



MLS Standards: Can and Do Exist Norm, Convention or Requirement

By James Harrison, RCE, CAE
President and CEO, MLSListings Inc

The stereotype of standard bearers brings to mind scrunched faces peering through dusty bins of yellowed pages and worn, leather bound books solely for the pleasure of imposing restrictions and regulation.

But the truth is; when properly defined and communicated standards create relevance, efficiencies and exemplary service delivery. Comparatively, organized real estate has lagged to embrace standards of practice ... as a practice. This is not altogether surprising when you consider the make-up of organized real estate. We are a distinctive community of similar entities with individualized business models, attempting to unite, compete and cooperate. The industry is not represented by one company, but a collection of entities.

Establishing Standards

In the corporate, one company environment there is ISO, the International Organization for Standardization, which is the world's largest developer of voluntary International Standards. They state, "International Standards give state of the art specifications for products, services and good practice, helping to make industry more efficient and effective. ISO was created in 1947 and since that time, has published nearly 20,000 international standards covering various aspects of business and technology."

Comparably, the National Association of REALTORS® (NAR®) initially addressed the issue of standardization by creating "an environment for the development and implementation of real estate transaction data standards," with the creation of the [Real Estate Standards Organization or RESO](#).

The vision of RESO is to promote and enrich accepted data standards and processes utilized by all professionals in the fully automated real estate transaction through the [Real Estate Transaction Standard \(RETS\)](#). RESO focuses its efforts toward providing an environment for the development and implementation of data standards and processes that facilitate innovation, ensure portability, eliminate redundancies and obtain maximum efficiencies for all parties participating in the real estate transaction. RESO incorporated in November 2011 as an independent, not-for-profit trade organization after previously functioning as a section of the National Association of REALTORS®. The RESO membership currently resides at 64 charter members including NAR®, multiple listing services, real estate associations and industry technology providers. Specifically, there are RESO work groups tackling (data) Transport, Data Dictionary, Syndication, and Compliance.

With no pun intended, RESO is the ISO for real estate. And the beneficiaries of this creation and normalization of standards will be brokers and agents throughout the United States.

How Standards Serve

While real estate is local, its reach is global. To the buyer, seller or browser geography is not necessarily significant. For those brokerages with mobile clients or investors, standardizing data provides consistency and clarity in the transaction process no matter which state their office resides. And for the brokerage specializing in a hyper-local environment, standardization increases efficiency in a transaction that might involve more than one multiple listing service.

MLS Standards: Can and Do Exist *Norm, Convention or Requirement*

The data dictionary alone will mitigate confusion in transactions for brokerages no matter where they hold their MLS subscriptions.

The MLSListings Perspective About Standards

At MLSListings, we have put into action the adoption of data standards and best practices. Our culture is built on a broker-centric business model. We know that the broker is our customer and broker services must be reflective of the needs of our customers.

Our representation on the RESO board of directors as well as on the RESO Data Dictionary and the RESO Research and Development workgroups insures that we not only stay abreast of standardization efforts, but share the insights and opinions of the brokers who serve on our board of directors.

Currently, we have fully adopted and integrated the 1.72 Version of the RETS Specification into our MLS system. In addition, MLSListings is leading the way in being one of only seven MLSs nationwide that has proactively worked to adopt version 1.1 of the RESO data dictionary standards into our MLS System and one of only two MLSs nationwide to adopt these standards natively. In Q2 of 2014, MLSListings will have fully adopted and integrated the 1.8 Version of the RETS Specification into our MLS System. We have also been an industry pioneer surrounding standards by actively participating in the creation of the 1.2 version of the data dictionary and the 1.0 version of the API standard. MLSListings has also led the charge in submitting the first versions of Event Catalog standards which includes the Property Unique Identifier Standards.

The data standards and 2014 forthcoming API standards which RESO is promoting and we are adopting creates opportunities for more technology applications to be created for our customers. There are very few MLSs which adopt new standards and new technologies as fast as MLSListings does, so certainly those firms who choose MLSListings as their MLS of Choice will find a partner and resource which understands their needs and will work to create business efficiencies for its broker clients.

Beyond RESO, we take seriously our goal to operate similarly to a technical 'responsive design.' A design is labeled responsive when it can appear in tact in any browser or device format. Those websites which are responsive look as great on your iPhone as your laptop or iPad. At MLSListings, our services are *responsive* so that our quality is consistent in any number of broker formats---creating a standardization of services and value for the brokerages that rely on us as a platform for transactions and business resources. We also believe that as we operate according to standards, brokers and agents who meet at the MLSListings platform can more easily do business with each other during the transaction process.

Service Excellence

MLSListings is tech-fortunate; we sit in the lap of Silicon Valley which is the most technologically innovative area of the world. And as we sync with the technology culture, we see first-hand that technology and quality service must exist at the same levels.

Our belief is that MLS service standards must include an innovative mindset, as well. At MLSListings, we know that the only way to truly serve broker needs is to create mechanisms for extreme communications. That means we aggressively seek broker insight using a variety communications vehicles.

For example, many companies use focus groups. We have created the focus group on steroids, called MLSListening Tours. The town hall meeting format is designed to accomplish exactly

MLS Standards: Can and Do Exist *Norm, Convention or Requirement*

what the name suggests, *listening*. The meetings have no presentations, an extremely light agenda, and smaller groups of attendees so even the shy of heart are comfortable sharing. Staff captures comments on old-school note pads---no videotaping or audio recordings. The raw and real comments we receive are shared with our board of directors and staff for review. In some cases, policy is modified to meet an obvious need or to improve a service. This open forum style of non-judgmental communications is a fertile ground for learning and is a launch pad for creating advanced service.

We also use survey tools in brief, rapid response formats to capture opinions about specific industry issues, and we report that information back to subscribers. In addition, we continue to build our face-to-face communications efforts with broker and association office visits.

In visual communications, we have adopted the infographic to succinctly communicate statistics, trends and MLS-specific information to brokers and agents.

The information flow makes its way into our road map for products and services. We are not the experts in real estate transactions so we rely on our community of professionals for feedback about the tools they need to do business.

Looking Ahead

To work in tandem with RESO for the creation of standards is an honor and privilege for all of us who support the real estate industry. There will be those who are slow or resistant to change and feel that things should remain the same; the 'ain't-broke-don't-fix-it,' stance. But, frankly, when an industry is wrestling with its brand value, something is broken. When real estate professionals have to roll the dice in working between MLS platforms because of the lack of consistency, something is broken. And our inaction could lead to reactionary change, rather than strategically designed growth.

Standards of practice are not created to level a playing field or restrict business models, standards are created to fill the potholes in the playing field and build relevance to every business model.

We are not emerging from the dusty old stacks with cobweb covered books of standards; we are emerging as those who develop best practices for the sake of effectiveness and efficiency. When we get it done, we will fully live the definition of standards: norm, convention and requirement within the multiple listing service environments.

About the Author

James Harrison is a nationally recognized leader of MLSListings Inc, one of the largest multiple listing services in northern California. He is a 29 year veteran of REALTOR® Association and regional MLS management in the states of Texas, Virginia and California. He serves on numerous committees for NAR, RPR and the Council of MLSs.

About MLSListings

MLSListings Inc is the premier multiple listing service (MLS) and real estate search website in northern California, representing more than 16,000 real estate professionals, and promoting the listings of more than 65,000 real estate professionals. Learn more about MLSListings by visiting www.MLSListings.com.