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Cutting Out the Middle Man

Many practitioners pay an IDX provider to set up an MLS feed on their website. Others have decided there are better ways to get their listings in front of clients.

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It may seem like a forgone conclusion that you should have your listings displayed front and center on your website, but some real estate practitioners are finding less value in it these days. While many choose to pay a third-party IDX provider to set up a searchable MLS feed on their sites, others say the cost isn't worth it, instead turning to other platforms that they say offer more exposure and a better return on their investment.

MLS migration is a common solution for getting listings to display on a personal website, most often involving an IDX company storing MLS data on its servers and migrating that data onto an agent or broker's website. The agent or broker pays a monthly fee for this feed, which is automatically updated regularly.
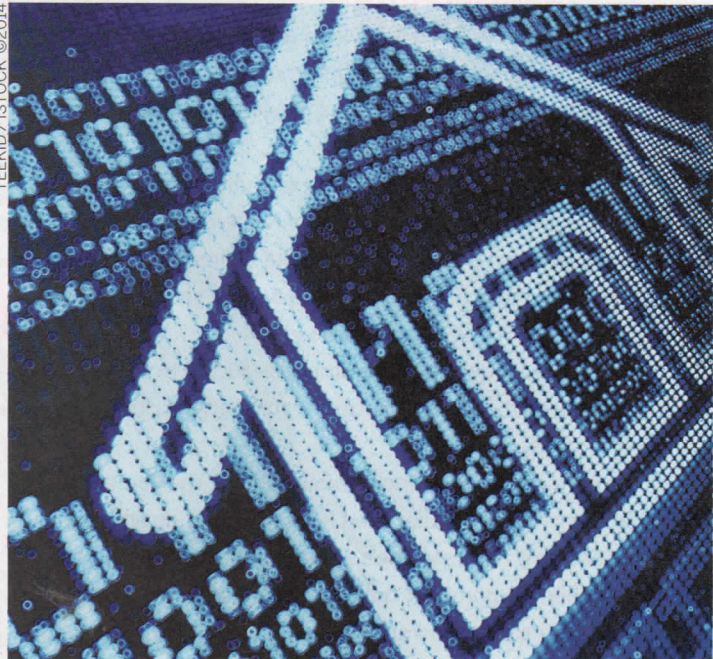
But one major drawback to using an IDX platform is that it doesn't give the agent website any of the search engine optimization value of the MLS data, says Carolyn Bickerton, a former practitioner who now works for real estate web development company Realtyna Inc.

"The IDX provider is a middle man," Bickerton explains. "It gives you the data to display listings on your site. The IDX provider has all of the real raw pages from the MLS on its server, which means it keeps all of the IP addresses, so it gets most of the SEO value. Agents are actually paying IDX providers to rob them of SEO value."

A different issue, though, is what drove Ivy Beitner, broker at Century 21 North Homes in Snohomish, Wash., to drop her IDX provider. Most of her clients don't rely on agent or broker websites for property search—they go to real estate portals such as realtor.com®. So what's the point in paying for a feed on her website?

"People start looking at houses way before they're even pre-qualified, and they just get comfortable with whatever interface they find most helpful," Beitner says. "No agent site can com-pete with the large real estate sites, simply because we don't have the kind of funds it takes to be at the top of Google search results. That makes IDX not worth the extra $30 or so a month. I would rather spend that money on something I think would be more effective: a self-promotional app, for example, that my clients can simultaneously use to search for homes."

That's exactly how Tyler Pearsall, a salesperson with Coldwell Banker in Jupiter, Fla., advertises his listings. Though he does use an IDX provider to surface listings on his website, he says he gets more leads and better exposure through the Coldwell Banker mobile app, which allows him to text links to MLS listings directly to clients. The app uses a phone's GPS to map listings so clients can see which properties are nearby. Clients can click on the listings and instantly call or text the agent for more information.

"It provides a more on-the-go means of MLS access," Pearsall says. "I don't think traditional websites for listings will go away, but they will surely be the lesser-used platform. Since smartphones and tablets take precedence over desktops and laptops these days, MLS access has to be streamlined and easy to use."

IDX vs. Organic MLS Migration

For those who still want an MLS feed on their site, there's an option other than IDX integration: It's called organic MLS migration. Companies providing organic MLS migration, such as Realtyna, connect the MLS feed directly to agent sites instead

of hosting the data on an IDX server and migrating it from there. Essentially, it eliminates the middle man and reroutes the IP addresses of MLS property pages to agents' sites so they get all of the SEO value, Bickerton says.

"When we do an MLS migration, we put the real pages on the agent's server," Bickerton explains of Realtyna's process. "We get the feed from the board, and we put it directly on the agents' websites. All those IP addresses lead back to your website, so you get all the SEO value and the leads."

Agents also pay only a one-time fee—$1,139 to $1,349, depending on the website platform—for the setup; there are no monthly fees.

Amir Feinsilber, broker-owner and CEO of The Force Realty in Seattle, a company that used Realtyna to set up an organic MLS feed on its site, says he's seeing far more SEO value than he did when the company used an IDX vendor. "The amount of traffic to our site has increased exponentially," Feinsilber says. "Lead generation now happens through osmosis, in that we are

heavily indexed [on search engines] naturally and receive phone and Web leads as a result without having to spend a tremendous amount of marketing dollars on pay-per-click and other brute-force methods of generating traffic to our site."

Still, there can be advantages to using an IDX platform for MLS migration. Feinsilber says that when his company used IDX integration, the costs of developing an MLS feed were much less than going the organic route, and the time it took to set it up on the company website was minimal. "Typically, these solutions were either instant or took a few hours to integrate while [my brokerage] inherited a suite of well-polished tools," he says.
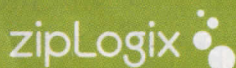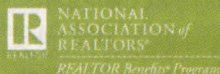
Whatever route you choose, it pays to take a thoughtful approach about whether listing feeds make sense for your overall business plan and budget. After all, your goal is to help consumers find not only the listings that most appeal to them but also the trusted agent they want to guide them through the transaction.

By Graham Wood