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Web site aims to be condos' Rosetta Stone

Let's say you're looking for a condo.

Let's also say that you want a 2,000-square-foot, three-bedroom unit in a recently constructed building. It has to be within a half mile of the lake and less than a half mile from the "L." It must have deeded parking, with a manager on site and with no rentals permitted in the building.

And you want high-speed Internet access and a bike room. And your dog will be welcome and you want to be able to park your RV. And you want a fireplace. And ...

This is the stuff that makes real estate agents go mad. And more than a few condo shoppers, too.

So, here's a potential mental-health aid: A new Web site that lets city condo shoppers mix and match their whims and must-haves in order to narrow their search within the city's sea of condo buildings. As the site's developer puts it, it's a "convenience store" for condo buyers.

It's the brainchild of Chicagoan Ric Cox, who this month unveiled ChicagoCondosOnline.com, one of the more highly detailed real estate sites I've come across. It aims to be a Rosetta Stone for deciphering the city's condo buildings and the neighborhoods.

To an extent, it succeeds. Currently it contains 6,000 floor plans in 600 buildings, and highly detailed neighborhood and area maps, plus demographic information. It offers access to 2,000 condo declarations and 500 amendments as recorded by Cook County.

Among numerous other tailor-able features, it provides side-by-side comparisons of buildings, and contains prices for units that sold in 2004 within the buildings.

It's not free, but some buyers can get a lot of its content for free. That's because Cox is marketing it to real estate brokerages that will buy it and then provide it to their agents — who, in turn, will give their clients free password-access.

If you're not working with an agent whose brokerage has signed on with the site, monthly access costs \$29.95.

Even then, though, this "convenience store" has extra charges for certain information, such as \$50 for a recorded declaration, or \$10 for a floor plan.

As set up, you can't test-drive it to see if you'd want to shell out the \$29.95, though there is a "slide show" that offers a taste of the contents.

And though it has a staggering amount of information, it's hardly complete. Generally, the buildings in the database are the city's larger ones, 60 units and up.

"It represents the buildings that accounted for 50 percent of all sales in the city in 2004," explained Cox, a former magazine editor who began the project because he wanted to create a tool to reduce the frustration that he had felt in his condo hunts.

"I'm a condo buyer and I built it for me," he said.

And, pointedly, it doesn't have active listings. Those, for now, continue to be the province of the brokerages themselves and the multiple-listing services.

I can see its biggest attraction among the tire-kickers and day-dreamers who aren't ready to buy but want to do some homework so that they can tell an agent: "When you see a two-bedroom unit in Over-priced Arms that comes on the market, let me know right away. But only if I can park my RV there."

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