How going digital improves your bottom line

ERA Evergreen broker/owner Michael Gonzalez was walking through an Inman Connect conference in 2011 when a bold thought popped into his head: throwing all his office's paper in the trash.

"That was about six years ago, and we've never looked back or regretted it," he said, naming printing, scanning, storage and buying paper as just a few of the costs his brokerage had to deal with. "We were completely overrun with paper."

Going entirely digital isn't a pipe dream for real estate brokerages anymore. Everything from lead generation to finalizing mortgage and title documents can now be done online. So if using a digital transaction management system, electronic documents and a slick online MLS platform help your business move smoother and faster, why not connect them all in one place?

Gonzalez is constantly getting closer to a lead-to-close digital strategy in his South Carolina brokerage, moving his listing presentations, client transactions and more to a single platform with DocuSign Transaction Rooms — and has plans to tackle earnest money and eClosings in the not-too-distant future through the DocuSign platform.

"The efficiencies are incredible," he said of Transaction Room's mobile capability and data storage. "An agent can call me about a transaction, and I can pull it up on my phone and talk about it. If were to get audited by the state or anybody, all of that data is right there.

"Our supply expense has shrank to almost nothing. We've taken our digital footprint to everything," he said.

Gonzalez's brokerage recently won the 2017 Realtor Service Award from his local Realtor Group

in Hilton Head, SC.

Industry experts from real estate consulting groups Swanepoel and WAV Group have studied the potential to digitize the real estate process since the early 2000s and rave about Transaction Rooms' ability to integrate the real estate transaction onto a single platform using DocuSign's API.

According to DocuSign, brokerages that go digital with its service experience a 67 percent increase in productivity while seeing a majority of its agents close more than 25 transactions per year.

All of that praise only goes so far without real-life results. The actual practice of going entirely digital is so new that few brokerages have undergone the change — but those that have are already seeing their muscles grow, thanks to the data it collects.

"It will pinpoint all of your transactions on a map. I encourage agents to show listing clients their closed and ongoing transactions," Gonzalez said of Transaction Rooms. "We would've never been able to do that in the paper world."

Since 2011, Gonzalez's digital transformation has helped his brokerage grow to four offices with over 75 agents, responsible for nearly $150 million in transactions last year.

He recognizes that growth might've taken longer had he chosen a platform with less strategic support.

"Compare apples with apples," he said of digital transaction management systems. "Anytime you can adopt a technology that integrates with the tools you're already using, that's something to really consider. The last thing you want is to take all your tools and go somewhere new."

Increase your appetite

When Re/Max Ability Plus owner Jimmy Dulin bought out the rest of the central Indiana brokerage he co-founded in 2008, he set the bar high, targeting $1 billion in transactions per year – a lofty goal, considering his brokerage has just sold $100 million for the year.

In order to reach that goal, Dulin knew he had to trim fat in more than one area.

"One of my ills was the moving of seven-year files that we stored, so the very first thing I implemented was an accounting package [online]. The next thing I did was implement an intranet network," he said. "Now, other than a few MLS requirements, everything we do is online. We've eliminated filing cabinets."

Dulin’s curiosity for tech advancement made him an early adopter of digital transformation, but he seemed to run into the same issue.

Jimmy Dulin

“The biggest challenge with any of it has been the connectivity,” he said of going digital. “It’s hard to get an entire, company-wide process that links together, because you’ve got different players in different areas.”

Using DocuSign Transaction Rooms and its API integration, he’s eliminated many of the roadblocks his offices used to face.

Re/Max Ability Plus’ accounting package now talks to a customer survey system and tracks referrals to ensure that closings are verified as they’re processed. Its lead platforms move leads into a CRM, which eventually move into the Transaction Room.

Dulin said the mobility has helped his agents close more deals while making their clients happier with the flexibility and client-collaborating features of Transaction Rooms.

The brokerage's documents, forms and data are all constantly shared and updated for agents, brokers and office administrators through the interactive hub, which Dulin says has eliminated confusion and added accountability to his agents.

"The consumer doesn't want to have to physically drive to my office every time we have to do something. Instead, I can send things, we can have a five-minute conversation and execute," he said.

"Agents are able to do more on the fly. It doesn't require them to occupy a desk."

Dulin's early interest in going fully digital is moving his billion-dollar goal closer to reality. His brokerage closed $710 million in transactions in 2015 and is now one of the top 12 brokerages across the Re/Max network.

Pushing the pedal

Both Gonzalez and Dulin said their digital transformations would've failed miserably without proper implementation and training, but first they had to train themselves.

DocuSign provides training to brokerages after they make the switch, even sending experts to offices to ensure smooth adoption; it also offers certification courses in digital transformation, so the brokerages could send staff to in-person training before implementing the change.

"Being able to send our trainer to them and get her a working knowledge of it was hugely beneficial," he said, citing DocuSign's vast support network as a key factor in his adoption of Transaction Rooms.

"The training never ends on any platform," he said, adding that he continues to receive more training opportunities from DocuSign as it updates its product. "We always take advantage of that."

Gonzalez made his brokerage dive in once he decided to make the switch, but he gave agents flexibility to adopt at their own pace. His more experienced agents were willing to learn once he made it clear that it would improve their sales, he says, but their learning curve was steeper than younger generations or brand-new agents.

By recognizing that some agents would learn faster than others, he tailored his training sessions to match the tech comprehension of his agents.

"We promoted the improvements: the ability to sit down with the listing and have the listing

agreement signed and sent to the listing agent immediately. Now clients have peace of mind because they have access to the Transaction Room and can look at it whenever they need to," he said.

Dulin was also steadfast in his digital adoption, but he figured out a way to allow wiggle room while still discouraging stubbornness.

"I never use the term 'mandatory' loosely with agents and brokers," he said, instead allowing his agents to close with paper deals if they don't like the digital route – if they pay a $185 processing fee.

He didn't cater his training to low earners, instead focusing on getting his top producers interested first. He also offered webinars and on-demand learning labs after the initial in-person training sessions.

"Some of my peers have offered these [platforms] but made them voluntary or available but not required. And the average person defaults to the simplest for them in the moment," he said.

"You have to pick a path. You have to have it organized. You've got to have a strong supporting cast."

To learn more about a digital lead-to-close strategy for real estate brokerages, visit DocuSign for Real Estate's resource center *for case studies, webinars, video tutorials and more.*

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