

## The MLS Domains Association - On the Wrong Path

By: Cameron Paine, CEO of the Connecticut Multiple Listing Service, Inc. – 5/19/2010

Every MLS executive has dealt with non-industry use of the acronym “MLS” in web addresses. Simply by virtue of the fact that the public recognizes the MLS name as the source of real estate broker’s data, those three simple letters lend instant credibility to any web address that contains them. The problem, of course, is that because it is not a protected term in the United States, anyone can invent or buy a web address containing “MLS,” with, or without any relationship to our industry. We are not alone in dealing with this issue, as the web address [www.whitehouse.com](http://www.whitehouse.com) will attest, but it appears to play a large role in some markets.

According to the MLS Domains Association, they were created to “obtain, manage and promote the orderly use of the **.MLS** ‘top-level domain’” on the Internet. It is a worthy goal, but if their purpose is to overcome the problematic use of MLS in the .com environment by launching an entirely new **.MLS** domain, they are misguided in their expected results. (For more information, please visit [www.mlssdomains.org](http://www.mlssdomains.org)).

First, the problem exists in the .com environment. While it may make MLSs feel like we have more control by moving to a **.MLS** environment, the public that visits our websites is in the .com environment. Expecting the public to know, or care, to follow us to a **.MLS** domain assumes, improbably, that we can either change their behavior on the internet or control their point of access to real estate information. The former is highly unlikely, and the latter has been proven wrong. Ultimately, even if we do succeed in convincing the public to visit only **.MLS** sites, do we simply abandon the .com domain and cede it to the very problems we’re trying to overcome?

Secondly, the success of non-industry real estate web sites like Trulia, Zillow, etc., proves that the public cannot easily distinguish between good (e.g., accurate and timely), and bad real estate data. In fact, I suspect that the public believes that a site offering more listings is correspondingly *more* accurate. Therefore, sites that do not remove outdated listings are seen by much of the public as being more comprehensive because they have (outdated) listings industry sites don’t. If we have not been able to educate the public on this single core difference between MLS and non-MLS sites, how can we possibly expect them to care about the **.MLS** domain? The simple fact is that if we move to the **.MLS**, the public will continue to search in the .com environment for listings – just not on our MLS websites.

Thirdly, if the MLS Domains Association is unwilling to determine the rights of an MLS to a domain name by virtue of their geographic coverage, MLSs will be forced into the unacceptable situation of having to make defensive buys of domain names. For larger MLSs, buying every town in their area would be cost prohibitive, leaving the less scrupulous ones with the tempting option to snipe domain names they have no right to, but are not prohibited from buying by the MLS Domains Association. In effect, we would be trading an extra-industry problem for an inter-industry problem, but one with far greater negative financial impact on MLSs than the issue that led the MLS Domains Association to contemplate the **.MLS** in the first place.

Lastly, because it doesn’t stop people from using “MLS” in the .com environment, it’s a solution that doesn’t address the defect. As a result, we end up spending time, money, and resources on something that will not correct the problem.