How safe is your data? ←

Following is a fact that you will likely never hear brought up by a Web based CRM provider. If one were to think about it, it makes perfect sense. Everyone who likes Web CRMs always says, *I like Web based databases because I don't have to worry about backing up*. Let's think about this in some detail. Let's say your computer is stolen. With a Web based CRM, all you have to do is get another computer, log in, and everything is there like you left it. Very nice! And that is the type of scenario people always think about when they think about what would happen if they had a desktop solution and their data is not backed up. They look at it in terms of a total one time loss. They think about losing their computer, or having a hard drive failure, or having a virus, etc., and losing everything.

Nevertheless, let's say you were working on your database on a Web based CRM, and you are using a Global Edit to make a change to 200 contacts. Instead of putting them into a different category as you thought you were doing, you accidentally delete them. There is a good likelihood that you are *bleep out of luck*! It is possible that a Web-based solution will be able to restore your database to the day before, or some period before, but if they can, it may cost you a chunk of change. So what can you do to protect yourself? Not much. You can do periodic exports, say weekly or monthly. Just bear in mind that exports never contain all of your information.

Let's take a moment to ease some concerns about data loss that are either outright wrong, or simply overstated. They are:

- Your data is not safe with a Web based solution
- Desktop CRMs make your data vulnerable due to inconsistent backups

1) There are actually two sub-categories here. First, some people are afraid that the web-based provider may steal their contact database and sell it. There was an instance back in the late 90's when a major franchise provided a Web based CRM solution for its agents, and unbeknownst to the agents, the people in their contact database were suddenly being deluged with mail, promoting the franchise's mortgage company, title company, insurance company, etc. In that case, the franchisor claimed a right to the data. Whether or not the franchisor was entitled to use that database was debatable, but it is quite different from a third party vendor doing it. Maybe that event is where this fear came from. It is certainly not an irrational fear, but may also not be worth worrying about very much.

That scenario is considerably different than a Web based CRM provider actually compromising their user's databases by selling the database, or soliciting to it. If they did that, their business would be over. It is that pure and simple. They would be found out in short order, and their business would be done. For what? For the relatively insignificant amount of money that they could get for the sale of that data. Is it possible? Sure. Is it probable? Most certainly not. If it were that probable, it would have happened by now. Is it possible that it has happened, and no one has heard of it? Possible but very doubtful. People love to recount such horror stories, and after conversations with thousands of people for over a decade one-on-one and in groups, it has never come up. Another possibility is that a disgruntled employee could steal it. Again, that is absolutely possible, but has not happened to date. It takes a great deal of time and effort to develop and market a CRM solution. To then allow such a thing to happen is unlikely at worst.

Secondly - people are concerned that their online database will simply be hacked, and marketed to. Is this possible? Certainly. Is it probable? With no statistical data to support this supposition whatsoever, it is about as likely as your personal computer being hacked, and having your database stolen from it. Very low odds. Getting hit by lightening also comes to mind. Also, consider that Top Producer would be a perfect, well known target, given that it has the largest collection of databases in RE CRM and it has not happened to them since they went online with their data in 2003.

With regards to an online solution simply losing your data; they always have at least one redundant set of servers - a backup. That said, do a monthly export of your data from a Web based solution. This leaves nothing to chance. While that export will not be a copy of all your data, it will be all or most of your contact data, normally including names, phone numbers, addresses, notes, categories, etc. Note that we are talking about an *Export* and not a *Backup*, the latter being usable only by restoring it into that CRM. An export is a copy of the fields of data in the CRM put into a file that is a common data format, such as TXT, ASCII, CSV, etc. That file can be imported into virtually any other CRM because it is a common data format that they will recognize. It is completely different than a backup, which is a proprietary data format unique to the CRM. A backup can usually only be used by that CRM.

There is actually another topic that bears discussion here. That is the misunderstood topic of Web-based contact managers/CRM solutions that hold your data hostage.

What needs to be understood is that in this context there are two kinds of data.

One kind can be exported from one CRM and subsequently imported into another one and viewed in the new CRM. That is the contact information. It would include all or most of the following for each contact: Names, addresses, phone numbers, e-mail addresses, Web site addresses, categories, and notes.

Then there is everything else:

- Calendar data - it is relatively rare that this information can be moved from one CRM to another, but there are a few
- Property data and notes
- Template content (letters, fliers, post cards and activity plans; - even if the content is capable of being exported, you still have to modify the merge fields in all of the pieces.
- Tasks/To-do's
- History - not to be confused with *notes* - this is the record of dates and times of appointments, phone calls, mailings, etc., that is in the contact or the property screen. This information is almost never capable of being moved from one solution to another. In some CRMs, it is capable of being exported, but it can only usually be opened in a spreadsheet or database type of application. Examples would be Excel or Access, as opposed to being able to place it into the new CRM's history fields.

So there is a significant aspect of the hostage sentiment that is correct. That is the fact that the *history* type information cannot usually be exported, and even if it can, you cannot view it in any fashion that would make it usable without a programmers help. Therefore, in that respect it is true that Web-based CRMs hold *that specific kind of data* hostage. So if you end up in a court case, and you need the historical events of what happened in that transaction, you will have lost that if you moved from a Web–based solution. The only way around it without hiring a programmer to build you a database to access the exported information, is to simply print it all out. Yes, that would be a lot of printing, but if you ever need it, it would most assuredly be well worth the effort. This is one of those cases where it is far better to have it and not need it, then to need it and not have it.

The reason the hostage comment is usually invoked (especially by desktop solution providers) is that if you have a desktop solution, you own the database and the software and you can view it all on your computer. You will never lose the ability to view that data. And that is assuming that each time you get a new computer, you load that old desktop CRM on the new computer. That is true with one big exception. Eventually, and granted it could be many years, that software simply will not work any more, due to operating system and and/or hardware changes that always take place on an ongoing basis.

Where the misperception comes in is that *all* of the data is being held hostage. Each Web based solution is very different concerning how much data they make available for export, but all of them enable you to export at least some basic contact data. The answer to quelling the fear of what data you will not get is simply to find out, before you decide on a solution, exactly which fields are available for export from your chosen solution. Bear in mind that not all of the export can necessarily be imported to the new solution.

Now consider weighting what data is most important to you. Losing the history is never a decision that should be taken lightly, and should be avoided if possible. But as long as you have the primary contact information, you have your inventory. As long as you have your sphere of influence's names, addresses, phone numbers, and e-mail addresses, you have far and away the most important information. Everything beyond that may seem absolutely necessary, but if you think about it, not having all that other information could put you at a tremendous disadvantage in one or two instances in your career, but it would not put you back to square one, as losing your contact database would.

How important it is to retain historical data cannot be stressed enough. The point is to keep it in its proper perspective if you are considering changing CRMs, which is to say that its value pales in comparison to losing your contact database.

2) Having a desktop solution means putting your database at risk, as many agents are bad/inconsistent at backing up.

While this is a valid concern, it used to be true more so than it is now. One of the reasons is that a significant number of agents have now been burned. They lost their data. You have never seen more faithful backer-uppers than those who have at one time lost their data.

The next reason is that if you pick the right solution now, there are very often at least two copies of the data in two different locations. Consider that a significant percentage of agents have both a desktop computer, and a laptop/tablet PC, or two desktops. They may have one at the office, and one at the home office. If that is the case, then the database is being shared between the two, hence two copies, and no absolute need for a backup. That said, even though two copies of your database should be sufficient 99.9% of the time, it would not hurt to have a regular backup as well.

For two of the contact management/CRM desktop solutions, the *Master Database* may be stored on a thumb drive, which is used to transfer the changes back and forth between the computers, while each computer also has its own copy of the database. This means there are *three* copies of the database. If you have two or more computers, backing up is not an issue. Those same two CRMs offer to host your master database, making it available to be shared by any number of remote users/computers. This of course once again makes backing up a non-issue, as the master would be the third copy of the database.

For those agents who have only one computer, which is certainly still a significant percentage of agents who use a CRM database, there are better and easier methods of backing up coming out all the time. There are automated online services which back up your computer in the background with no effort from you whatsoever, other than the original setup. But if you still do not back up consistently, then you *will* be in trouble some day. For those of you who know you will not back up consistently - get a Web based solution! This will be a safer solution for you.

Once you have finally realized that you must have *some* kind of method to track and maintain a relationship with your sphere of influence, without a doubt, keeping that sphere of influence (your inventory) safe, is of paramount importance. Proper research and planning will ensure that it is given the attention it deserves.

Part 6 - Learning how to use a CRM

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Your CRM should be the hub of your business. If you are not in it every day, you are not using it as you should be. You should be adding contacts, adding information to existing contacts like notes of phone calls, sending follow-up e-mails and letters, tracking transactions, adding listings and closings, and it becomes integral to your business day. It will take a while and that is okay. It will be frustrating for a while that is all right too. You are changing the way you run your business and the way you organize your business. Change is always challenging to some degree or another. You are training yourself to create new habits and it is not easy. It is an elephant, and is to be eaten one bite at a time. If you make a firm decision up front that you are going to *do* this, not going to *try* this, then you will be fine. Making a decision to *try* to get organized is a recipe for failure. Just make the commitment and when it gets discouraging, always remember not to question *whether or not* you will continue, but *how* you will continue.

The single biggest mistake people make with regards to overall efficiency is the tendency to use many different programs to do many different tasks. A powerful Real Estate Specific CRM contains at least the following capabilities:

- Contact management
- E-mail
- Calendaring
- Transaction management
- Word processing
- Desktop publishing
- Phone synching
- Referral tracking
- Document management
- Follow-up drip campaigns

There are two functions that you are currently usually better off, if you actually use separate programs. They are financial, and CMA's.

None of the CRMs have, or are ever likely to have, an adequate financial tracking solution. For that reason it is still recommended that most everything financial be done in Quicken, or if you have any need to do invoicing or payroll, then Quickbooks. Quicken can track your income and expenses and generate reports for them. It can track your expenses for each listing and closing. It can then show you in graphical charts exactly what you spent on each listing or closing, or what you spent on advertising year to date, or anything else you can think of. No CRM comes close to any of that.

Currently only two RE CRMs have the capability of doing CMA's while importing MLS data directly into the property module. It is generally recommended that these capabilities not be a requirement of your CRM search. Your MLS, or a third party solution can be used for CMA's.

For each bullet on the list above, you can find a software product that does that one thing the best. No RE CRM has a better desktop publisher than MS Publisher. None of then have a better word processor than MS Word either. As a result, many people use their CRM for some things, but still use MS Word for creating letters, or MS Publisher for creating fliers. The vast majority of the time, that is not the best decision. If you always bear in mind that one of the primary reasons you have a CRM is to enable you to be more efficient in your operation, it is clear why. It is simply very inefficient. It involves considerable redundant data entry, and the complete loss of having a contiguous history of activity with a contact or transaction.

When considering using a separate solution for a function for which your CRM is capable, you should always be asking if it is worth the difference. Make sure you look at the big picture. On one hand, it is faster and easier to create the graphics for a nice flier in MS Publisher. On the other hand, every time you create one for a property, you have to key in all the variable information manually. It may take longer to create that flier once in your CRM, but you only have to create it once. You have to key in the variable info into the Publisher flier for the rest of your career!

Another reason is that if you hire an assistant, they will have to learn many different kinds of software, instead of just the CRM. Take printing out a flier for an open house as an example. If it is in MS Publisher, they have to know how to use it, and then create it. In the CRM, they just have to click a couple buttons and print it out, already merged with the appropriate information.

Adding contacts to your CRM – Some suggestions when adding contacts.

If you have everything on paper, start entering them according to the ideas suggested below. If you already have them in an electronic format, you have to import them. A common question is if one should clean them up in the old database first, or clean them up in the new one. By cleaning up, we mean getting rid of contacts when we do not know who they are, or filling in a last name on contacts that have none, etc. One difference that may affect that decision is that if you do it in the new one, you are learning the new one, so maybe that is the better way to go. If you do it that way, but the existing database is such a mess that it creates problems with the import, then you have your answer. Just delete the trial import and clean it up first.

As soon as you get the new database in and cleaned up – BACKUP immediately, twice!

As you are adding your contacts, click around in the menus. Try right clicking everywhere and see if anything happens. Experiment! That is part of getting a new CRM. The more time you spend with it up front, the sooner you will feel comfortable and more efficient with it, and the more you will use it.

Add everyone ← If you have to call, e-mail, or write to someone once, put them in your database. You never know when you may need it again. Text takes virtually no space on a computer. Taking up too much space is not a factor. Many people have the concern that they did not want to clutter up their database. Some agents want only the names of the people to whom they want to mail in their database. That thinking is probably a throwback to when we had all our names and addresses on a piece of paper that we used to copy onto a sheet of labels to do our mailings.

They considered names of loan originators whom they did not use themselves, or maybe the buyers' names when they had the sellers' side of the transaction, as just clutter in the database.

People will often say they do not want to have to sort through names they do not need. What sorting? You start keying the name of the person you want in the search box, and it comes up. If you have 50 names or 5,000, it is the exact same procedure and result.

After you use a CRM for a few years, if you put everybody in there, you will be amazed at how often you will not have to look someone up, because they are already in there. In many markets, there are hundreds of ancillary service. Title companies, loan originators, termite inspectors, home inspectors, etc. After a few years and a number of transactions, a great many of them will be in your database. When you add a new transaction, many times, many of the parties to the transaction will already be in there. If you need to call or e-mail someone, you will have his or her contact info already. It gets to be a tremendous time saver.

- First name – Only put the first name of one person in the first name field. Do not put *Bob and Karen.* Karen goes into another field, which exists specifically for that person. No *Mr.* or *Mrs.* or anything else either. And this might sound stupid but it happens all the time. *Always* include a first name. If you do not have a first name, use the last name as both first and last until you get the first name.

- Middle name – Only use the middle initial, but always use it if you have it. It helps with duplicate names. It would be great to always have one of course, but a full middle name *can* be problematic. More databases than not do not have room for a full middle name. Most only allow for the middle initial. So if you are using a CRM that *does* have a field for the full middle name, but then you export that data to move to one that allows for only one letter, then you can have a mess to clean up.

- Last name – Always put a name in the last name field. If you only have the first name, put the first name in both the First name and the Last name fields until you get the last name. Another option is to put TBD (to be determined) in the last name field. Then, on occasion, you can easily call up everyone with TBD in the last name field, and work on getting those last names. Without going into great detail, not having a name in every field can cause problems when doing searches, ordering names in a list, and other things you may end up doing. A name in a database without an e-mail address *or* phone number *or* address, is probably not worth having, unless you know one of them is forthcoming. Always have at least one of them.
- Address – Whenever possible get a postal address regardless of what kind of contact it is. If the *City* field has an auto fill feature, use it. Auto fill is where you can key in the name of the city and it will remember it and retain a list. In the future, as you start to key in that city, it will complete it for you after the first few letters. It sounds trivial, but saving a few thousand key strokes over a years time adds up.

- Company – If the person works for a company, take the time to put the company name in the company field. If it has auto fill, *definitely* use it. This is more important the city field. The reason is that it is very easy and common to key in a company name differently from one time to the next. You might key in RE-ACT for one person, and RE-ACT, LLC. for the next person. The problem then becomes that if you do a search for everyone in your database who works for a given company, the results can be varied.

- Category ← *Always* put a contact in a category such as Buyer Prospect, Seller Prospect, Appraiser, etc. and always put some kind of note in there on them if possible. The goal is to always have something in the contact record that will jog your memory about them. You would be surprised at how little it takes to remember someone you have spoken with, even years later, if you have them categorized and have a sentence or two about your conversation with good keywords.

    - Different CRMs call them different things. It is a field that identifies what that person is to you. *Buyer-Past, Seller-Active, Gold Partner, Title Rep, Mortgage Processor*, etc. For you to truly interact with your database in an expedient and accurate, and profitable manner, being able to categorize your contacts is at the core of what you are trying to accomplish. The versatility here is critical. You should require that you at *least* have the ability to add as many categories as you choose, and that a contact can be included in as many categories as you need. Keep in mind though that you want to have an organized rational approach to adding categories. Think it out first *before* you start adding them haphazardly. If you are working in a team, there should be one person who is designated the *Category Cop.* That person is the only one permitted to add or delete categories, either on their own, or by committee review/agreement. $$$

To get started, consider the following core categories:

- Buyer Past
- Buyer Active
- Buyer Pending

- Buyer Prospect
- Seller Past
- Seller Pending
- Seller Active
- Seller Prospect
- Settled 20XX(XX = year /closed/settled).

- Referral - Always put in the name of the person who referred this contact to you if that was the case. A good CRM can show you a referral tree of who referred whom. A really nice feature of a CRM is when it tracks a commission dollar value to each referee. Then you can see not only who that person referred to you, but how much money they made you by giving you those referrals.

- Source - If it was not a referral then you need to record the source from which they came. Such as *Homes and Land* ad call (note that you should not just say *ad call*). Be specific because in a good CRM you can generate a report to show you where your business came from. This is the kind of thing people are talking about when they say that you need to run your business like a business. If you know exactly where your business is coming from, it allows you to identify your strengths and weaknesses, and where to continue to spend money, and where to stop.

- Mail Preference - When you meet someone and get their contact information, you should try to determine with which mode of communication they are most comfortable. When getting their e-mail address, do not ask them if they check it often or daily etc. Ask them how often they check it. Their answer will tell you if e-mail or postal mail is better. If your CRM tracks it, you should note their mail preference. In some CRMs, that can automatically determine whether or not they get an e-mail or a printed letter when something is sent to them in their follow-up campaign.

- Date of initial communication - Whatever CRM you pick, make sure that it both date and time stamps your notes when you key them in. This comes in handy for many things including risk management down the road. Copious and accurate notes frequently stave off hours of wasted time and unnecessary finger pointing and posturing. It is absolutely amazing how quickly someone will defer to you when they become aware that you have an accurate point by point record of date and time stamped phone calls, notes, e-mails, and letters all at your fingertips. In the future if you have another transaction with them, they will remember. What will happen is that eventually you will get a reputation for being accurate and organized, and other agents will sometimes recommend your offer over others because they are confident that their transaction with you will go smoothly.

- Follow-up reminder - If this new contact is a lead of any kind, you should have a reminder either to call or e-mail them at some point in the future, or you should start a drip campaign for them.

In summary, every contact should have information in the following fields if available:

- First name
- Middle initial
- Last name
- Postal address
- Company
- E-mail address
- Phone number
- Web site address

- Note about initial conversation or communication with the date of that communication if other than e-mail
- Category
- Referral person or source
- E-mail or postal mail preference
- Calendar item for next contact – at least one if not a plan

Adding Properties ← To add or not to add – that is the question! Do you need to record property information in your CRM? You already have to key the property info into the MLS, and probably your Web site as well. Now the CRM too? Whether or not you do is one question, and if you decide to do it, then the next question is how much information you are going to key into it. It depends upon what information you are actually going to need and use from within the CRM.

One type of information you want in the CRM is information that is frequently referenced by you or your team. This is information that you now have to go into the MLS for, or information which you have to find in the paper file. The idea is that if you commonly need the information, you key it in to the CRM because long term it is quicker to key it in once, then reference it in the CRM, than it is to go into the MLS or find the file. Another reason is that if you have a team, and the information is in a file, you may not have access to it, or the access will take unnecessary time. The fields to always complete are things like sale price, listing date, expiration date, executory agreement of sale date, closing date, etc.

One kind of task is to produce property fliers, just-listed cards, just sold cards, open house fliers, brokers open fliers, price reduction fliers or post cards, and anything else of the kind. You can either task a third party with it, or you create them in-house. If you have a staff, it may be more expedient to have them do it. There are many factors involved in the decision, but creating them in-house should not be discounted out-of-hand without an evaluation. If the decision is to create them in-house, then they should be done from within the CRM. That defines yet another set of information that needs to be keyed into the property module, as you will be drawing on that information for merge fields required for the word processor or desktop publisher pieces.

Targeted Marketing ← If you read up on the trends in marketing, you will find that the key word is *targeted* as opposed to the blanket marketing we have always done in this industry. One of the driving forces behind targeted marketing is that the old way of throwing things against the wall to see what sticks is expensive. Data mining to reach audiences who *want* to hear from you is what it is all about now.

For example, a tool now exists that accurately predicts the likelihood of someone moving in the next six months. Why mail to all 2,000 homes in a geographic farm when you could mail to 20% of them and still reach 45% of the sellers?

You target your marketing to your sphere of influence by categorizing them, such as hot buyer, past seller, etc. Even better is keeping certain information on them such as that they like golf, or are a graduate of Penn State, or that they like wine. All of this information enables you to target market to them, as opposed to doing what all the other agents who do not know them do. They use generalized non-targeted marketing. Which would you prefer to receive?

The point is, you have a CRM, or you are planning to get a CRM to make you more money already. Start using it! Do not let your CRM solution suffer the same fate as that poor Nordic Track® you have, sitting in the corner of your bedroom being used as a lingerie rack!

And what are you doing each time you send out these targeted communications? You are staying top of mind with those clients and prospects, and of course, you are asking for referrals.

Do not neglect your past clients with regards to follow-up. Are you proud of the job you did for them? Did they like the job you did for them? Then capitalize on it! Make absolutely sure you touch them at least once each month by mail or e-mail, and annually or semi-annually by phone. And again, always ask for a referral. Your CRM makes it very easy to do this consistently.

If you are not consistently in front of your past clients, guess who will be? Right! The neighbor or the brother-in-law who just got in the business. They are hungry and prospecting. If you are not top-of-mind with your past clients, you *will* lose money. That is not an opinion, that is a fact, and if you have been in the business for any length of time, you have experienced it.

If your CRM does not have its own template letter and e-mails incorporated into activity plans, then write your own. Just make sure to use spell check, and have someone else critique and edit them before you use them.

If the thought of writing scares the Dickens out of you, buy some, like Dave Beson's LetterWriter. Pay heed to another topic in this book about the value of canned content being in the concepts, not the wording. Alternatively, you can do a search on *Real Estate Prospecting Letters*. Be careful, as some of them are quite dated and/or just plain terrible.

Are you using your CRM to follow-up? ← Many CRMs enable the user to create Activity Plans, or Campaigns. These Plans have several tremendous benefits, and if you are using one of those CRMs and you have not yet seriously looked into using the activity plan capability in them, you are missing out on an incredibly valuable tool that you already own. For those of you who are using them, or plan to use them, the following information will help in the development of them.

From a follow-up standpoint there are 5 statuses of contacts for which you should be launching activity plans. They are:

Sphere of Influence – Everyone in your database who is a past client or a potential future client, has referred, or may refer business, is your sphere of influence. They need to be touched on a regular basis one way or another. As each of these people are added to your database for whatever reason, either an activity plan should be launched specific to them, or they should be added to part of an existing plan such as a monthly mailing drip campaign, or both.

Prospects – A consistent organized method of following up with someone who has expressed an interest in buying or selling a property should be in place. It would be comprised of e-mails, letters, post cards, and phone calls. The prospects can be classified in many ways. The more ways you have them broken down, the more targeted you can be with your marketing efforts. Some of those classifications could be buyers, sellers, hot-medium-cold (or however you have been taught to classify them), Internet lead with only an e-mail address, Internet, IVR (800 number), open house, ad call, sign call, have e-mail, have phone number, have address. You do not have to be that detailed, but just think how specifically you could market to them if you did. You could set up a different campaign for them based on many things. It would take you a while to build those campaigns, but once you were done, you would have a very powerful tool that would increase your income significantly.

Sellers-Listings – Once that prospect turns into an active listing, a process begins. 80% to 90% of that process is the same every time, which is why it can be so effectively incorporated into an automated system in a CRM solution. First you have to get all the paperwork signed and submitted to someone in your office. You have to get a sign up, a lockbox on, an ad written, and so on. You can create an activity plan to accomplish this process.

Sellers/Buyers-Closings – Your listing sells, or you write an offer and it is accepted. Either way, you now have another process that begins, and which again contains mostly the same tasks each time.

Post closing – After you close/settle with your clients, if you developed a good relationship, they now become a potential source of new business which needs to be nurtured. So once again, you must launch an activity plan which will consist of any number of ways in which you will encourage them to call you the next time they need you, or cause them to refer you to others.

So…

- What are *Activity Plans*?
- What are the benefits to using them?
- How do you create them?
- To-do's, and Not to-do's!

What are 'Activity Plans'? ← In any contact manager or CRM the user can add a task to their calendar or to-do list one at a time. If it is a reminder to make a follow-up call to a prospect, or a reminder to send a follow-up e-mail, or letter, it ends up being only one reminder on a calendar page. When you get busy, it does not always get carried forward to the next day, or just gets tossed to the side. Using your CRM to *launch* a series of follow-ups ensures that it is done automatically. If it is an e-mail or a letter or post card, and that phone call did not get made, it keeps staring you in the face when you open your CRM, until it gets done.

Most licensees sit down when they get a listing, and at best either write down reminders in their calendar, or they have a checklist that goes inside the file jacket. Most just do it in their head. The former takes a significant amount of time, and because it does, only a small percentage of the tasks that are actually performed during the process, will make it to the calendar. Using activity plans, you create a template group of tasks, which can be assigned to a contact, or property transaction. They will then appear on your calendar all at once automatically, on the dates when you need to accomplish them.

Tasks are things such as; Send a Thank You follow-up e-mail, Do a one week later follow-up call, Enter into MLS; Write thank you note; Introduction call from assistant; Change contact category to 'Seller-Active'; Obtain association docs, Mail 'Client Listing Report' etc.

What are the benefits of using activity plans?

Far and away the biggest benefit for prospects and post closing follow-ups is getting new business. For listings and closings, the benefit is the reduction of stress in your business life. Why is this business so stressful? Of course you are often working with people who can be very stressed out, but why else? Did you ever sit down and really evaluate why it is? One reason is that there are a myriad of tasks involved in listing a home for sale, getting it sold, and then taking it to closing. One of the biggest reasons for your stress, is that you have those hundreds and hundreds of details constantly bouncing around in your head. When you are in the middle of the listing, or the sale, those tasks are clogging up your mind. On top of all that, the need to make decisions about *when* to accomplish those tasks is in your head as well. Hundreds of tasks and decisions on a daily basis = Stress!

At least 80% of what you do for a listing or a closing is the same every time. Having an automated to-do list for all your transactions takes all of those repetitive tasks and decisions out of your head, and puts them on your task list and calendar. You decide once, when you create the plan, *which* tasks to do, and *when* you want to do them. The number of decisions you have to make on a daily basis is then reduced tremendously. Things no longer fall through the cracks. Your mind is more clear and less stressed, because you literally do away with dozens of decisions every day.

It is not possible to appreciate how much of a difference this makes, until you do it! It is like telling a seller how complicated selling a house and getting it to closing is. They cannot comprehend it until they do it for a living.

Even if you have a third party doing your transaction management for you, how much of the complete set of tasks do they do? They do not do literally everything you need throughout your listing, or your side of the sales transaction. If you break down every task that needs to happen for each listing and closing, you will see that even with other people helping, you still have a lot to do yourself.

You may be sitting there thinking, "I use comprehensive lists!!!". Well congratulations on being that well organized! It is more than most. What you need to see though, is that many if not most of the tasks you do for a listing or sale, are not on those lists. And even if they were…

- You still have to look at the list over and over and make decisions on what to accomplish that day
- No detail should be on a paper list
  - Paper lists get lost.
  - Paper lists can only be in one file, or on one desk, at a time.
- Those same details, when in an activity plan, can be viewed by anyone at any time, without having to waste time locating it. No more – *OK, who has the Oak Lane file?*
  - No more walking to someone else's desk or file cabinet.
- No more need for e-mails, sticky notes, voice mails, etc.

One of the goals with activity plans is to have every single detail (to-do, letter, call) in the plan, so none are overlooked. You may also be anticipating the day when you either hire an assistant, or have to replace one. Every detail that is in someone's head becomes a potentially overlooked detail. It becomes a liability, and part of a learning curve *you* must teach to the new assistant or replacement. This translates to a loss of time to you, because you now have to communicate that detail to the new assistant, and/or do the backpedaling for them, because they missed it.

No activity plan can hope to take every detail into account. Every transaction is unique. That said, a good activity plan can take the vast majority of the transaction's details into account, as most transactions are the same to a great extent. More often than not, the assistant takes care of the majority of the plan items, and the agent takes care of the majority of the unique items. The plan items are a known and do not require any new kind of decision making, or creative thought and analysis beyond what is already understood. The unique items can then be analyzed and either performed by the agent, or delegated.

Activity plans and assistants

If you have an assistant, how long did it take to train them? How many hours did you lose in productive listing and selling time? Your production went down did it not? What if they quit next month? You have to start all over again. If you have activity plans in place, the new assistant's time to transition and the learning curve will be a very small percentage of what you just went through.

Do you have an Operations Manual that covers what your assistant is supposed to do, to do their job. If you have ever written an Operations Manual you know that the day after you get it done and printed up, it is well on its way to becoming obsolete.

Some CRMs enable you to have Notes in each task in the activity plan, which you can use to describe click-by-click, how to accomplish that task. It can tell how to edit the letter for that activity; how to print the report in that activity; what that activity is telling the assistant to do, why they are doing that activity, and so on. The notes section of the activity can be used as a Dynamic

Operations Manual. This eliminates a tremendous amount of training time, and negates the need for a traditional operations manual for that set of tasks.

The difference is that with a paper operations manual in a small overworked team, it inevitably becomes useless, because it is not kept current. Using the activity plans, and the notes in the activities, means you can edit/change/update that particular activity on the fly, and it is automatically incorporated into any future launch of that plan. It is extremely easy and takes very little time, and therefore it is more likely that the plans will be kept up to date.

Building Activity Plans - some pointers ←

Combining Activities in Activity Plans

Efficiency is the desired end result, but, with regards to combining activities, you should be cautious. There are different qualifications to use when deciding whether to combine them.

1. If the activities will always be accomplished together, whether you are interrupted or not, then you may want to combine them. i.e.; Erect Yard Sign/Affix Lockbox. If they are *always* done at the same time, together, without exception, then make them one activity. If not, then do not. That sounds obvious, but note that it says *may!*

2. Why may?. Because if you are sending out Client Listing Reports, to the Seller, then you want that report to be as long and detailed as possible, to give the Seller the perception that you are doing a lot of work for them. Combining activities shortens the list, and lessens the perception. A few extra clicks to complete the activities is a small price to pay to strengthen that perception.

3. In some offices, a listing file cannot be submitted to admin unless it is *100% complete*. If that is the case in your office, then there is no need to have each form being submitted as a separate activity. Unless, once again, you want the Seller to be impressed with that long list. If your office does not mandate a complete file, then they should be separate activities. One of the points of the plans is to not let things fall through the cracks. Separate activities ensure that. What takes more time; backpedaling when a form is forgotten, or a couple extra clicks to complete several separate activities to ensure that the form has been submitted?

4. One of the goals with activity plans is to have every single detail (to-do, letter, call) in the plan, anticipating the day when you either hire an assistant, or have to replace one. Every detail that is in someone's head becomes a liability, a potentially overlooked detail, and a learning curve for the replacement. This is a loss of time to you, in that you have to communicate that detail to the new assistant, and/or do the backpedaling for them.

Many top agents around the country are very successful doing all of this on paper, without using any or minimal organizational software solutions whatsoever. But it comes at a great price. That price is the loss of a great deal of time. Very few agents or teams are well organized with a paper system, let alone a comprehensive set of activity plans in a CRM for transaction management. A perfect example of a team leader experiencing the difference between being organized with paper lists versus automated activity plans is an agent in Delaware who had an eight person team. He had a manager, a listing coordinator, a closing coordinator, a marketing manager, and three buyer agents. He had put together an incredibly organized and comprehensive system for his team. He had paper lists for every step of every procedure, and that office ran like clockwork, given that there are always some impediments you simply can not get away from in a paper system. One for example would be the popular office game called “Who’s got the file?”

One year after taking this beautifully honed paperwork team and converting that system onto a Real Estate specific CRM, he wrote and said the following:

"Hi Gary, I wanted to follow up with you regarding the success of our CRM *software and especially the "Activity Plans" that you helped us to implement.*

As you know, we have for some time been operating with extensive manual 'check lists'. The check lists we designed were created with two main objectives. First to enable us to work as a complete team, and second as a complete management tool for our clients' entire real estate process.

With your help, we were able to fully automate our own 432 step process into the CRM *system. Having used the system now for over a year, I can attest to you the success it has had on our business. Being able to launch plans (not check lists) has made our operation much more efficient and complete. Those in the office responsible for managing client files no longer need to improvise and second guess the process. Each step is automatically set up on their desktop w/ step by step procedures (Activity 'Notes') as a reference if they need it.*

Our office manager has been able to alter the plans as needed, enhancing our ability to customize a particular client's process or to simply edit a plan for efficiency. Our entire business model's servicing process is in our CRM and is the tool of choice in our company. I want to thank you for your expertise and guidance in helping us to automate our servicing process.

It has made a world of difference to all of us and most importantly helped our clients receive a thorough and completely managed real estate process.

If fully servicing a client is important, I recommend the real estate professional automate their process. No more hand written notes, no more 'to do's' falling through the cracks, no more embarrassing phone calls about what was forgotten, no more sleepless nights wondering what was done or left undone. It is all there, in the system, documented and professionally managed."

Bill Luke, Luke Real Estate – Delaware

So are you, you know, using yours? ←

If you own a CRM, and you have that phone conversation that goes something like – "*Oh thanks for calling, but we already found a house"*, then you are not organized following up with your prospects! You are not utilizing your CRM the way it can be, and should be. Certainly, it may not stop that call from happening occasionally, but it will reduce the number of times you hear it dramatically.

Any time you speak with someone, and they say something like "*Oh we're not doing anything until Bobby graduates in June"*, always make sure you get some personal information from them such as the fact that he likes to golf, or that Bobby is going to major in art/photography. That fact goes into that prospect's notes, or in some CRMs, special fields for *Demographic information* . You then continue to mail/e-mail them, consistently, until it gets closer and then you call.

When you call him back many months and sometimes years later and ask if Bobby was still interested in photography, you will be able to hear a pin drop on the other end of the phone. There will be one of two reactions. He will either marvel at your memory, or he will say something like, "*You use follow-up software don't you?"* Either way you will have him, especially if he says the latter, because you just proved to him that you are organized. Buyers and sellers like organized!

You have a pre-arranged follow-up Plan or Campaign. As soon as you get that lead, you click a couple buttons, and select the plan you have specifically created for that kind of lead. It would be a Hot, Medium, or Cold plan, and when the plan called for that phone call somewhere down the road, it will come up on your to-do list.

You need to get the right information, so you track people in such a manner as to be able to best personalize your communications with them. So let's say you find out about a special golf outing in your market area. You can do a quick search, find the golfers, and shoot an e-mail out to them to let them know.

Or maybe Doylestown Borough just announced a tax break in the local paper. How many people read the paper any more? Before they find out by word of mouth, you can do a quick search on your past buyers who bought in Doylestown Borough, and let them know about it. Finding your past buyers in the Doylestown area; writing the e-mail announcing the tax break; and sending it out it them, will take about 60 seconds, plus as long as it takes to write the e-mail.