

## A New Strategy



Homefree changes the way agents think about marketing homes

By Stephanie Andre

In today's market of change, which includes a bona fide decrease in sales—and more recently, prices—agents need a way to get their name out in front of buyers and sellers after the transaction. But how do they stay top of mind?

Enter Homefree, an online, personalized toolbox created by Ethix Media that organizes and automates the process of home maintenance for homeowners long after the transaction is complete.

"The beauty of Homefree is that it delivers just as much value to the homeowner as it does to the agent," explains Darren Steele, vice president of marketing for Ethix Media. "How useful is a 'Just Sold in your Neigh-

borhood' postcard to a homeowner? How useful is a fridge magnet with a real estate agent's glamour shot? The Homefree team is committed to a substantial amount of ongoing research to ensure that this product is highly useful to homeowners."

How it works: Homefree creates a 24-month online maintenance plan for the client that doubles as a two-year marketing plan for the agent. "Think of it as the only marketing campaign your clients will actually thank you for," says Steele. The agent gets 24 monthly "Homeminder" e-mails with their photo and contact information integrated and ready to be forwarded to a friend for referrals.

Additionally, the agent's branding tops every personalized Web page of [www.homefree.com](http://www.homefree.com) that their client sees for two years. "The Homefree client knows that their agent has

saved them time, money and stress by helping them know what to do and when to do it to keep their home in tip-top shape," he says. "The agent receives loyalty, visibility and referrals as a result."

**Creating Satisfied Homeowners—After the Sale**

Oftentimes, agents wonder why their repeat business isn't higher. For that, Tom Blondi has the answer.

"There is a large number of homeowners who are disillusioned by the 'love 'em and leave 'em' behavior many agents display," says Blondi, president and CEO of Ethix Media. "For many homeowners, the only time they will hear from the agent after the sale is on a postcard that tells them how much the neighbor's home just sold for and asks them if they'd like to sell theirs. If the homeowner is really lucky they might even get one of those high-end refrigerator magnets with an extremely rare calendar on it."

Blondi says that just like during the transaction, after its completion, communication is still key. He compares the real estate industry to the automobile industry: the product is one of the most expensive assets you will ever acquire and it is usually replaced every three to five years.

"I can't understand how an agent or car salesperson would not treat the relationship like a rare commodity," says Blondi. "If most agents just took five minutes a month to communicate with their clients in a non-sales style—like offering them advice or helpful tips—they would be amazed at the amount of repeat opportunities that came their way. That's where Homefree comes in."

Adds David Gray, Ethix Media's vice president of business development: "Most agents struggle with building a sustainable prospecting pipeline. So much effort is expended in finding or marketing the home and closing a transaction that it's often hard to find time and energy to

actively nurture relationships and locate new prospects."

Instead of a steady growth pattern, most agents experience a cyclical path of "find a prospect, go close a home, rinse and repeat," he adds. "This process is inefficient."

Conversely, if you have a passive system that works to keep you in front of—and more importantly provides a valuable service to—your past clients, you're on your way to a more productive sales cycle, Gray says. "With Homefree, the system is in place; your simple phone call once a quarter should yield referrals," he says.

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"The real value to the homeowner is peace of mind that their most prized asset [the home] is under control...and will be worth a lot more if properly cared for," adds Blondi. "The real value for the agent is peace of mind that their most prized asset [the customer] is being satisfied... and will most likely refer him or her to others."

Buying or selling a home is almost always driven by a life event, according to Gray. Things like marriage, kids, jobs and retirement all act as a catalyst for moving. However, having a water heater flood the house or

unexpectedly having to replace a \$6,000 furnace is a life event as well.

"Our goal is to prevent the crummy life events and keep the agent in front of the client as a valued part of the homeownership experience," explains Gray. "If [the agent] can advise the homeowner that now is the right time to do something that will prevent a bad life event and keep his/her family safe, then we've provided a valuable service."

"Continued service is a promise that most business owners make, we just take the work out of it for our sponsors," he adds. "Now if the client has a question about the home, the agent is seen as the expert. And when the agent reaches out to the client in the marketplace or by direct contact, goodwill has been created that the agent can leverage into asking for new business and referrals."

**Changing the Way Agents Market Homes**

Homefree is a more valuable form of communications with the homeowner, according to Blondi. A simple monthly reminder, sent to the homeowner and sponsored by the agent, could potentially save them hundreds if not thousands of dollars in repairs bills, not to mention the stress of worrying about what they are not doing instead of just enjoying their home.

"This casts the agent into the role of helper, advisor...and it is not purely altruistic, either," he explains. "If I'm being treated like a valuable client every month by my agent, without being pestered for my listing or reminding me how much my neighbors have sold for, then when I am ready to sell, who do you think I will go to first? When they do come back to their agent, they can also equip him/her with their home's maintenance history from Homefree over the years...the who, what, when, where, how much, etc. That's valuable information for the agent's marketing of the home to new buyers."

Adds Steele: "Each time the homeowner visits [www.homefree.com](http://www.homefree.com) to update their inventory or consult their plan, they will see the agent branding. Agents also have the ability to update their photos, logos and contact info at any time from their Homefree account to stay current and personalize it further."

### The Product Itself

Everything about Homefree is geared toward simplicity, according to Steele. Currently, Ethix Media has this offering for agents only: purchase a two-year Homefree gift subscription for your client for \$39 and receive a personal subscription at no charge.

"We know agents are bombarded with marketing alternatives every day," says Steele. "We're always working to make the Homefree concept, the purchase decision, the gift-giving and results-tracking simple for the agent. Homefree is simple to give and simple to use. But don't be fooled by the simplicity. Under the hood, there is some amazing technology that creates a personalized home maintenance plan for each homeowner that is customized for their individual home."

What's more, not only does Homefree get in front of homeowners consistently for two years, it

tracks the results of those impressions in real time. Agents know how many impressions their homeowners log on the site in addition to the monthly "Homeminder" e-mails, messages sent to each homeowner with a short list of reminders specific to their home. Homefree takes into account the systems, structure and appliances in the home and generates a personalized two-year maintenance plan for each homeowner.

"These monthly Homeminders help homeowners know exactly what to do, how and when to do it to keep their largest asset running smoothly," explains Steele. "Each e-mail and Web page for Homefree includes tastefully integrated agent branding. Twenty-four monthly e-mails will not only remind the homeowner what to do to maintain their home, but it will remind them of the agent who gave them the gift and keep the agent's contact info at their fingertips."

In addition, there's also a Homefree Meter on the Web site that shows homeowners how their homes are "feeling"—that is, the meter shows them how their home is being maintained on a percentage basis, similar to a home maintenance thermometer, says Blondi. For those more curious, there are hundreds of articles on every aspect of home maintenance

from water to electricity to legal, financial, environmental, etc.

### A Lasting Impression

If you're going to offer a closing gift, give something that benefits you—and has a lasting value, according to Gray.

"Because they're branded and include the sponsoring agent's contact information, each monthly e-mail highlights that the sponsor is someone that cares about the home and the client," explains Gray. "It's the most honest form of marketing I've found. If you're going to provide a home closing gift, why not give one that has lasting value, improves the homeowner's experience and brands you for two years? You could buy a \$50 Home Depot gift card for more money, but why brand a big-box retailer and cover part of a purchase when you can be the star for two years?"

Adds Steele: "A piece of art is a nice closing gift, but it doesn't allow for any agent branding or contact information when a friend asks for a referral. Homefree does the work of a closing gift and a two-year marketing plan all in one. It is the ideal long-term marketing plan for agents who want to stay top of mind month after month with a campaign that homeowners appreciate." **RE**