

December 2007



Maintaining Revenue, Providing a Public Service

Newspapers assist during a volatile mortgage market

By Jennifer Streisand

Revenue in the real estate category held steady and even increased at some newspapers during the mortgage crisis of 2007.

Classified managers have developed packages and encouraged organizations to use classified advertising to help agents sell foreclosed homes and advise distressed homeowners how to proceed.

An increase in Los Angeles

"Our real estate classified ads increased dramatically between January and August of 2007," said Martha C. de la Torre, publisher and CEO of El Clasificado, a Spanishlanguage weekly newspaper in Los Angeles.

"Our weekly classified ads increased by 500% in the first quarter of 2007. Real estate sales have gradually continued to increase since then," she said.

El Clasificado has received numerous requests for advertising from real estate and legal professionals to get the word out to families and individuals who are facing or in the process of foreclosure.

Agents and mortgage companies pay for these ads to reach distressed homeowners, but non-profit organizations offering debt counseling are not charged, de la Torre said. The advertising has boosted revenue for El Clasificado and has enabled it to enhance its mission as an established community resource for its loyal audience. Because El Clasificado is a zoned publication, the ads can be placed in additional zip codes to reach more people.

In accordance with its mission as a community resource, El Clasificado consistently publishes content to help readers with financial literacy, de la Torre said. Such information can provide sustaining tips during a crisis such as the subprime collapse.

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"We always strive to provide our readers with as much information as possible that is relevant to their needs. El Clasificado regularly runs an editorial real estate column, which contains information on where to find assistance and support for your real estate/mortgage needs," she said.

In addition to the regular real estate column, the publication held a first-time home buyers expo in March 2007 entitled "Hogar, Mi Dulce Hogar, Home, My Sweet Sweet Home." Governmental agencies such as the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the Calfornia Housing Finance Agency (CalHFA) made presentations to educate the Latino community about financing options. Often, qualifying income levels are much higher than in past years, which makes government-assisted financing a better choice than a subprime loan, de la Torre said.

"Often the government has really great programs that nobody knows about," she said.

El Clasificado supplemented the expo with a real estate directory that contains information on credit scores, avoiding predatory loans, obtaining the right loan and content on permits that are necessary in some remodeling projects. The publication launched a Web site, *www.hogarmidulcehogar.com*, that has information similar to the guide, further extending the reach of the message, de la Torre added.

In 2008, El Clasificado plans to hold another expo with a supplement to target distressed homeowners specifically.

"We are thinking of calling it something like, 'My Finances, My Power,'" de la Torre said. The mission would be to educate the Latino community so individuals and families can gain strength from financial knowledge.

"So they are not convinced to buy a home that they are going to lose in a year," de la Torre said.

Legislation

California has been hard hit by the downward spiraling mortgage market with the highest number of mortgage default notices in a decade during April through June 2007 according to research published by Data Quick Information Systems, which monitors activity in real estate nationwide. Lenders filed 53,943 Notices of Default related to California homeowners April through June, up 15.4% from the first quarter of 2007.

The state Senate's Banking, Finance & Insurance Committee held hearings in an effort to repair the subprime mortgage collapse. Finding solutions to help Californians stay in their homes is in the best interest of the state's economy, said Sen. Michael J. Machado, CONTINUED

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D-Linden, in a published statement. Machado is chair of the committee.

On August 31, 2007, President Bush announced steps to help families struggling to keep their homes, including reforming the Federal Housing Administration's mortgage insurance program and reforming the federal tax code, which penalizes homeowners who have refinanced to keep their homes. The president called on Congress to pass legislation quickly to implement these steps. While the government's role is relatively limited, the president stressed that homeownership has always been at the forefront of the American dream and aggressive measures to keep as many people as possible in their homes will uplift the overall economy.

Bundles, rebounds and perceptions

The staff at the Las Vegas (Nev.) Review-Journal is working with real estate agents to make advertising much more affordable, said Lani Dorlack, real estate/rentals advertising manager.

From January through June 2007, Nevada had 15,812 pre-foreclosure filings, which topped the list of states, according to *foreclosures.com*, an established foreclosure Web site in the United States.

It is estimated that 40% of the listed homes in the Las Vegas market are vacant. When the real estate market is sluggish with so many foreclosures, this makes it difficult for agents to advertise, Dorlack explained.

"Almost all resale advertising is paid for by agents. If homes aren't selling, their income — and therefore, their advertising budgets — decline. They know they need to advertise, but they literally can't afford to," Dorlack said.

To help agents meet the cost of advertising, the newspaper has introduced 28-day bundles for real estate listings so that agents can help their sellers showcase their homes, she said.

"Homes are on the market much longer than in the past few years, and the bundles are a way to provide the agents with much stronger marketing to try to sell the homes before buyers are in trouble," she noted.

The news is not all bad, however. Real estate sales in June 2007 were up over June 2006 in the Rochester, Minn., market, said Sue Lovejoy, classified advertising and special sections manager at the Post-Bulletin.

"This shows things are starting to rebound. To help reflect this we compile positive editorial content in our real estate publications: We mention homes that were sold the previous week or month, new home construction, etc.," she said.

In Waterloo, Iowa, builders have been pleased with the results of weekend advertising in August 2007, noted Sharon Jordan, classified advertising manager at the Waterloo Courier.

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Negative perceptions, and not necessarily reality, sometimes have an impact on local builders.

"A problem here is that they hear a lot of what is happening on the East and West Coasts, and it makes them pull back a little with their advertising spend," Jordan explained.

Bankrate.com

Perhaps newspapers are playing their oldest and strongest role in helping agents, investors, and homeowners survive the mortgage plummet, and that is by providing information.

In the mortgage arena, *Bankrate.com* provides rate data information and editorial content to more than 450 newspapers in the United States, said Bruce Zanca, senior vice president and chief communications officer.

"Less than one half of one percent of our business is affected by subprimes, so for us, it has not been an issue," he said.

Mortgage advertisers who want to reach readers who prefer print can use Bankrate for mortgage rate tables in the classifieds, and the lenders must meet certain criteria, he added.

Bankrate publishes relevant content on its Web site including daily financial blogs, and newspaper editorial staff can interview and quote experts on the Bankrate staff, Zanca said.

"What we are trying to do is provide transparency to the situation. This is a 'buyer beware' type of circumstance. Clearly what has happened is that some unscrupulous mortgage lenders have put consumers into mortgages that they can't afford. That is not good business, and it's not smart for anyone," he noted.

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