site even allows users to upload photos and documents to create a unique URL for each, making sharing information with clients as simple as cutting and pasting the URL into an email. Dot Loop is a similar tool, and agents, brokers and clients can log into shared space and access pertinent information easily and securely.
How one MLS is making “paperless” work for them

In Georgia, real estate agents are experiencing the benefits of a paperless workplace firsthand. The Georgia Multiple Listing Service has member offices in the North Georgia mountains and metropolitan Atlanta, as well as throughout the central portion of the state and down the coast. Servicing 25,000 agents in 2,800 offices throughout the state, GAMLS uses technology solutions to provide members with valuable, relevant resources that respond to the industry’s changing needs.

GAMLS has integrated a number of paperless applications into their processes. These changes have helped members and made accessing valuable data easier. According to John Ryan, director of marketing and membership for GAMLS, the wide range of products and services allow members to better serve clients’ buying and selling needs.

“One of the software solutions we provide is a suite of transaction management services called TransactionDesk,” said Ryan. “It is provided by Instanet Solutions, one of our vendors.”

Ryan explained that TransactionDesk includes:

- **InstanetForms**
  Online real estate forms and contracts which are PC, Mac and tablet compatible

- **DocBox/DocBox2Go**
  The complete paperless online document management and storage solution

- **Authentisign E-Signature Tool**
  Legally e-sign documents and forms online

- **InstanetFax™**
  Unlimited inbound and outbound, including paper fax to email

- **Calendar, Appointments, Contacts, Task and much more**
“This suite of products allows our members to create, manage, electronically sign, and distribute documents to all parties associated within the real estate transaction in a paperless environment,” noted Ryan. “All documents can be legally signed and disseminated electronically.”

TransactionDesk even allows agents to submit documents for broker review through a tool called Broker File Management, according to Ryan. He added that this is a fantastic way for agents to review documents without printing them out, all while creating an electronic audit trail.

These resources mean that GAMLS members typically have an easier work day ahead of them.

“TransactionDesk allows our members to manage and access their transactions anywhere they have access to the Internet,” said Ryan. “Whether they are using a desktop computer, a tablet or a smartphone, GAMLS members can respond to the needs of their clients in a timely manner. The ability to access documents while on the go creates efficiencies for our members, which allows them to be more productive and responsive by utilizing any device from any location.”

The days of traveling to a local courthouse to access property data are over. CRS Data has developed innovative suites and technology that quickly bring important information wherever it needs to go. GAMLS has taken advantage of CRS Data’s offerings in order to bolster its offerings.

“CRS Data plays an integral role in the delivery of timely and accurate real estate information to GAMLS members. That data allows our members to effectively evaluate real estate property through the use of tax assessor public records, sales and mortgage information and a powerful comparable sales analysis tool. The public record data is also integrated with GAMLS active and off-market listings, so whether a listing has been sold inside or outside the MLS, our members have a true snapshot of what has transpired in the marketplace.”
A Realtor’s perspective

For Tennessee-based real estate broker Rick Smenner, he uses his iPad, iPhone and computer to capitalize on the paperless real estate trend. Also found in his office—in place of paper—are a scanner, Nitro Pro 8 PDF software, and other applications which make the process easier. Smenner is also a fan of TransactionDesk and Evernote. Overall, he is glad he made the switch.

“I no longer carry a bunch of folders around with me,” said Smenner. “I’m able to share files with people via Evernote. I label each one of my files in Evernote according to property address and client name. Then each PDF file I name whatever the document is in the transaction. That way I can access it quickly when I need it. I used to dig through my paper files looking for paperwork. I’m now more organized with my paperwork by going paperless.”

Smenner added that he needs to access files at any time, every day, which is why a paperless office works for him. Tools like his mobile devices allow him to stay in sync, wherever he goes.

When going paperless is both appropriate and efficient

The real estate industry relies on signatures. Traditionally, this means it is time to print a document, get in the car and drive to the client. With electronic signatures, those steps are eradicated. Instead, clients and agents can share files and apply their signature in a safe, secure manner.

However, are electronically-signed documents appropriate? More importantly, are they even legal? Thankfully, the answer is yes. In 2000, the U.S. government passed the ESIGN Act, so virtual endorsements are equal to paper ones.* E-signatures are valid for nearly every document in real estate, and according to Christopher Noll, of PCWorld, court systems are even paperless.* Therefore, real estate agents can virtually sign in confidence.
Noll recommended DocuSign as one e-signature solution. Backed by Google, this software allows agents to upload a document and send out for autographs. The technology is user-friendly, making the learning curve small. Another option is Adobe’s EchoSign. It is similar to DocuSign, but it works with faxed signatures for clients who prefer traditional methods.

A trend that shows no sign of slowing down

Paperless real estate is a trend that is here to stay. There are too many benefits for both companies and industry professionals to not take advantage of the software and other available technology. Learning how to use and integrate these tools into a business is simpler than some people may believe. The steps are relatively easy, and many devices can be learned in a matter of days—if not hours.

Across the industry, real estate agents and organizations are already going paperless. This option is typically better for professionals and clients, and those who haven’t used traditional paper in a long time are already reaping the rewards from their commitment. Looking toward the future, this is a trend that shows no sign of slowing down. Technology is constantly evolving, and paperless real estate has become widespread across the industry. The sooner real estate professionals start to integrate these platforms into their daily work life, the quicker the benefits will be felt.
Sources


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