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VoiceXML Makes MLS Mobile

Is that house in our price range? Real estate agents can search multiple listings with no human assistance, from the curb, with any phone.

By Ellen Muraskin

11/04/2002, 10:04 PM ET

The scenario: Diligent Real Estate Agent, printout in hand, has just toured Mr. and Mrs. HouseHunter through the three properties that the MLS (multiple listing service) turned up this morning. The printout reflects the results of DREA's screen of location, price range, number of bedrooms, etc, on the HH's behalf. The couple is pretty enthused about the second home, when they see a For Sale sign on a handsome house across the street. Why haven't they seen this one? they ask.

DREA can see the HouseHunters' eyes narrowing, while they try to memorize the number of the listing agent on the sign across the street. She sees her sales commission evaporating and rematerializing in the pocket of that listing agent. But all is not lost: She whips out her cell phone, dials in to AnytimeMLS, and enters her pin code.

You have a choice of endings here, all happy: In ending A, DREA performs a speech-recognizing search: she gives the street number and the first letter of the street name. The speech app reads her back the listing, showing that this property is \$120,000 over her clients' range. The HHs shrug, make peace with their pocketbooks, and decide to make an offer on the second house.

Ending B: The house turns out to be just \$12,000 over the HH's range, vindicating DREA's diligence but tempting the HHs to raise their sights a bit. They decide it's worth a look, and one more voice command ("connect") connects the DREA with the listing agent, so they can arrange a tour on the spot. Ending C: AnytimeMLS informs DREA that a new qualifying property has

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Define It

just been listed in the past half hour, and it turns out to be this very property. The HH's get first look and first chance to make an offer.

Kevin King, Orange Country real estate agent, has been subscribing for a month. It's too soon to have actually closed on a sale that he can attribute to the service, but one is in process, and he is seeing A and B play out. "I don't use it everyday, but when I really need it, it helps," he says.

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The application, from Newport Works (Aliso Viejo, CA - 949-330-6430, www.newportworks.com), has been sold on a subscription basis to about 100 individual real estate agents in California's Orange County; Ken Stockman, Newport Wireless CEO, is in discussions with real estate brokerages to deploy company-wide. He's also in discussions with Boards of Realtors in other precincts to see if he can tap their MLS databases and promote subscriptions to their members. He admits that a Palm version of the MLS already can keep tech-happy agents up-to-the-minute, but that an MLS that doesn't have a learning curve or a new device requirement is a better bet in this market. "There's only a 5% Palm penetration in the agent base," he says.

Stockman's application is coded in Java; once the call is connected, dynamically assembled VoiceXML 1.0 is the programming and execution language. Why Dynamic VoiceXML? "Because every property and every client is different. We've created an application that allows them to deliver different information based on the question asked." The telephony interfaces and VoiceXML interpretation run on an IBM (Boca Raton, FL - 800-825-5263, www.ibm.com/software/voice) WebSphere Voice Server, IBM speech rec and text-to-speech, and many thousands of professionally recorded .wav files, residing in an AIX IBM pSeries server with DTX telephony cards. The database, HTTP web server and back-end application run on an IBM xSeries Linux-Intel server. All are hosted in a data center, hooked up to T1s, through which a fresh MLS database is ftp'd every two hours.

To get the app's full benefit and receive notifications, real estate agents set up accounts on AnytimeMLS' website. They enter clients' requirements and email addresses, and these are compared against the MLS continually. Agents can opt to be actively notified via phone or SMS message when new hits happen (they are also emailed), or they can be alerted to new listings the next time they dial in; the system then connects them to the listing itself, whereupon the agent can say, "email to client." AnytimeMLS then emails a copy of the listing to the address entered on the agent's site.

No recognition problems have been noted except for individual letters of the alphabet; simply training agents to say, "b as in boy," however, has solved that problem.

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