

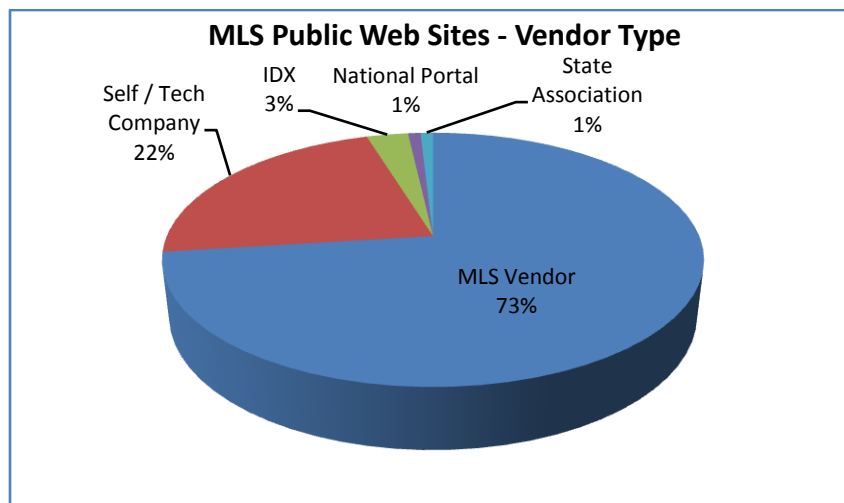
## A Study of Multiple Listing Service Public Listings Websites

Clareity Consulting

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Clareity Consulting has been an advocate for MLS websites that provide real estate listings information to the public since the company was formed in 1996. Such websites have always made sense as a hedge against industry outsiders that want to intercept the consumer on their way to the real estate professional, selling expensive advertising, charging referral fees and/or reducing the broker's capability to provide a one-stop-shop for services ancillary to the real estate transaction. MLSs have done much recently to reverse the misconception that a local public MLS site "competes" with brokers' online efforts and establish that these sites complement them – and thankfully, over the past few years, many MLSs have begun to strengthen their online presence, creating or improving on websites that include the listings. Some MLSs have built or licensed very compelling sites and made them the 'go to' listing site for their geographic area, providing a steady stream of traffic and leads to their subscribers through cost-effective efforts, while others have not done as well in their endeavors. The purpose of this short paper is to review the landscape of the MLS public listings website, provide a baseline for discussion and hopefully spur continued improvement of MLS public listings websites.

Clareity used the directory of sites maintained by Internet Crusade as a starting point for the investigation. When duplicate and non-working sites were removed from the list, there were 335 web sites to visit. 73% of the MLSs licensed their listings search (if not the whole web site) from their MLS system vendor while another 22% have built their own or worked with a local company to do so. The last 5% either licensed a solution from an IDX vendor, a national listings portal or, in a few cases, from their state REALTOR® association.



Interestingly, of the 73% provided by MLS vendors, 52% were provided by Systems Engineering, a provider with small MLS market share (by number of subscribers) but which provides service to many smaller MLS customers. Another 20% were provided by Rapattoni Corporation, followed by single digit

representation by MarketLinx, Solid Earth, FBS, Fidelity, EZlist and Technology Concepts. A number of other MLS vendors each have less than 1% share of this segment.

## Some Differentiating Features

Other than the raw listing information, these public sites need to be attractive and have an interface that facilitates searching for, browsing and comparing properties, making a list of listings and using that list to facilitate the visitors' property search. During this evaluation, Clarity looked at many differentiating features including, but not limited to, the following:

- Map search
- Open House search
- Foreclosure search
- Sold Status listing search
- Single Input Search (like 'Google' - multi-field, beyond address)
- Modify criteria without leaving results
- Multi-property map
- Full Address Displayed
- Property map
- Aerial / Birds Eye View
- Points of Interest
- Multiple Photos
- House Values / AVM
- Showing Scheduling
- Neighborhood / Demographic Info
- School Performance Data
- Mortgage Calculator
- Email Listing (to friend)
- Print friendly property report
- Compare properties (side by side)
- Registration/Login
- Saved Searches / Listings
- Email Updates for Search Matches
- Multiple-languages

Many of these features are available on current real estate portals like Trulia, Zillow, Cyberhomes, Realtor.com and so forth – so that's where there bar has been set for MLSs if they want to be competitive and enable the consumer to have a similar experience to the major portals. Having a robust site increases the possibility of becoming the "favorite" real estate site for consumers in their market and a good site also creates pride within the membership which in turn increases consumer traffic through referrals.

There are many ways to implement the above-listed features – some good and some bad. For example, a map search can be as simple and poor as requiring the visitor start the search by clicking on a large and artificial geographic area on a map, and can be as robust as allowing for a polygon search along with other search criteria to find or narrow down search results – and the polygon search can be easy to use or difficult to use. Also, a site can technically have content such as mapping, neighborhood, point of interest and school information - but many of the sites reviewed were integrated very poorly with that content, making the user click over to other sites in pop-up windows or tabs for each property to view the additional content on a third party web site rather than integrating the information into the listing detail display. It's not just a matter of having a feature that's important, but making it easy to use for the consumer is crucial.

There are many other less common or unique features not listed above, as well as features that consumers won't see that are important for an MLS to implement to create an effective site, such as

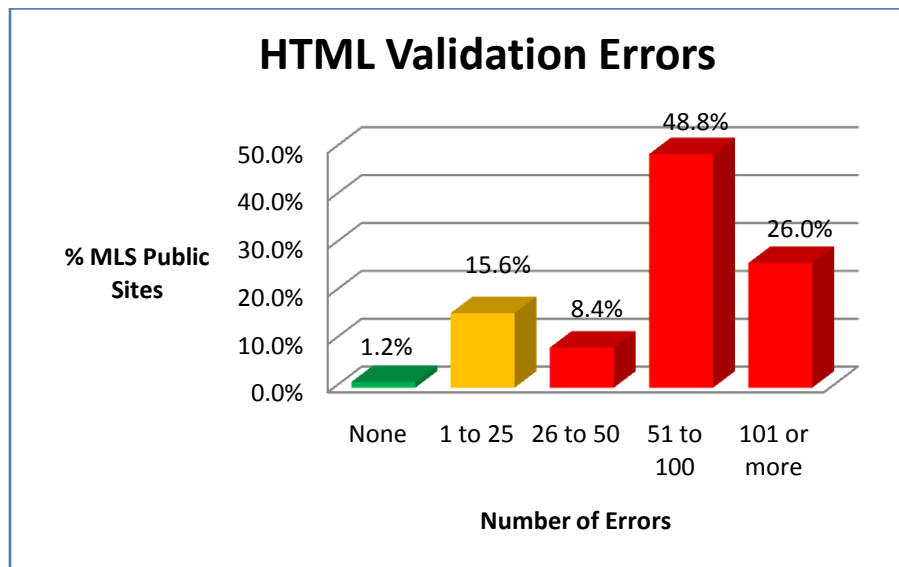
back-end reporting on web site use, listing views, leads sent, and so forth and while those features weren't included as a part of this review, they are important factors when an MLS is considering what technology to implement.

## The Current Landscape

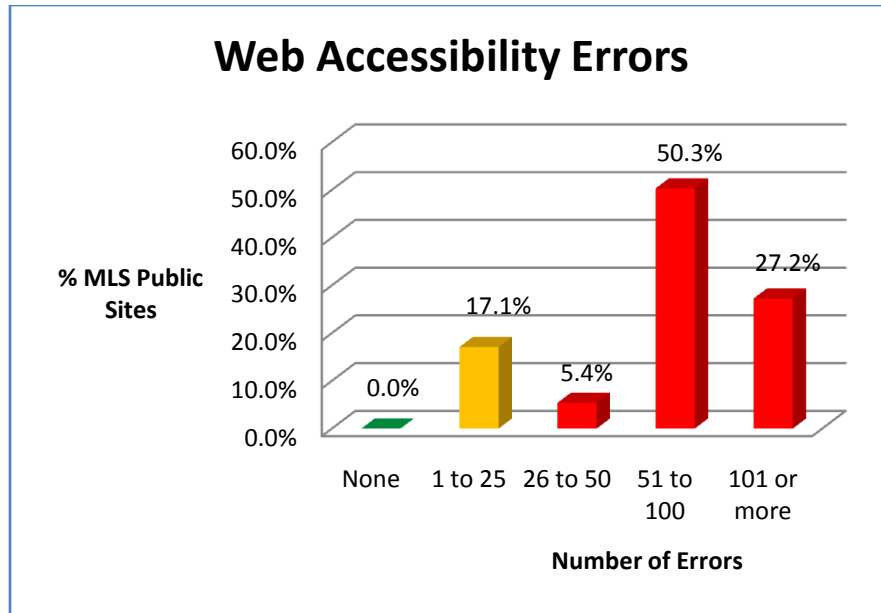
Let's look at some basics: the Privacy Policy, Terms of Use, and Anti-scraping. More and more, consumers are expecting that a complete privacy policy be posted online – but only **10% of the sites reviewed have a full privacy policy** posted. A robust Terms of Use (along with anti-scraping techniques) is important to ensure that visitors only use the site and its content as expected – but only **9% have a robust Terms of Service** and only **4% have any anti-scraping design or capability** to speak of.

There are a lot of aspects of website marketing and search engine optimization, but for this study Clarity examined the sites in terms of Google Pagerank. On a scale of zero to five where five is best, **71% of sites have a zero Google Pagerank** while **only 3% score a five**.

In terms of HTML standards compliance, **only 1.2% of sites have no HTML validation errors** on their main search page. 15.6% of sites have 25 or fewer errors – leaving over 83% of sites with significant HTML validation issues. MLSs should care about this because invalid HTML can have an adverse affect on search engine optimization, mobile device usability, and web accessibility.



Clarity performed a high-level review (only examining the main search page of each site) for compliance with web accessibility standards (see <http://www.w3.org/WAI/intro/accessibility.php>) and found that **all tested MLS public web sites have accessibility errors**, and 83% have major accessibility errors.



It's important for an MLS listings site to have no channel conflict with brokers – specifically not having ads for services that may conflict with broker interests. Thankfully, we found that only **7% have advertisements** that might concern their brokers.

Looking at the search capability itself, **31% have an Open House Search** enabling the consumer to find listings of interest to visit, but only **7% have a Multi-Property Map** allowing visitors to see a visualization of the location of prospective properties at a glance and allowing them to plan their open house visits more easily - and only a handful of sites offer driving directions integrated with that display. **16% have a Map Search** – though as previously noted the quality of the map search varied greatly. **Less than 1% of sites have a Foreclosure Search or Sold Status Listing Search** – search types that consumers might find of interest. However, during previous research, Clarity found the percentage to be higher among larger MLSs. Exploring other criteria that relate to usability, **less than 1% of sites have a Single Line Search** (Google-like search beyond basic search criteria) and only **3% allow the user to Modify Criteria without Leaving Search Results**.

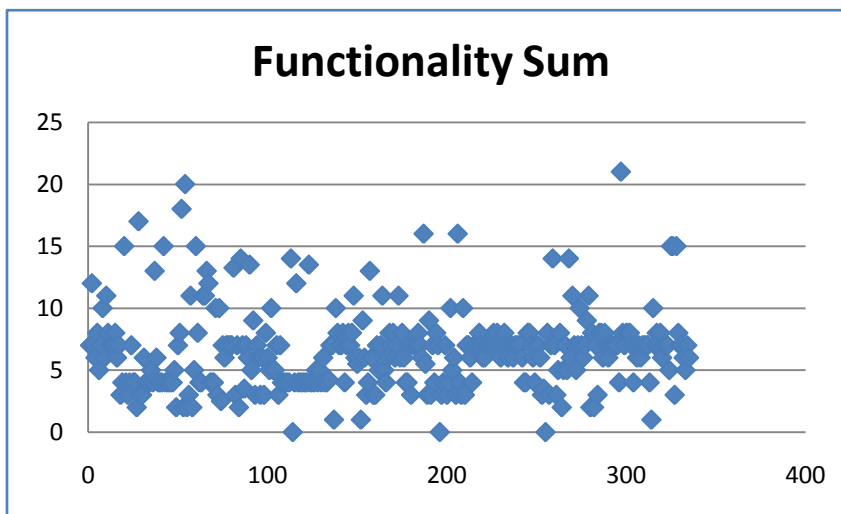
Looking at the search results, while **78% of sites have a Property Map** allowing the visitor to see the location of the home on a map and **62% included an Aerial or Birds-eye View** of the property, many of these implementations were just link-outs to third party sites and potentially added many clicks to the consumer home search process. *This is poor interface design.* **2.4% include Point of Interest** information, but even of this small number many sites require the user click through to another site to view the information, which is again poor interface. **84% of sites include Full Address Display**, though most of those that don't display the address betray the address unintentionally via the links to mapping sites, which include the property address in the web address. In terms of other listing-related content, **94% display Multiple Photos**, only **0.9% display Calculated House Values / AVM**, **3.6% include Neighborhood / Demographic Information**, and **5.4% display School Performance Data**. Note that most

sites displaying school information are just deep-linking to other sites rather than including the information directly in the listing detail report, which would provide a better consumer experience.

According to the 2000 US Census (<http://factfinder.census.gov/>), 17.9% of Americans speak a language other than English at home and 8.1% speak English less than "very well", and of course web site visitors may come from other countries where English is not the primary language. While the language barrier seems to be a growing trend, only **0.9% of studied websites provide a Multi-Language option**.

In terms of activities the visitors can perform on the site, **4.5% include Showing Scheduling, 62% have a Mortgage Calculator, 55% allow the visitor to Email the Listing (to friend), and 2.1% allow the visitor to Compare Properties (side by side). 86% have a Print Friendly Property Report** though what constitutes 'print friendly' is a subjective thing. **12% of sites allow Registration/Login, 12% allow Saved Searches / Listings, and 9% allow the user to receive Email Updates for Search Matches**. There are a few sites that do not require registration for the user to add listings as favorites, which while useful to the casual visitor, some visitors might accidentally close the browser without printing or noting their saved listings somewhere and may be frustrated by the loss of their search results.

Of the 28 criteria that Clarity Consulting evaluated these sites on, the average site had 6.5 of the criteria, while the median was 7. Only 9 sites had 15 or more of the criteria. The following chart shows the clustering around those numbers and illustrates how few sites were exceptional.



## Kudos

Following are some of the more robust and interesting MLS public listings websites:

**Houston Association of REALTORS®** - <http://www.har.com>

This site set the bar for MLS public web sites and HAR continues to innovate. The site provides lots of features for consumers to use, yet it balances that very well with ease of use. Allowing visitors to see the top 100 listings for a search with wide criteria and letting them adjust their criteria without

leaving the search results screen if they want to narrow their selection is just wonderful. There are a few other sites that allow consumers to send themselves listing detail via text-message, but this was one of the first. As MLS executives have seen in Bob Hale's presentations around the country, the site also provides great reporting allowing the MLS to demonstrate great value to brokers. HAR.com had over 1,000,000 unique visitors in March of 2009 and sends over 500,000 leads to its brokers every year at no charge. HAR.com is the first MLS public site Clareity is aware of that has introduced an agent ranking system where the agent is ranked by the client. This is a controversial feature that Clareity has been advising our clients is being offered by industry outsiders whether the agents like it or not, so we're excited to see HAR take control of the situation and offer it in a controlled environment. In the program's first month, over 1000 agents voluntarily enrolled in the "Client Experience Rating" system. HAR staff and volunteers spent time thinking through all the business rules to make this work. They encourage agents to opt into the program to receive the feedback, and allow the agent to decide whether they want their rankings displayed by their listings. HAR sends the email survey to the consumer and has experienced a 38% response rate thus far. This is clearly a controversial feature on a MLS web site, and we congratulate HAR for innovating and finding a way to make this work well for its members!

**MRIS - <http://www.homesdatabase.com/>**

The combination of structured search (beds, baths, etc.) with natural language query for location and amenities is brilliantly done, providing tremendous power and ease of use. This site also displays listings no matter how many are found (nothing is more frustrating on other sites than searching and getting the message "You found 52 listings – go back and refine your search to have less than 50") and allows the user to refine their search without leaving the search results screen. It's so wonderful to see that MRIS looked at and learned from other industries, including a "People Who Viewed this Listing Also Viewed..." link. This site has all the informational resources a consumer might want, including comparable properties courtesy of Cyberhomes. Homesdatabase has been around for many years, but MRIS recently updated the entire site and started to promote it doing targeted online advertising. Their goal is to drive more traffic to the broker and agent sites. In the first 90 days since the re-launch of the new site, Homesdatabase has had 1.5 million visits, almost 20 million page views, and consumers are spending an average of 11:28 minutes on the site. They have also seen that many people are coming back to the site, and in a recent week in April, about 70% of the people were return visitors, and nearly 30% had been there more than 10 times! That's a good indicator that consumers like the site, and when they are ready, will be likely to contact an MRIS broker or agent directly. Like HAR.com, all leads are 100% free from the MLS public site.

**The Connecticut Statewide Multiple Listing Service - <http://ctreal.com/>**

This is another highly functionally robust site with a polygon map search and the ability to mark properties and compare the listings side by side. As with previously mentioned sites, this one displays listings no matter how many are found and allows the user to modify the search to limit the results further.

**Bay East Association of Realtors® - [https://www.bayeast.org/index.php?q=buysell\\_findahome.html](https://www.bayeast.org/index.php?q=buysell_findahome.html)**

Providing an attractive interface and a powerful search across a wide array of criteria, this site has some interesting Web 2.0 features, such as allowing registered users to add notes on listings and set up an RSS feed for a listings search. It also allows the consumer to search foreclosures, which seems very responsive to people's interests right now.

**Real Estate Board of New York (REBNY) - <http://www.residentialnyc.com/>**

This site is "Powered by Trulia" but is not just a branded version of the original site. With the interface that makes Trulia so popular, keyword search, neighborhood information and statistics, and side-by-side property comparisons, this site is well constructed.

**Multiple Listing Service of Hilton Head Island - <http://www.hiltonheadmls.com/>**

This site may not have every feature on which Clareity evaluated MLS websites but the design is quite nice and the interface has some very innovative elements.

**FBS (for example: Northwest Montana Association of Realtors® - <http://www.nmar.com/>)**

The dynamic and attractive "count on the fly" feature on the websites FBS provides makes it very easy for the consumer to see when they have narrowed a search too far or when there is an opportunity to narrow their search further using advanced criteria.

## Next Steps for Your MLS

If an MLS is considering improving its current public listings web site, it's important to consider not only features, functions and interface – only some elements of which have been noted above – but also requirements such as standards compliance, search engine optimization (SEO), information security, performance and maintainability. Clareity Consulting guides clients through this maze by:

- Presenting on the need for, and pre-positioning common objections to, robust MLS public listings websites
- Reviewing existing web applications, creation of or review of functional specifications, and working with developers on an improvement plan for improving functionality and usability
- Developing robust RFPs to solicit competitive proposals from technology providers for new sites or major updates
- Negotiating (or re-negotiating) technology contracts

If your organization has an interest in engaging Clareity Consulting to assist with its listings website or online strategy, please contact: **Matt Cohen** - [Matt.Cohen@CallClareity.com](mailto:Matt.Cohen@CallClareity.com) - (612) 331-1788 or **Gregg Larson** – [Gregg.Larson@CallClareity.com](mailto:Gregg.Larson@CallClareity.com) - 480-368-8100.

## Company Profile

Clareity Consulting was founded in 1996 to provide information technology and management consulting to the real estate industry. Clareity is committed to delighting its consulting clients and provides a wide variety of services to MLS, Associations, brokers, franchises, and software and service companies that serve the residential real estate market. Clareity brings its clients a fresh insights and wide perspective gained by serving clients throughout the industry.

### **Clareity provides the following services to MLSs and Associations:**

- MLS System Selection and Implementation
  - Surveys
  - Review of MLS options
  - MLS Request for Proposal (RFP)
  - MLS demonstration facilitation
  - Contract negotiation
  - MLS project management, communication plan and implementation assistance
- MLS Public web site Request for Proposal (RFP)
- Transaction Management System (TMS) Request for Proposal (RFP) and Selection
- Public Records Request for Proposal (RFP) and Selection
- Regionalization facilitation
- Staff audits and compensation studies
- Strategic planning
- Content/data licensing
- Surveys and Focus groups
- Information security and business continuity assessments
- Executive and technical recruiting
- Public speaking