

Home buyers gain jump-start on Web

What's driving the red-hot real estate market? How much are people willing to pay for a piece of S.C.



paradise? Nearly 8,000 active property listings can be found on the Multiple Listing Service. About 2,500 of your Grand Strand neighbors are licensed real estate agents who belong to the Grand Strand Board of Realtors or the Coastal Carolina Association of Realtors. Another 2,000 hold a current license but remain boardless. And Horry and Georgetown counties are home to 468 real estate firms, says Fortune School of Real Estate President Tom Maeser. That's a lot of ink in the Yellow Pages.

It's enough to overwhelm some shoppers, many of whom are preparing to make the biggest economic investment of their life. But Myrtle Beach resident Dawn Curtis, a first-time home buyer, employs a strategy to narrow her choices. She is making a wish list of neighborhoods where she'd like to live before securing a real estate agent's help. Meanwhile, she goes online to research builders and mortgage loan options.

"Five years ago, 60 percent of home buyers used the Internet to assist in their search," says Mary Eaddy of the Center for Excellence in Housing, an Internet-based consortium of consumer information headquartered in Myrtle Beach. "Today, 80 percent start with the Internet."

The real estate market is being driven by a more sophisticated consumer who asks tough questions, Eaddy says, and the Center for Excellence in Housing was created to help people better understand topics such as how

home warranties work and what an insulation R-factor means. The Web savvy also can find mortgage rates, get hot-off-the-wire market news and search for a builder or agent.

Maeser agrees that the Internet is a wonderful research tool and says folks can browse an abbreviated version of MLS listings before finding an agent. And if you're one of the many homeowners considering putting your place on the market to accommodate the latest migration of newcomers, you can get a pretty good idea of its worth by having an agent find out what similar homes in your neighborhood recently sold for.

So if you're a passenger on the real estate express, take a deep breath and try not to get weighed down by the amount of choices. And don't forget to use the Internet. A great place to start is MyrtleBeachOnline.com; click on the real estate link.

Some other sites worth checking out are www.discovernewhomes.com and www.realtor.com.

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Dawn Curtis studies up on construction terminology at www.discovernewhomes.com, a sister site of the Center for Excellence in Housing.