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THE DATA ON

WHY AGENTS LEAVE THEIR BROKERAGE

Can you predict agent departures? Yes, by examining patterns of behavior. Here's how.

By Robert Keefe, president, Relitix Data Science

SEE PG 7

JANUARY 2021 NEWSLETTER

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2020 REHASH

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

Much has been learned from COVID-19 about how consumers value their homes, but there's more. Here's an analysis of the importance of real estate.

By Steve Murray, partner

The year 2020 won't easily be forgotten. In the broader sense, as a people we faced an unprecedented—in modern times—pandemic. Many Americans still have to reckon with personal financial stress from lost jobs and income. In the midst of this, one of the most contentious presidential elections ever was held.

Meanwhile, after a sharp decline in housing sales from mid-March until roughly the end of May, housing sales rose to heights not seen since the record years of 2005-2006. Tens of thousands of families moved to the suburbs and flooded second-home regions across the country. The reasons were varied. In fact, how big this wave is and how long it may continue are still being debated.

Record housing sales, strong home-price gains and roaring equity markets were all indications of parts of the economy that brushed off the decline in the general economy. At the same time, unemployment remained well above where it was before the pandemic caused an economic shutdown. And major parts of the economy, such as tourism-related businesses, dining out, sports, education, and many state and local governments all suffered, and continue to suffer.

Even with all that, the country muddled through. Families and communities supported each other in ways seldom seen before. Despite civil unrest in some urban core areas, people did the best they could to stay safe. Importantly, we learned that maybe we are stronger as a nation than we thought. The middle held. From our view, here is what we learned in our business.

Importantly, we learned that maybe we are stronger as a nation than we thought.

1. **Homes Are No. 1.** Americans value their home as more than just an investment but as a place to ride out storms and feel safe. The great migration from April 2020 continues to this day and strongly supports this. As more Americans have the option to work from home from any location, they will choose different kinds of housing that fit these entirely new lifestyles. Want further evidence? Look at the jump in homeownership this year.
2. **Virtual Transactions Are Vital.** We learned that, in fact, having an integrated transaction platform and sale-to-close system is vital to the conduct of brokerage.
3. **The Successful Get More Successful.** We learned that in challenging markets, the best people don't just survive—they thrive. Top agents and brokerage firms gained share, which we have confirmed in a number of markets and will confirm even more with our 2021 REAL Trends brokerage and agent rankings.
4. **Wasted Money.** We learned that even the best brokerage firms were wasting hundreds of thousands of dollars in expenses that were unnecessary.
5. **Communication Rules.** We learned that, in some cases, remote communication works better than in-person. Many brokers shared with us that the agent participation levels for both company communications and education were measurably higher online than in person—and less expensive.
6. **Value of the Realtor® Association.** We learned the true value of the Realtor association, particularly at the state and national levels. Without their efforts to keep brokerages, essential service workers and independent contractors eligible for federal assistance, the carnage in our industry would have been much worse.
7. **Core Services Make Brokerages More Competitive.** We learned that those brokerage firms with core services, such as mortgage, title insurance and escrow are much better positioned to compete than those without them. Earnings from these core services in the aggregate may exceed earnings from brokerage in the aggregate for the 100 largest brokerage firms in the country.

We have much to be thankful for despite the ordeal of 2020. Readers have their own top things they learned this year. We invite you to share them with us. Send your lessons learned to Tracey Velt, managing editor, at tvelt@realtrends.com.

Steve Murray is a partner in REAL Trends Consulting, a brokerage consulting, M&A and valuation service. He is also a senior adviser for HWMedia, the owner of REAL Trends content, rankings and more.

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7501 Village Square Drive, Ste. 200
Castle Rock, CO 80108
Phone: 303-741-1000
Email: realtrends@realtrends.com
Web: realtrends.com

President:
Steve Murray - smurray@realtrends.com

Publisher:
Tracey Velt - tvelt@realtrends.com

REAL Trends Team:
Amy Falko - afalko@realtrends.com
Bo Frize - bfrize@realtrends.com
Brent Driggers - bdriggers@realtrends.com
Cooper Murray - cmurray@realtrends.com
Liz Smith - lsmith@realtrends.com
Peter Gilmour - pgilmour@realtrends.com
Scott Wright - swright@realtrends.com

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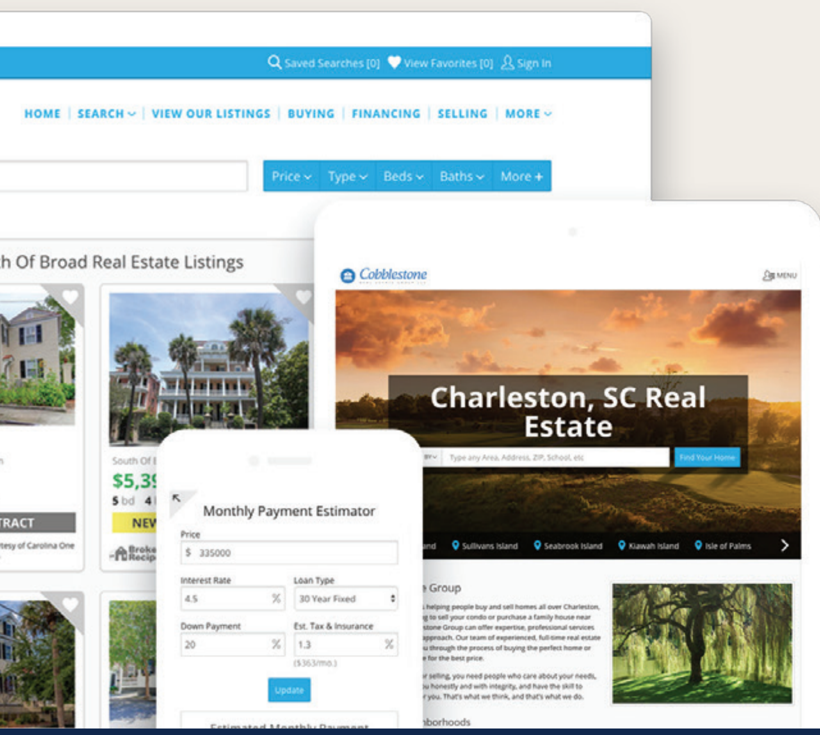

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PREDICTIONS FOR 2021

WILL THE BOOM MARKET CONTINUE?

What's up for 2021? We're predicting a wild year.

By Steve Murray, partner

Given what happened in 2020, making predictions for 2021 seem like a wild gamble, but here goes!

1. **Consolidation among brokerage firms will continue at a fast pace.** More major deals will have been done in the fourth quarter of 2020 than in any quarter of the last 10 years, and it will continue. First, brokerage and core services earnings are coming off a record year for most, and that trend will likely continue. Second, there are more firms with more capital chasing growth through mergers and acquisitions. We count no less than seven major firms seeking to grow through acquisitions. That number is likely to grow. Further, the variety of deal structures is far higher than ever before—from total buyouts to majority stakes, and from total brand conversion, to partial-to-no-brand changes.
2. **Housing sales are predicted to be up 5%-7% by unit count with prices continuing to rise.** While mortgage rates are forecast to rise, they will still be very low by historical standards.
3. **The real estate tech segment will continue to receive inflows of significant amounts of capital and consolidation.** CoStar's potential acquisition of Homesnap and Stone Point Capital's acquisition of Lone Wolf Technologies are the proverbial tip of the iceberg. And don't forget the pending public offering of Compass.

For most Americans, a return to normal feels like it's just around the corner. With the COVID-19 vaccine and the natural course of viruses based on history, 2021 is set to be the next iteration of the Roaring '20s!

FOR MOST AMERICANS, A RETURN TO NORMAL FEELS LIKE IT'S JUST AROUND THE CORNER.

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THE BIG MYTH

HOMES SELL FOR A FIXED PRICE —NOT TRUE!

By asking sellers just one question, you can articulate your value proposition. | By Larry Kendall, author of "Ninja Selling"

What do discount brokers, iBuyers, For Sale by Owners (FSBOs), the Justice Department, most sellers and many sales associates have in common? They subscribe to *The Big Myth,* which is they believe homes sell for a *fixed price*. Let's take a closer look:

- **Discount Brokers:** We've all heard the ads with the soft female voice posing as a recent seller, "I saved $12,000 by selling my home with ABC Discount Brokerage." Did she sell her house for top dollar? Her greatest expense may be the money she didn't make.
- **FSBOs:** FSBOs indicate their No. 1 reason for doing it themselves is to "save the commission." They assume the house will sell for the same price as with a broker. Big assumption based on *The Big Myth*.
- **The Justice Department:** The Justice Department clearly does not understand our business as they work to unwind the MLS system of cooperation to "save the consumers on commissions." Again, they believe commissions are an expense and brokers offer little, if any, value.
- **iBuyers:** iBuyers promote speed and convenience but their formulas are built on the myth of a fixed price.
- **Sellers:** A seller might say, "I think I'll list with my niece. She just got her license and could use the money." What is the seller's thought process? First, there is a fixed price at which my house will sell *(The Big Myth)*. Second, real estate professionals don't bring any value to the transaction. Their commission is an expense that I either need to reduce (discount) or direct to my niece.
- **Sales Associates:** How many sales associates freeze up when asked to reduce their commission? Do they really know how to bring value to the transaction?

The Value Clarification Question. Ask the seller this question:

> ***"Do you believe your home will sell for a fixed price, or do you believe there is a range of value based on the marketing and negotiating skills of your real estate professional?"***

In my experience, most sellers will say, "I guess I didn't think about that. There is probably a range of value." Of course, there's a range of value. Homes sell for wholesale (as-is condition) or retail (move-in ready) and everything in between. There is a range. A proper listing launch with maximum exposure can generate more offers and expand the range of value. A skilled negotiator can expand the range of value as well.

After asking the value clarification question, sales associates need to articulate their value proposition. Here's what it sounds like:

"My job is to help you get the most value as close as possible to the top of the range. There are five ways I do this:

1. We'll walk through your property together, and I'll show you ways to enhance the value, so you get top dollar for it.
2. Next, I'll help you with a pricing strategy—not pricing it too high so you scare buyers away or too low, so you leave money on the table.
3. Our marketing plan is designed to give you maximum exposure, so we attract more buyers and more contracts. The more buyers and contracts you have, the higher your property will sell in the range of value.
4. How important do you believe negotiation is in this market? I'll help you negotiate the best contract.
5. Finally, I'm your transaction manager. There are a lot of moving parts in a real estate transaction. My job is to handle those parts so your contract closes on time with a minimum of uncertainty and surprises."

It's time for our industry to explode *The Big Myth* and start articulating our value proposition. A seller's greatest expense is the money they don't make.

> It's time for our industry to explode *The Big Myth* and start articulating our value proposition.

WHAT DOES
THE DATA SAY?

REAL ESTATE AGENT BROKERAGE CHANGES

Can you predict agent departures? Yes, by examining patterns of behavior. Here's how.

By Robert Keefe, president, Relitix Data Science

Volumes of articles have been written about why agents chose to leave their broker and join a new company. Most say the broker is not upholding their value proposition through design, or they cite mismanagement. What kind of agents react to these changes? Who is more primed to jump for a new opportunity? Who will ride it out? Relitix developed a sophisticated AI system for predicting agent departures by examining patterns of behavior, but it's also helpful to get a sense of mobility by looking at more obvious agent characteristics.

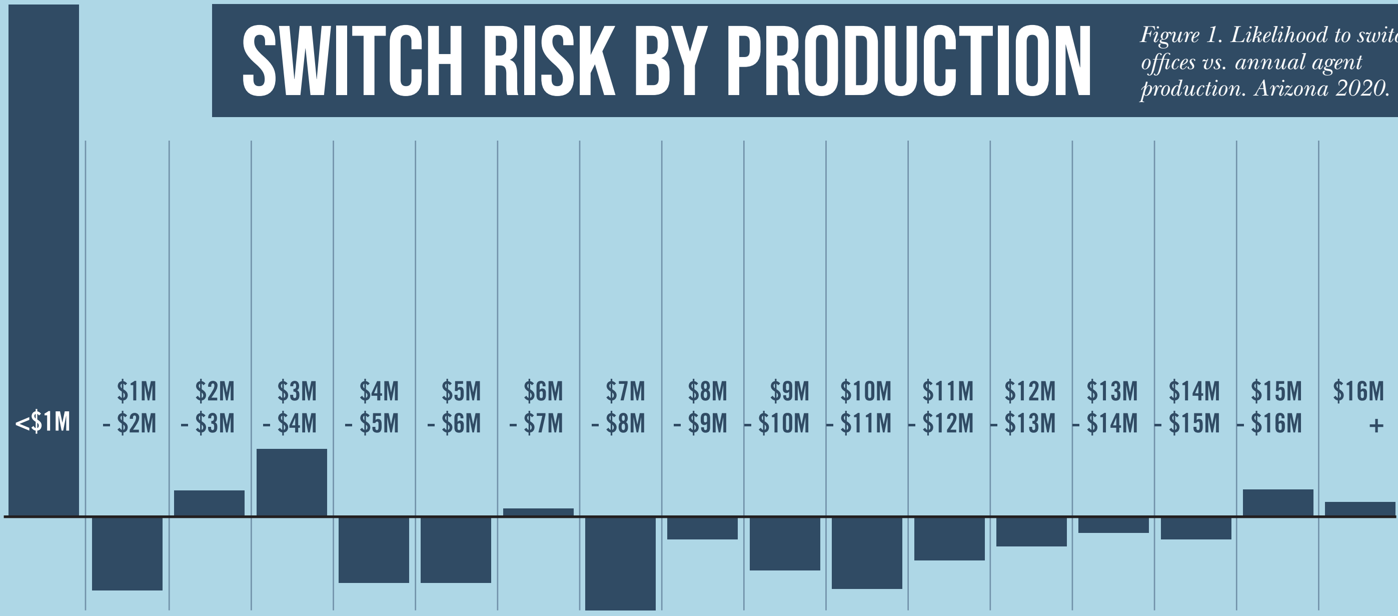
We analyzed agents in two markets to get some answers to these questions. It turns out that there are a couple of factors that make a big difference.

IT'S NOT PRODUCTION

We examined 3,489 agents who changed offices in Arizona during the first 11 months of 2020 to get a sense of the influence on annual production on propensity to change offices. Figure 1 below shows the relative propensity to switch offices when compared to the total agent population.

SWITCH RISK BY PRODUCTION

Figure 1. Likelihood to switch offices vs. annual agent production. Arizona 2020.



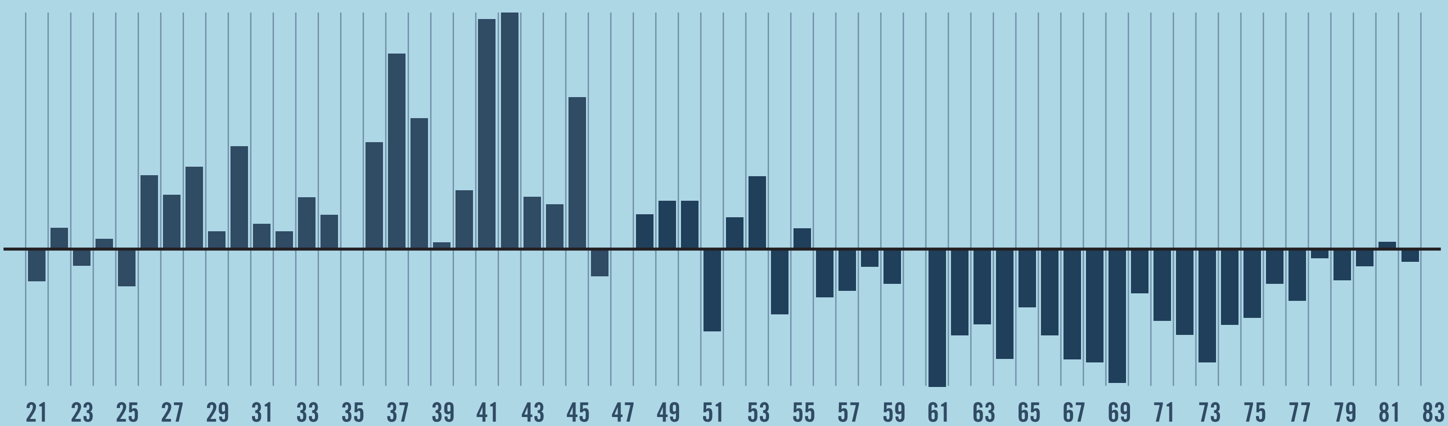
A bar above the line indicates a group of agents more likely to switch, a bar below indicates those less likely. This graph tells us that, aside from agents producing less than $1 million per year, production level has very little impact on propensity to change offices. Agents producing less than $1 million per year are the exception and change offices at rates much higher than average. We'll see later that this may be related to the age and tenure of these newer agents.

AGE HAS A HUGE IMPACT

We used a set of 1,100 agents who switched offices in 2019 and 2020 in Wisconsin—a state for which we have excellent birthdate data—to examine the effect of age on likelihood to switch. The Bureau of Labor Statistics has published a study that shows the likelihood to change jobs declining exponentially with age. Will real estate agents follow this pattern? Figure 2 shows the result of our analysis.

RELATIVE LIKELIHOOD TO SWITCH
BY AGENT AGE

Figure 2. Likelihood to change offices by agent age. Wisconsin 2019-2020



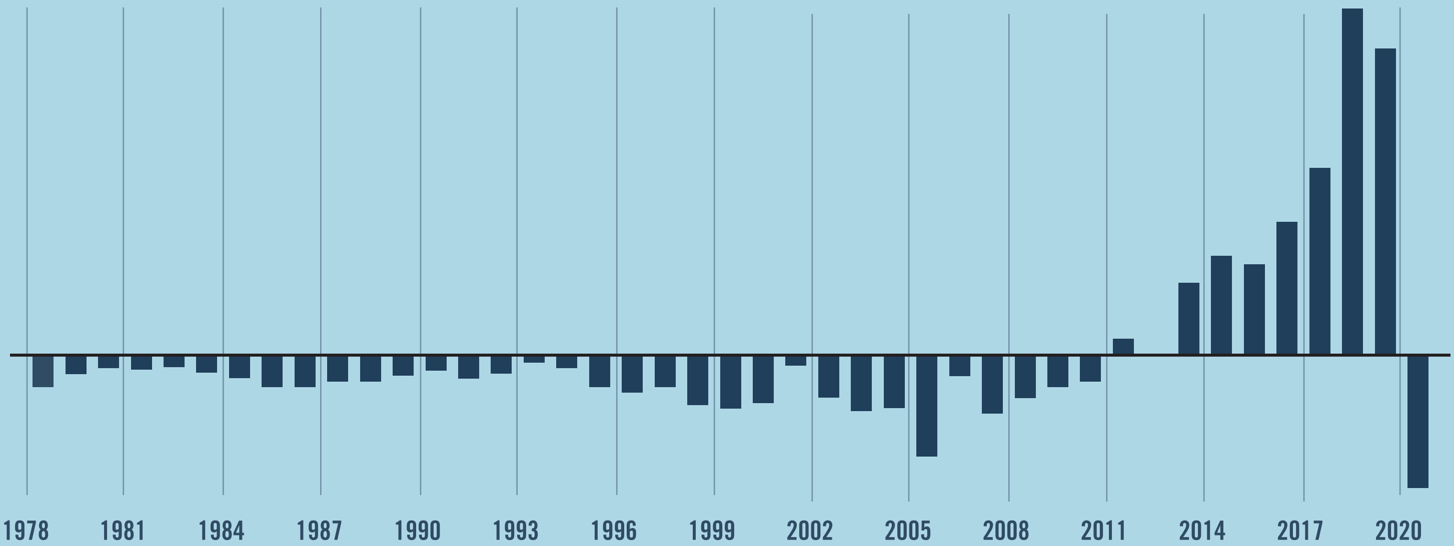
The bars above the line (indicating a group more likely than average to switch) rise for people in their 20s, peaking for those in their late 30s before declining back to average by around age 50. Clearly age is a huge factor in determining who is most at risk of switching offices with peak risk between 35 and 42 years of age. Those older than 50 are more likely to stay put.

YEARS IN REAL ESTATE IS THE BIGGEST DETERMINANT

An examination of initial license dates in our Arizona data set lets us plot risk of switching offices by years since original licensure.

RELATIVE LIKELIHOOD OF SWITCHING
IN 2020 BY LICENSE YEAR

Figure 3. Relative likelihood to switch offices in 2020 by license year. Arizona.



AGENTS REMAIN AT A HIGHER-THAN-AVERAGE RISK of moving until they reach their eighth year in business. After the eighth year, they become less likely than average to move for the rest of their careers.

The implications of Figure 3 are obvious: Newer agents are mobile. Agents in their first year in business are too overwhelmed to consider changing offices but the risk jumps dramatically for agents in their second and third year in real estate. Agents remain at a higher-than-average risk of moving until they reach their eighth year in business. After the eighth year, they become less likely than average to move for the rest of their careers.

MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

Armed with this information, brokers are in a position to look at strategic management of their agent pools in a new way. A few take-aways:

- Switching offices appears independent of production level. You don't have to sweat it because your agents reach certain production milestones. They are moved more by other factors.
- Older, more experienced agents bring great stability to your agent pool. We demonstrated in another article that agents steadily grow their productivity through at least year eight. At the same time, they become increasingly likely to move. This is offset by the impact of higher producers on company dollar in traditional progressive-split brokerages.
- Younger, newer agents have a much quicker trigger finger when it comes to changing brokerages. They are indispensable to replacing retiring agents (typically around 5%-10% of a brokerage's annual production will leave to retirement annually). It's often much easier to recruit new agents into the business than to recruit from the competition. These agents will have a positive impact on company dollar percentage. The downside: They require outsized time and attention to avoid losses to competition.
- Brokers should place special emphasis on retention programs aimed at agents in their first three years in real estate. Early identification of high-potential new agents–and spending time and attention nurturing these future stars–is especially important.

Brokers should strategically plan and recruit for the type of agent pool they want, balancing the benefits and drawbacks that come with differences in production, age and experience. Striking the optimal balance between stability and growth will be key to achieving the brokerage's long-term goals.

Rob Keefe is president of Relitix Data Science, a real estate brokerage data intelligence company.

LESSONS LEARNED

4 LEADERS SHARE THEIR BEST ‘AHA’ MOMENTS

We rounded up four of our best nuggets of information from the REAL Trending Special Edition Podcast.

By Tracey Velt, managing editor

Interviewing brokers, top agents, team leaders and industry executives gives me a bank of information to share with you! If you haven’t listened to our podcast, what are you waiting for? CLICK HERE or subscribe to Podbean: CLICK HERE

Here are four takeaways from 2020’s podcasts.

1. **COVID-19 Budgeting.** When the stay-at-home orders hit, brokers scrambled to review operating budgets and cut expenses. A big one was lease negotiations. According to Hoby Hanna, president of Howard Hanna Real Estate Services with offices in eight states, “We sent letters out to landlords—the ones that we have personal relationships with because we are a personal relationship business. In most cases, we asked for relief for the next three months, and then we’ll take those lease payments across the balance of the year or extended extend the lease terms by a few months on the back end.”

2. **Expanding a Footprint.** Many brokers took advantage of the market lull to expand their market presence or start a brokerage company. Adam Elias, owner of RE/MAX Celebrations in East Windsor, New Jersey, did just that. He already had a law firm and a title insurance agency, and he said, “I was ready for another venture. I made the inquiry with RE/MAX, they got back to me within two days, and just when we were ready to put pen to paper, the state of New Jersey announced that they were going to shut down due to the rising COVID-19 pandemic.” Elias said they, “put things on hold for a couple of weeks, and we wondered whether this was the right time to enter into a market!” At the same time, he felt like there was a huge opportunity to forge ahead. “I’m a big history guy. You look back at the 2008 financial crisis or the Great Depression, these types of economic downturns usually produce opportunities in different ways. We figured this is now the opportunity to find agents who are not necessarily happy with their current situation, they may feel that they’re paying too much for brokerage, they’re not getting enough out of it. We saw that admission into real estate schools jumped during the pandemic, so it was a great opportunity to move forward.”

3. **Recruitment Boomed.** As any broker knows, recruiting great agents never stops, even during a pandemic. Ben Hess, cofounder of Co-Recruit, offered some insight. “There is a huge influx of new, high-quality agents entering the business. Initially, COVID-19 caused a bunch of mass layoffs and furloughs, so many executives took the opportunity to start a real estate business,” he says. Digital tools such as Zoom can be just as effective as in-person meetings to suss out whether a candidate should move further into the interview process.

4. **Relationships Matter.** When agents aren’t coming into an office, how do you maintain the relationship? Brokers had to get creative. For Jessica Averbuch, CEO of Zeitlin Sotheby’s International Realty in Tennessee, that meant first making sure all of her employees and agents had the tools to work remotely. “We immediately went out and bought a dozen laptops and got people set up to work digitally. We also got our accounting department set up so they could deposit and cut checks from home with proper checks and balances,” she said. The next thing the leadership team did was schedule daily Zoom meetings with staff and biweekly company meetings. “Our participation in those calls has been somewhere between 85 to 100 people on every Zoom meeting,” she says.

The key for success, according to most brokers interviewed, is to get close to your agents, let them know you care and invest in their success. You can weather any storm with the right communication tools.

Tracey Velt is managing editor of REAL Trends, now owned by HW Media and HousingWire.

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SPONSORED CONTENT

TOP RENTAL BROKERS ARE USING THIS METHOD TO GENERATE MORE LEADS

Believe it or not, there's a new best-kept secret brewing among top rental brokers. The brokers who are in on this best-kept secret know the way to take advantage of every resource available to them. The method they're using to generate more leads? Opting in to an Apartments.com data feed through their MLS for free and exclusive leads.

APARTMENTS.COM AND YOUR MLS MAY ALREADY BE WORKING TOGETHER

Want in on the action? You may not be aware of this (hence the best-kept secret), but your MLS may actually be partnered with Apartments.com and sharing rental listings on your behalf already. MLSs are notoriously underutilized for rental properties, but there are ways to benefit from utilization.

"Our technology helps both sides of the coin," says Senior Vice President of Apartments.com Operations Simon Law. "We provide renters with the largest selection of available rentals along with powerful search tools, which attracts more renters that in turn provides maximum exposure to the listings on our site. For brokers and agents, we set up data feeds with hundreds of MLSs around the country, so it's easy for them to list with their MLS and automatically get their listings across our entire network. Our platform provides this robust exchange that helps both parties close the deal faster and easier than anyone else in the industry," says Law.

Apartments.com works directly with hundreds of MLSs across the country to provide brokers and agents maximum visibility for their listings. Of the 500 or so MLSs across the country, approximately 370 in the United States feature rental listings. Apartments.com has relationships with roughly 250 of them and counting. When your MLS is partnered with Apartments.com, your listings automatically get placed on the Apartments.com network of sites. This network includes ForRent.com, ApartmentHomeLiving.com, WestsideRentals.com, Apartmentfinder.com, Apartamentos.com and ForRentUniversity.com. You may see where we're going with this: More exposure equals more leads.

Apartments.com works directly with hundreds of MLSs across the country to provide brokers and agents **MAXIMUM VISIBILITY FOR THEIR LISTINGS.**

So how can you take advantage of the leads coming from Apartments.com? You can opt in via your MLS if it has a data feed established. By doing so, you save time and eliminate the need for duplicative listings, as you're automatically increasing your listings' exposure and creating a pipeline of future renters who one day could turn into potential buyers.

YOUR LEADS ARE ALWAYS YOURS

Unlike other internet listing services, all leads for your listings are sent directly to you at no cost and are yours exclusively. Apartments.com uses the phone number and email associated with your MLS listing to pass leads to you directly.

"That allows us to deliver millions of leads for free to brokers and agents that use an MLS to list their rental vacancies. And unlike other companies, we never sell or share those leads with competing brokers," says Law.

APARTMENTS.COM HAS MORE THAN JUST MULTIFAMILY LISTINGS

"Many brokers and agents may not realize that Apartments.com is more than just apartments. It's actually the leading rental marketplace for all types of residential rental properties, and millions of renters come to the site searching for exactly these types of homes," says Law.

Apartments.com has over 320,000 active listings of houses, townhomes, condos and duplexes. Brokers and agents who list on Apartments.com receive over 1 million leads from renters each month looking for these types of properties.

MARKETING IS KEY TO LEAD GENERATION

Apartments.com knows that marketing and exposure are keys to driving more leads. The site invests heavily in its national advertising on your behalf, and its campaigns reach over 100 million renters across TV, video on demand, social media streaming, audio and more. These tactics bring engaged audiences to the site, helping to get your listings seen and rented.

Save time and eliminate the need for duplicative listings, as you're **AUTOMATICALLY INCREASING YOUR LISTINGS' EXPOSURE** and creating a pipeline of future renters who one day could turn into potential buyers.

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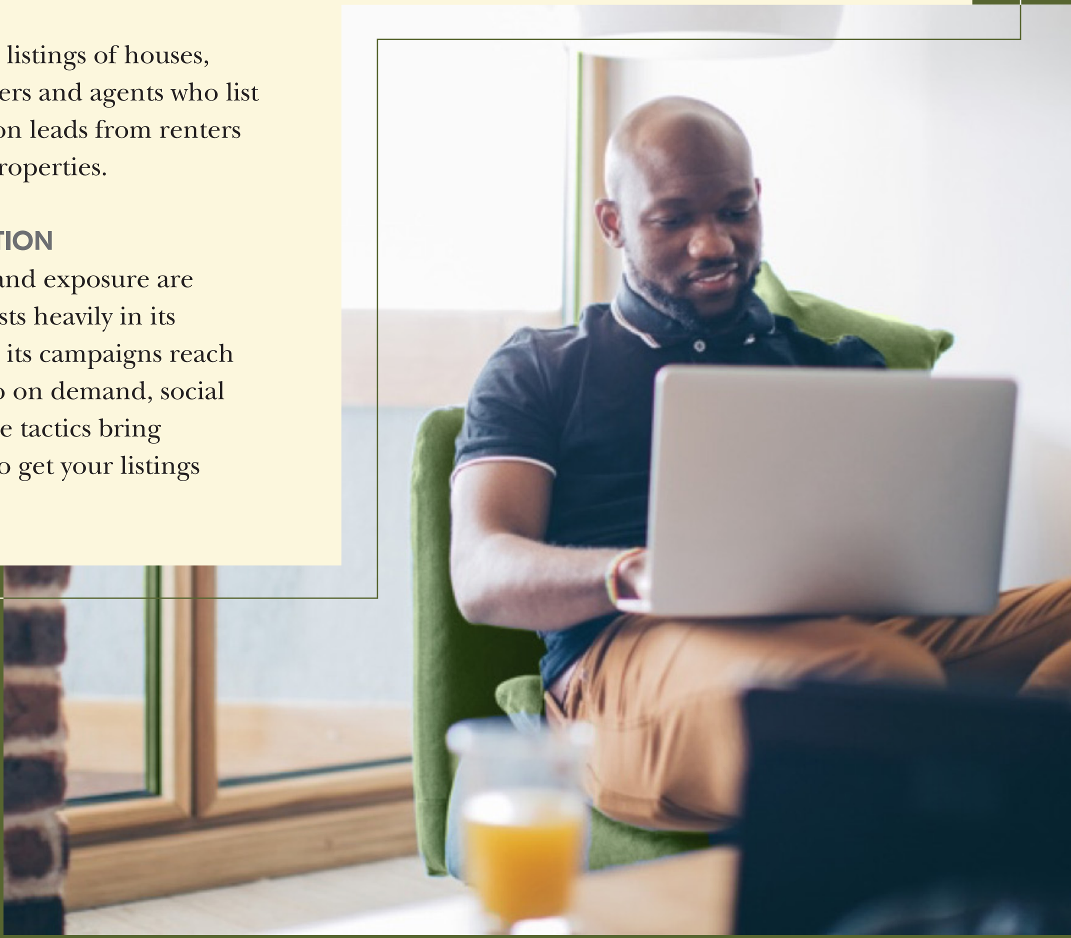
Top residential brokers are taking advantage of Apartments.com's advanced tools and technology, including online applications and digital leases, helping them close deals even faster.

Don't miss out on leads coming from the exposure of over 70 million renter visits every month. Apartments.com has helped get over 40 million leases signed, and yours could be one of them. Check if your MLS is a participating Apartments.com partner so you can opt in today.



Apartments.com has **HELPED GET OVER 40 MILLION LEASES SIGNED,** and yours could be one of them.

BROKERAGE VALUATIONS

BOOSTING YOUR FIRM'S VALUE

It's time to take a look at your profitability and make your firm more valuable. | By Scott Wright, partner

You don't have to be ready to sell your brokerage to take action on making your business more profitable. Boosting value typically means boosting profitability, and I don't know an owner out there who would object to being more profitable!

There are many ways to boost value. For most firms, getting back to the basics by spending less can often bear fruit! The first thing we tell clients, regardless of their reason for improving their bottom line, is to carefully track where they are spending their money. This may require the time-consuming endeavor of sitting down with the controller and going line by line down the general ledger. It may seem tedious, but it's a highly worthwhile time investment.

OPTIMIZE SPENDING

No matter how menial an expense may seem, every opportunity to cut or optimize spending can positively impact the bottom line. Make sure you aren't cutting something that would adversely impact the culture of the company, or an agent service for which you're not prepared to offer a meaningful alternative. When it comes to larger endeavors, such as closing offices and cutting staff, such actions need to be well thought out and executed.

TOP-LINE GROWTH

Once firms do what they can with operating expenses, it's time to boost the bottom line via creative action on the top line. The most logical means of adding top-line growth is recruiting more agents. That's easier said than done, right? Since recruiting productive agents is something all firms actively pursue, let's look at a potential value booster that not very many pursue—fee increases.

Not all firms may be in a position to increase fees, but many are, and should. Rather shockingly, we find that fee increases are rarely something brokers endeavor to undertake because there's risk when you mess with compensation plans. But, if it's done with intentionality, it can be well accepted.

I'm not going to give you a script on how to communicate fee increases to your agents, but I'll encourage you to make it more of an organizational mindset. Most people understand the increasing costs of running a business. Perhaps you write into your independent contractor agreements and corporate manual that you reserve the right to adjust fees periodically, which would go a long way in helping to alleviate any surprise when you pull the trigger.

Keep in mind that fee increases don't need to be large to make a meaningful impact to your bottom line. Almost all of a fee increase would drop to the bottom line, which would increase your value by a factor of say three to four times every dollar dropped.

These are just a couple of ideas on how to boost your firm's value. By spending time putting these ideas into practice, 2021 is bound to be your most profitable year yet!

Scott Wright is a partner with REAL Trends Consulting. Reach him at 303-741-1000.

Once firms do what they can with operating expenses, it's time to boost the bottom line via creative action on the top line.

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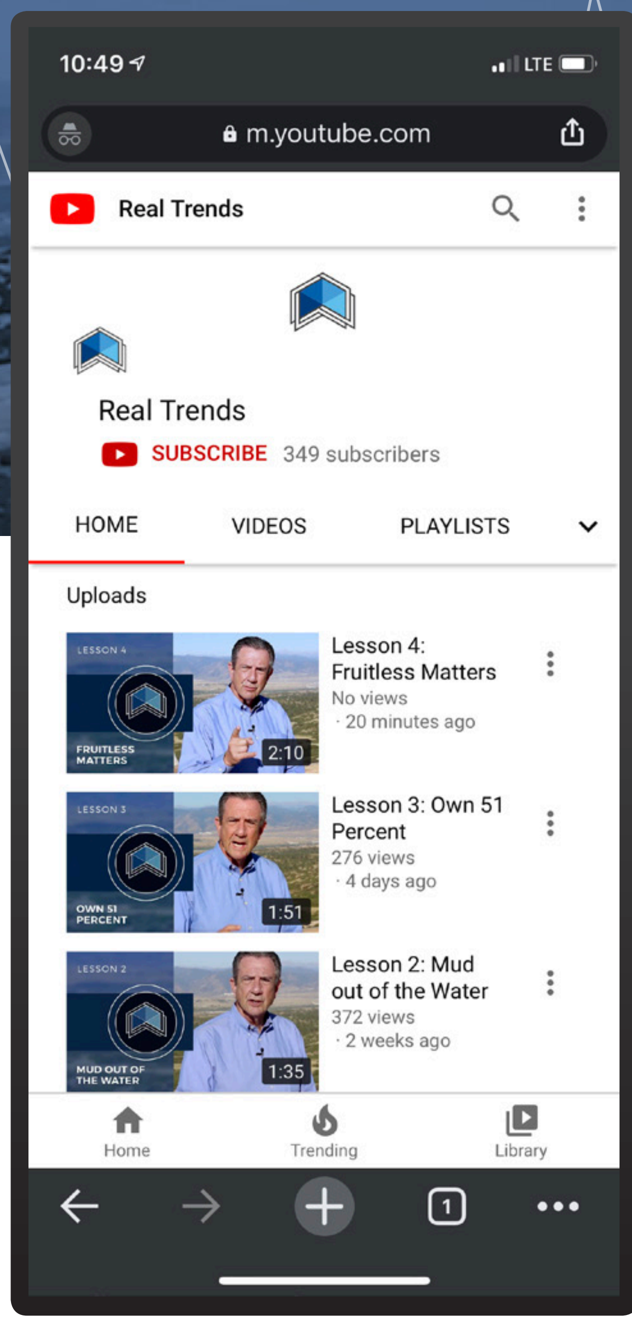
LESSONS LEARNED: A ROUNDUP OF ADVICE FOR BROKERAGE LEADERS

Steve Murray, president of REAL Trends, shares his top lessons learned from coaches, brokerage leaders and more in this series. You'll find great nuggets of information and takeaways to implement in your own business.

WATCH NOW



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After a turbulent election season, the verdict is in. Joe Biden will be the next president, and the Trump administration is at an end. What does this mean for Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac (the government-sponsored enterprises or GSEs), which guarantee more than half of the mortgages in the United States?

CAN PRESIDENT-ELECT BIDEN RESHAPE FANNIE AND FREDDIE'S COURSE?

By Sue Johnson, strategic alliance consultant

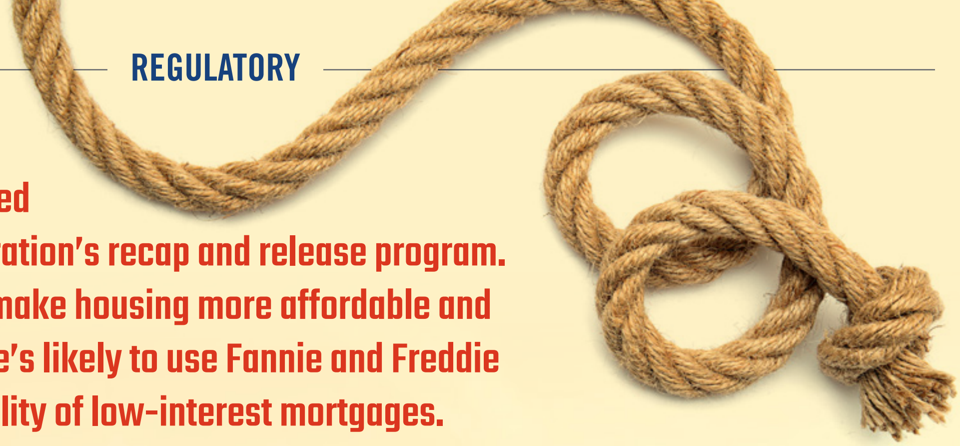
After the 2008 Great Recession, the government bailed out Fannie and Freddie to save them from insolvency and placed them in conservatorship. Congress created the Federal Housing Finance Agency (FHFA) to regulate the companies, giving it broad authority to put them in a solvent condition and preserve their assets. The FHFA entered the GSEs into an agreement with the Treasury Department, under which their net profits would be swept into the Treasury to repay their debt.

Since then, the FHFA has reigned in the GSEs' more risky activities. With Congress unable to enact broad GSE reform legislation, the Trump administration has been working independently to return Fannie and Freddie to the private sector.

Biden undoubtedly will want to change this path, although he may face some hurdles depending on events over the next few months.

THE TRUMP "RECAP AND RELEASE" PLAN

The Trump administration's game plan for Fannie and Freddie, often referred to as recap and release, first involved building the GSEs capital to bolster their safety and soundness. Once they were recapitalized, they could exit government conservatorship and compete as private companies with the private-label securitization market.



President-elect Biden is expected to roll back the Trump administration's recap and release program. Given his campaign pledges to make housing more affordable and address economic inequality, he's likely to use Fannie and Freddie as tools to increase the availability of low-interest mortgages.

Recapitalization meant allowing Fannie and Freddie to retain more of the profits that currently are being swept into the Treasury, as well as sell shares in public offerings. Reducing the size of Fannie and Freddie's loan portfolios would further reduce their risks in financial downturns.

Leading this effort has been FHFA Director Mark Calabria. Since assuming that post in April 2019, Calabria has begun to recapitalize the two enterprises by working with Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin to reduce the profit sweeps. Even after it became apparent that Biden would be president, Mnuchin testified before Congress that the Treasury and the FHFA are considering a consent order to release Fannie and Freddie from conservatorship before their full capital levels are reached—probably with some government restrictions.

WHAT TO EXPECT FROM THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION

President-elect Biden is expected to roll back the Trump administration's recap and release program. Given his campaign pledges to make housing more affordable and address economic inequality, he's likely to want to use Fannie and Freddie as tools to increase the availability of low-interest mortgages.

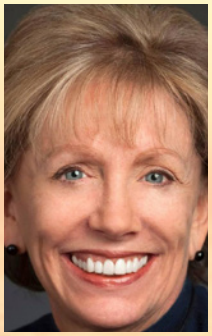
Since higher capital requirements would make their mortgage pool smaller, the GSE profits would likely be returned to the government rather than be retained by the companies. In this case, it's likely that Fannie and Freddie would remain under government control with an expanded affordable-housing mandate.

A WILD CARD: THE SUPREME COURT

Any plans that Biden has, however, could prove to be more difficult if a consent order is reached between the FHFA and Treasury to release Fannie and Freddie from conservatorship before he takes office—particularly if he can't fire FHFA Director Mark Calabria before his five-year term expires in 2024.

In that regard, the U.S. Supreme Court will have its say. On Dec. 9, 2020, it heard oral arguments in the case of *Collins v. Mnuchin,* which will determine whether the FHFA's structure is unconstitutional because it's headed by a single director who can be removed by the president only *for cause* (inefficiency, neglect of duty or malfeasance.)

If the Supreme Court rules that the FHFA's structure is unconstitutional, Biden would be free to replace Calabria. Most observers expect the court to give him that power since it recently declared the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau's (CFPB) similar single-director structure to be unconstitutional—but the FHFA's powers are not generally considered to be as far-reaching as those of the CFPB, and a declaration of unconstitutionality could impact the future of other independent federal agencies. U.S. Supreme Court opinions typically are handed down by the last day of the court's term in late June or early July.



Sue Johnson is the former executive director of RESPRO, the Real Estate Services Providers Council Inc. She retired in 2015 and is now a strategic alliance consultant.

COVID-19 RECOVERY

MALAYSIAN PROPERTY MARKET IS SLUGGISH

A popular place in Asia to retire, Malaysia's once booming housing market is suffering from a glut of homes on the market.

By Peter Gilmour, chief foreign correspondent

Malaysia is a Southeast Asian country just north of Singapore with a mix of Malay, Chinese, Indian and European cultures. The country is home to approximately 32 million people, of which almost 25% live in the capital, Kuala Lumpur. Malaysia's economy is one of the most competitive in Asia and was ranked 20th in the world in 2015. In 2019, the country had a GDP at purchasing power parity of nearly $1 trillion.

Malaysia is rated as the best place in Asia to retire as it has a warm climate, rapidly growing tourist industry and well-developed infrastructure among newly industrialized countries in Asia. Foreign investors can buy real estate in Malaysia, subject to certain conditions set by the government with a property price over $250,000.

GLUT OF HOMES

As a result of many major development projects in the last few years when the economy was booming, there is now a severe glut of homes in the market which has resulted in today's sluggish market conditions. Unsold apartments and single-family homes in Malaysia's major cities are currently valued at nearly $2 billion. The government has recently introduced multiple measures to discourage developers from embarking on new construction.

Malaysia's house price index rose by a minuscule .41% in 2019, according to the Valuation and Property Services Department, down from an average price growth of over 8% in the previous five years. Kuala Lumpur has Malaysia's most expensive housing with an average price of $175,000 while the cheapest homes are in Melaka with an average price of $45,000.

STIMULATING DEMAND

In order to stimulate demand for the unsold residential units, the government —in conjunction with the Real Estate & Housing Developers' Association (REHDA)—introduced the Home Ownership Campaign with its stamp duty exemptions and discount on certain selling prices. This is in addition to the current low interest rates on borrowing. While the short-term effect is a drop in sales volume, the long-term effect of COVID-19 will impact consumers' lifestyles leading to the transformation of how they work, shop, live and changing real estate preferences. Many developed real estate markets around the world such as United States, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Britain experienced a strong rebound in real estate volumes post COVID-19, but Malaysia has seen volumes go in the opposite direction.

The housing market is expected to remain a challenge in the near future with over supply of residential property taking time to be absorbed. As with many other countries, housing affordability remains a hot topic. Malaysian developers are directed to incorporate more affordable housing units into future developments.

Peter Gilmour is REAL Trends chief foreign correspondent and Chairman Emeritus and co-founder of RE/MAX of Southern Africa.

Petronas Twins Towers in Kuala-Lumpur

IN MEMORIAM

Merrill Printing's Fred Thomas

By Steve Murray, partner, REAL Trend Consulting

Fred built Merrill Printing into the largest firm of its kind in the residential real estate industry in his nearly 30 years with the company. As Merrill's President for most of those years, he oversaw incredible advances in printing and fulfillment services that were the most innovative of their kind.

For those who had the privilege to meet Fred and get to know him, that was the tip of the iceberg. Once you knew him, you knew that you would benefit from one of the warmest, most decent, and fiercely loyal friends one could hope for in a lifetime. Fred had an abundant personality—brave, supportive, thoughtful—well there are just too many attributes that only touch the surface of the heart that he put into his family and friends.

Fred passed away on Sunday, December 20. His sudden death left behind his wife of more than 45 years, two wonderful children and five grandchildren. They were truly the loves of his life, and the years after he left Merrill were devoted to them.

Fred also leaves a legacy of being courteous to all, helpful at all times, and someone who made you feel better when you could be with him. He is gone far too early. I will miss him more than can be put into words.