

## Branding the MLS

If a brand is any product or service for which people believe there is no substitute, then how can associations strengthen their MLS brand?



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AEs know better than anyone the value of MLS to members, buyers, and sellers. MLS is a powerful tool for both REALTORS® and consumers. It offers the most timely and accurate information about property for sale. But today, MLSs face a marketing challenge. Other popular brands, such as Google, Craig's List, Zillow, Trulia, and Property.com, also offer information about property for sale. That's why it's critical to differentiate the MLS from other property compilations (see sidebar). This means being able to articulate and promote what makes MLS different from, and superior to, the other brands competing for members' listings and consumers' attention.

There's a healthy discussion about the MLS brand going on in the REALTOR® community today. One opinion is that MLSs are a behind-the-scenes product, so a public image isn't important. On the other hand, some argue that MLS is becoming too generic of a term to both the public and to members, causing confusion and the spread of misinformation.

**Given growing competition to capture, present, and package property data to consumers, here are three important steps any association can take to ensure that members and the public appreciate the unique value of the MLS.**

The Indiana Association of REALTORS® is working on its Broker Listing Cooperative (an NAR Game Changer program), to rebrand MLS. This rebranding will further set apart cooperative broker listings from the plethora of online real estate listings. Meanwhile, the MLS Domains Association is pushing for a top-level domain (.mls) to set apart MLSs from other real estate search engines online (see p. 4).

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and package property data to consumers, here are three important steps any association can take to ensure that members and the public appreciate the unique value of the MLS.

### STEP 1: DEVELOP A BRAND "PROMISE"

All strong brands promote a clear and compelling promise about what they deliver. Apple's brand promise is "innovation, reliability, and simplicity." UPS's promise is "absolutely positively overnight."

Anyone in the REALTOR® community knows MLSs deliver a promise of "cooperation, compensation, and reliable data." But are you taking this promise for granted instead of actively promoting it?

You know the MLS value and power so well that you may forget to talk about it. This is a habit you need to change, because the competition for listing data and fight for data integrity aren't going to ease.

Your first step to strengthening the brand is to answer one question as simply as you can: What does your MLS offer that REALTORS®, buyers, and sellers can't get anywhere else?

In your next MLS board meeting, take the challenge to develop a clear and concise promise. As you answer this question, you'll get a renewed sense of the value of MLS to members and consumers, which will jump-start your thinking about what you need to communicate. Even if five MLS board members' answers are completely different, at least you'll know that you need to work on your branding.

If your MLS has a public face, you may want to develop a consumer-specific promise emphasizing that all property listings are not created equal. Develop a promise and supporting marketing messages detailing your role as the original source for all listing data, highlighting your commitment to data integrity as well as the participants' code of ethics.

### STEP 2: COMMUNICATE YOUR BRAND, INTERNALLY AND EXTERNALLY

You can take a giant step forward in reinforcing the brand by making sure every customer-facing per-

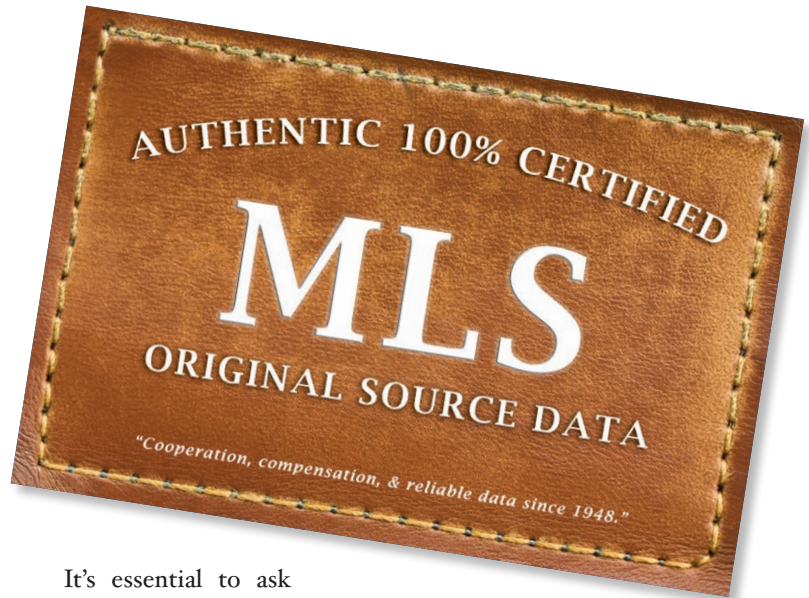
son in your organization, from help desk personnel to the MLS board president, understands the brand promise and can deliver the simple messages you've developed.

A brand is an in-house promise first, so take very seriously this opportunity to "market" the campaign to your board, members, and staff. Helping them internalize the brand promise before you take it to the streets will ensure that they are able to speak knowledgeably and passionately about the brand.

You might even create a wallet card as a cheat sheet for new members to carry with them as they learn the brand message. Taking these steps will help you harness the power of your MLS subscribers, transforming them from users to brand messengers.

### STEP 3: COMMUNICATE WITH THE PUBLIC

MLSs that don't have a public-facing Web site may shy away from any public outreach, but this would be a mistake. Even if your MLS site is just a login for members, a Google search may point consumers there, so include a tab that explains what the MLS is, using your branding promise. Tell consumers that MLS data is the only source for truly accurate property data and let them know where to find it.



It's essential to ask members to educate the public on how the MLS is different from other listing compilations whenever the opportunity arises. Incorporate the branding messages into your consumer Web site's FAQs, when speaking to members, and in media interviews.

The goal is to set the MLS brand apart from other listing data sources. Strengthening the brand brings credibility to the REALTOR® who communicates it. How will you measure your success? When consumers hear the term "MLS" and know that you are talking about the best property listing data available. ■

## What is an MLS? Definitions for members and consumers

Your association members and staff should be able to readily articulate and promote what makes the MLS different from, and superior to, the other types of property data compilations competing for members' listings and consumers' attention. Here's just some of the information you can promote and post online.

MLS stands for Multiple Listing Service, which is a shar-

ing of comprehensive home information among real estate professionals in defined geographical areas, such as a city, county, or region. Extensive details of every home for sale that is listed by a real estate broker appears in this electronic compilation (unless it is specifically exempted from MLS). Only real estate agents, brokers, and other professional affiliates who are members of an MLS

can access MLS data. Homebuyers and sellers can access much of the same information via the public search engines many MLSs have established (although some listing details are not made public) and also through other home search sites, such as *REALTOR.com*. However, countless web sites claim to be an MLS or provide public access to MLS data, but they often offer outdated or in-

accurate information. How can you be sure the online search engine you're using is up-to-date and accurate? Contact a REALTOR®.

An MLS is not a real estate advertising service and does not work directly with any real estate buyers or sellers.

There are no homes for sale by owners in an MLS.

Sources: NAR, Wikipedia

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