

Northeast Florida MLS

Data Sharing With a Single Vendor

Introduction

The Northeast Florida MLS (NEFMLS) and some of its neighboring REALTOR® associations/MLSs have been working together to provide their combined members with access to each other's listings since 2016. The most recent data sharing relationships were launched in November 2016 and continue to expand, demonstrating what is possible when you keep trying and working together.

The four organizations include Northeast Florida Multiple Listing Service, Ocala/Marion County MLS, Daytona Beach MLS, and Flagler County MLS. Combined, they serve about 12,000 brokers and agents in Northeast Florida, providing data sharing and key access. Flagler County MLS is the next data share scheduled to go live in the fall of 2017. These associations are using the built-in Flexmls data share tools to provide exposure of their broker's listings within their "home" or primary Flexmls system – the one used by the local MLS subscribers. This data sharing capability within Flexmls is a simple two-click selection and takes less than one minute to complete by MLS staff. The built-in controls allow each MLS to choose what individual fields will be shared. This capability allows neighboring MLS/associations to break down barriers and foster data sharing.

NEFMLS is the center or the "hub" of this data share. Working in partnership with peer organizations, they are making this happen for the collective members and the consumers they serve.

This case study is about associations and MLSs working together to better serve their brokers and agents, especially those who cross-over into more than one MLS. The primary driver for change was a lack of inventory and firm and agent crossover between several MLSs in the area. The solution was the sharing of listings on a common vendor system in this case, Flexmls. This approach delivers measurable benefits for the MLS users, while maintaining distinct and separate MLS organizations and systems.

Leadership

For Northeast Florida MLS, the latest data sharing initiative was born during their Strategic Planning event when they committed to reach out to neighboring associations/MLSs with open lockbox key access as the first step in leading to data sharing discussions.

For Flagler County, NEFMLS led the data share conversations at a meeting of neighboring MLSs back in 2011, which resulted in data share agreement between Flagler and the Daytona Beach MLS. Daytona Beach was under contract with CoreLogic, which offers a Data Co-op™ platform for data sharing that is a separate system from the primary MLS software used by brokers and agents. It was the best solution for data sharing at the time, but not ideal since it requires the users to log in to a different system to access the shared listings. Since that time, Daytona Beach has changed systems and is now using the same vendor and software used by NEFMLS to enable data sharing with Flagler and NEFMLS.

Success Factors

In 2016, the consolidation effort moved forward:

- NEFMLS and Flagler continued the outreach to neighboring MLSs.
- For NEFMLS and Daytona, their subscribers were not required to leave Flexmls and now have access to the shared data from all four MLSs.
- The associations have been able to reciprocate on lockboxes and keys using both Sentrilock and Supra equipment.
- It is now easier for subscribers to access shared data within their “home” MLS system.

They now work with one vendor to remove the technology challenges from the decision-making process. If MLS organizations feel that they need to “regionalize their database” and create one common MLS system, this is one option.

Main Drivers

The association/MLS markets involved in the data sharing (and others who are not) have considerable agent cross-over. As stated by one of the presidents, “when buyers reach out to us with interest in living in northeast Florida, they don’t know the areas and we need to be able to see all the inventory available to meet their needs. Otherwise, they use the national portals, which may not be accurate or up to date.” Consolidation addresses this issue in a number of areas:

- Making it easier for brokers and agents to show homes through reciprocal key box access.
- Low inventory, according to Dorothy Desvousges Sperber, Executive Officer with the Flagler County REALTORS®.
- Providing consumers with more complete listing information in order to keep them from utilizing the national portals for their real estate search.

- Technology improvements over the past 5 years making it easier and more cost-effective to share data.
- Maximizing access and convenience by bringing data sharing into the home MLS software rather than requiring the subscribers to access an alternative database like Florida's MLSAdvantage™ or RPR®.

Intended Benefits

- Give brokers, agents, and appraisers access to as much of the complete inventory as possible by in their home system by sharing listing information across multiple MLS systems.
- One-stop shopping for complete listing information, making it more efficient for brokers and agents.
- Increase the exposure of the broker's listings and seller's properties to other licensed professionals in Florida.
- Reduce the costs to brokers and agents associated with joining and paying multiple associations and MLSs.
- Provide more options to choose from including having more than one MLS with the information they need to do their job.
- Further breakdown some of the borders and walls that exist between MLSs and databases by sharing the information.
- Make access easier with the shared listings being available in the primary MLS software.

How the Issues Were Resolved

Some of the remaining challenges include: MLSs/Associations that are unwilling to share data largely due to the fear that they will no longer be relevant or they will be gobbled up in the process; convincing the leadership of other MLSs/associations who are also using Flexmls to share data with this group. Here is how some of the issues were resolved to produce this outcome so far:

TECHNOLOGY (MLS vendor platforms, auxiliary services, contractual obligations, hardware and software systems, lockboxes).

- When MLSs change vendors and software, sometimes a new door of opportunity opens.
- Data sharing on the same vendor and system can be easier and less costly to use, more complete and accurate (data integrity) and more cost-efficient when compared to data sharing "across" different vendor platforms.

- In the case of Northeast Florida MLS and Daytona Beach, they both arrived on Flexmls in 2016 making it possible to data share on the same platform. This replaced the Data Co-op™ solution, used in the past.
- For the subscribers of the Flagler County MLS who use the SEI Navica software, they had to go to Northeast Florida MLS using Flexmls and separately to Daytona Beach MLS using the Data Co-op™ to access a more complete inventory of listings and comps. This was much less convenient than the new data share arrangement.
- Within Flexmls it is a simple, it takes less than one minute for MLS staff to enable the data share one-time and the built-in controls allow each MLS to select specific individual fields to be shared.

FINANCES (MLS operations, distribution to consolidating partners, funding association operations, reserves, real and personal property ownership, taxation etc.).

- While there were some concerns about the number of secondary MLS subscribers who would drop out of the MLSs, due to the data sharing, that has not been the case. There is other value from the associations that are thought to be maintaining most of the secondary subscribers.

OWNERSHIP (business structure, ownership interests, allocation process, legal issues, etc.)

- There were no changes to the ownership or business structure.
- Data sharing agreements between the organizations were put in place.

STAFFING (right sizing, staff leadership, buyouts.)

- No changes in staffing were required.

Lessons Learned

- Set an intention (strategic planning with leadership was the basis for this one) and do the outreach required to move the needle. Repeat the process.
- Don't stop at the first no – keep trying.
- Concentrate efforts on the benefits and positive outcomes rather than what you are trying to protect in the process of sharing.
- Small steps are better than no steps at all and can lead to a larger long-term outcomes than what was initially expected.
- Use an MLS systems and software that enables data sharing as a standard function built into the base system and which allows individual MLS organizations to control their system and fields for sharing.
- Break down the barriers between neighboring MLSs/associations through data sharing.

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