CISCO SYSTEMS

SHOREWOOD
REALTORS

P R A X I S

Cisco **Channel Partner**
Helps Southern California
Real Estate Firm **Stay on Top**

Shorewood Realtors is consistently ranked as one of the top ten real estate firms in Los Angeles County. In 1998 it appointed Mike Collins as its general manager to direct Shorewood's explosive growth as a result of California's red-hot real estate market. Under the direction of Collins and Lynn Edwards, the firms CFO and director of technology, Shorewood teamed up with Cisco Channel Partner Praxis Computing and using the Cisco local-area network (LAN) and wide-area network (WAN) technology, created a "virtual community," linking agents at all five Shorewood offices and those working from home. The new system streamlines the distribution of information throughout the agencies five offices, attracts the attention of top real estate agents and clients, and contributes significantly to the agency's market-leading position.

Agency Targets Inefficient Paper-based Operations

Shorewood has always been aggressive in pursuing listings and in closing sales—and that push made it number one in its market. But Collins knew being content with the status quo was not going to keep the agency number-one in Southern California's exploding real estate market. He and Edwards wanted to disseminate information more efficiently about new listings to other Shorewood agents. Giving Shorewood agents first crack at all of the agency's new listings before they reached a multiple listing service would keep more business 'in house.'

While the company had built a solid reputation with its expert agents specializing in homes above the half-million dollar price point, many of its operations could not keep up with current information. For instance, its outdated DOS-based database was merged each day, but crashed often. Agents would enter search parameters to find a property for a client, and sometimes out-of-date listings had not yet been purged. As a selling agent got a new listing, they would prepare a paper document of listing information and fax or send it by courier to agents at the other Shorewood offices. Sometimes a new listing would take one to two weeks before it was featured on the company's Web site and even worse, in some cases the property was already sold when it finally did appear.

"As business grew, we were staffing up in the field offices to handle administrative tasks," said Collins. In addition to the paper-based new listing information, the industry and related agencies have, over the years, required many more files and pieces of paper to conduct business. With the market booming, Collins decided Shorewood could not stay aggressive and competitive without either employing new technology or adding many more employees to deal with the paper.

Edwards had chosen local technology consulting firm Praxis Computing to set up a system for the company's bookkeeping and other corporate functions several years earlier. Based upon the success of those systems, Edwards suggested to Collins that Praxis would be an ideal choice to integrate new technology into his expansion plan for Shorewood. Edwards and Collins sat down with Jeff Roback of Praxis and discussed how technology could be applied to Shorewood's business to help it stay competitive. He liked that Praxis looked for long-term relationships with its clients and builds a team environment.

"Praxis is not merely a reseller," notes Collins. "They are as excited as we are about applying technology to make our business better, and Jeff was way ahead of the curve. I was thinking in terms of getting all agents productive on their laptops and desktops. Jeff wanted to tie all of the offices together and make new information available to everyone immediately and simultaneously."

"I looked at the size of Shorewood's market and the potential there, and with the price of LANs and WANs coming down it was the reasonable thing to do," said Roback. "We already had a strong database in the bookkeeping department—why not push that database out into other offices with a WAN and tie agents together using the Internet?" Just as Shorewood's business was exploding, the price points of a WAN solution were low enough to make it an attractive solution.

Teams With Cisco Partner to Stay Ahead in Aggressive Market

Roback and his team went through a standard needs analysis for Shorewood, examining questions such as what was Shorewood's capability for maintaining equipment internally? What were the performance expectations? Would there be any resistance from agents on introducing a new system? They bounced a few technical questions off of the Cisco representative to ensure the solution they had mind would work as planned.

Praxis could see where the Internet and associated technology were going, and proposed a system that would create a WAN among Shorewood's five offices with T1 Internet access. The firm would host its own Web server and a new email system would be introduced that would give everyone access internally or externally.

"I really appreciate that Cisco is playing a role here," said Collins. "It was very reassuring to know this new system was going to be quality products from top to bottom."

Collins and Roback decided on a phased rollout to be sensitive to the agents' resistance to a new system. "They needed to ease into the new process," said Collins. "Many of them felt like business is great so why make me learn to do things another way?" Roback also had to gear his thinking to an elementary level for the Shorewood employees, right down to selecting the hardware.

"We could have put in the 'Ferrari' of systems, but it would have sat there and not been used," said Collins. "That was really an adjustment both teams made. Also, I budgeted consciously as it was a pilot program. We were going to phase in the technology as people needed it, and gradually upgrade to more speed as demand warranted."

The first step was creating a WAN and LAN for each office and handling the associated cabling. Reliability was critical, so careful testing was performed. Next, they rolled the database out. The last step was bringing the Web site into that database, and that's where Shorewood's agents saw the potential of the new system. Mike sends a daily email to agents detailing the new listings, and then that information is posted on the public site in a day or two after agents have had ample time to review new listings. Now all Shorewood agents, no matter where they're located, would know up-to-the-minute information on Shorewood listings. And if they need to search the database, it would be fast, reliable and current.

Training Programs Ease Agents into New System

Collins and Praxis worked together to design a training program that would make agents comfortable with the new system while showing them the benefits. They arranged for evening classes at a local technical school that offered basic computer training. Once the agents understood the technology they grew comfortable with it, and as they saw the benefits of the new system, they understood how it could make a difference in beating a competitor to a listing.

Today, Shorewood agents look for Collins' daily emails with the new listings— "And if that daily email isn't there, they're asking for it!" he said. "Our agents use the technology to show sellers the benefits of the Shorewood system." Collins feels that as clients become more technology savvy, realtors need to raise the bar to that level, proving to clients that agents add real value in the buying and selling of a home.

Today, Shorewood remains number-one in its market and is clearly the technology leader among its competitors. And while Collins and Roback initially resisted putting in the 'Ferrari' of systems, now all the agents and employees are using it and they want more speed. "If we had put all that capability in at the start, it would have put people off and never been used," said Collins. Praxis and Shorewood are now in the process of upgrading to full T1 capability, quadrupling the bandwidth.

"Shorewood has a reputation of being a technology leader and doing cutting edge stuff with the Internet," said Collins. "The system is helping us keep the best agents and attract the best listings in a very busy and competitive market. But buying and selling a home is still very personal, and the best part of the new system is that it enhances our personal touch and makes us look even more professional."

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