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Techno-file

MAN OF TOMORROW ON THE MOVE TODAY

Sky's the Limit for New-Breed Salespeople

The motto of the '90s salesperson might be "I beep, therefore I am."

Between pagers, cell phones, and E-mail, salespeople's physical ties to their offices are becoming as thin as a fiber-optic cable line.

In the next few pages, you'll meet a new breed of beeping, ringing salespeople who are as reachable as they are mobile: a Canadian whose Jeep might be confused with one of NASA's space centers; Prudential top producers who've been given a virtual warehouse of goodies to keep them away from the office; and several salespeople for whom E-mail means business.

They're capturing the future--and sales--with today's technology. Follow their sounds of success.

By Christina Spira

If you stepped into Jeff Stern's Jeep Grand Cherokee Limited, you might think you had entered an FBI undercover operation.

The vehicle is outfitted with a notebook computer, digital camera, video camera, TV screen, cellular phone, pager, and printer. "It looks like a cop car," admits Stern, of RE/MAX-Real Estate Inc., Winnipeg, Manitoba, who spends no more than one and a half hours a day in the office. Instead, he spends 50 hours a week tooling around with buyers, looking for sellers, and conducting his day-to-day business from his "bionic" real estate office on wheels.

"About five years ago--I've been computerized for 11 years--I thought, 'There's got to be a better way to keep up with the demands of the job,'" Stern says. That's when he added a removable desk to his Jeep to accommodate his notebook computer. "It sits on the transmission hump and bolts into a post. If I'm driving someone, I remove it."

But that was only the beginning . . .

Stern talks to Today's REALTOR® about what technology has meant to him.

How much has this technology cost in total?

I've spent close to \$12,500 [All dollars are Canadian.] on technology--probably about what I would have spent in the United States. But I've recouped that; my business has increased 25 percent since I created my mobile office. *(For more on his technological acquisitions, see "Jeff's Stuff.")*

Midway through 1997, my gross commissions were about \$60,000. My goal is to do 55 deals and come in at \$130,000 by year's end. The average sales price in my area is \$84,000-\$87,000.

I received my Accredited Buyer Representative® designation in January 1995 and work with buyers about half the time, though I'm trying to get more listings because that's the name of the game. I carry no more than 12 to 15 good ones.

In what unusual ways do you market yourself?

When I compete against other salespeople for listings, I make sure I'm the last practitioner through the door. That way, I have the chance to overcome any objections the sellers might raise because of what the other salespeople have said. I've blown a lot of salespeople away by doing that.

I recently paid \$1,500 to participate in a home show of merchants at a local mall. I rented a 10-by-20 space, drove the Jeep--with a nonworking computer, in case someone stole it--into the mall, and set up some pillars that read "Virtual Office" to show it off. I got about three listings and two sales from the event.

Have you removed the human element from selling by being so computerized?

I think when other salespeople first saw me toting around my computer, they thought, "Why don't you spend your time on the street and not on the computer?" Before real estate, I was in consulting, where the computer is your mainstay. Drop the computer and you're out of business.

The big thing right now is teams. I'm on my own. But no matter where I am, I'm reachable. And no matter where I am, I can access the Internet and the MLS. I can even pull land titles.

When I was driving around an out-of-town buyer, he pointed to a mansion that had been ravaged by fire. I was able to get information on the property while we were there. I did a land title search by address, found out who had the registered title, and contacted him. He didn't want to sell, but we found that out right away.

You've invested so much in your own business. How about hanging up your own shingle?

Although I'm taking a broker's course now, I don't think I'll ever go out on my own again; I had my own business for years as a marketing consultant. You're the boss, the accountant, and the chief cook and bottle washer. As a broker I'd be responsible for the finances and other salespeople. It's tough enough being a salesperson and handling the work that makes you money.

I pay my money every month. The office takes care of my receivables and my paperwork. My costs are fixed at about \$36,000 a year; everything else is profit.

Do you ever get tired of working out of the Jeep?

When I do, I can work out of my home or office. Mostly I enjoy being in the car. I'd get more tired of being in an office.

Jeff's Stuff

How much technology can you fit into a Jeep? A lot. Here are the specifics on Jeff Stern's mobile office:

Pager: Stern's pager is connected to his E-mail, care of a service provided by Fine Line Communications, so

he can receive E-mail (*jeff.stern@page.ca*) as well as phone messages without connecting to the Web.

"If somebody sends me an E-mail, the first 400 characters, including the person's name and phone number, appear on my pager," he says. Then he can call the person or prepare a package of information for mailing. However, he notes, "Since most people on the Web want information returned to them via the Web, I usually attach a file of information and respond the same way."

How helpful has E-mail been for Stern? He received an E-mail from a military prospect being transferred to Winnipeg who had also sent E-mail to three other salespeople. Not one of them responded. "He sent me an E-mail at 11 p.m.," Stern recalls. "And I phoned him right away. He was astounded. I signed a buyer's agent contract with him, sold him a home, and asked him for more business. I've had about four sales from those referrals."

Online forms: Stern uses an online home search form at his Web site (*www.jeffstern.com*), which buyers can use to provide information on the style of home they want, the area they desire, the price they'll pay, whether they've been preapproved, and the date they'd like to take possession, "so I know their motivation," he says.

He also has an online home evaluation form, which asks sellers for characteristics about their house so that he can do a CMA. Users can also be preapproved for a mortgage from his site.

"I'm planning to set up a referral network so that I can immediately forward forms to a trusted referral if the prospects are looking outside my market," he says. "Then the referred salespeople will send me a fee when the deal closes."

Computer: "My Toshiba notebook is secured to the removable desk with Velcro, so I can yank it off, throw it in a case, and go," he says of his ability to work on the fly. Adding to that mobility factor, Stern has loaded the computer with WINFax Pro, a PC faxing software, since a lot of people aren't yet on the Internet, and hooked it up to an HP-340 bubble jet printer. "My CMA format is on the computer, so with my wireless access cellular modem, I can reach the MLS, pull down the comparables, and print out hard copy right in front of the sellers' eyes," he says. "And I recently purchased a digital Polaroid camera, so I can download photos to the PC and print them out for marketing materials."

Color monitor: Because Stern finds that relocating buyers can't remember all the homes they've seen, he has attached a Watchman-sized Casio LCD color monitor, which plugs into a video camera, to a cellular phone post in the Jeep.

"With permission from sellers or listing salespeople, I videotape the homes I show buyers," he says. "Then I plug the camera with the tape into the LCD screen so that the buyers can sit in the backseat and review the houses we've seen. They can also take the tape to their hotel room. That way, I can sell them a house quickly to get out to the next guy."

For bored kids, Stern has "Sesame Street" and "Barney" videos. "Then the kids are happy, so the parents can concentrate on the task at hand," he says.

Software: Altaira, also known as MLS Windows, which is made by Wyldfyre Technologies Inc. (*www.wyldfyre.com*), gives him access to the MLS database; a CMA module allows him to do market evaluations; ASAP from Software Publishing Co. (*www.spco.com*) helps create presentations and reports; CorelDraw from Corel Corp. (*www.corel.com*) offers graphics capabilities; and Top Producer, for contact management, links to Altaira. "When I'm talking to prospects," he says, "I can toggle to Altaira to do a listing search and then toggle back to Top Producer, where I can record notes on their home interests."

Power supply: Stern has two DC converters that run off his car battery. "I don't know how many batteries I'll go through," he admits. "But so far it's working OK. I haven't replaced the battery in 14 months."

Home office: When Stern isn't in his Jeep, he's at his home office.

"I have a laser printer, laser fax, and Pitney Bowes copier," he says. "At the company office, I have a desktop Pentium, a fax, and a laser printer."

Send Calls, Faxes to Your E-Mail

You probably don't have a microchip implanted in your head to provide instant communication access, but you can make do in a mobile work world with communication technology that follows you from place to place.

If you're willing to be *this* accessible, JFAX Communications Inc. (310/966-1800) will assign you--in 24 hours--a fax-phone number that receives and routes voice and fax messages to your E-mail.

To get started, download the Los Angeles-based company's software supplied free at its Web site (<http://www.jfax.com>). It will enable you to read, file, and print incoming faxes (including graphics and signatures) or hear voice messages, provided you have a multimedia system with a sound card.

You'll pay \$15 for a phone line setup and \$12.50 a month for one line. Your first 100 messages or faxes are free, but after that you pay 20 cents per fax page or voice message. If you download the free JFAX/Send software, you can also send faxes from your E-mail. Faxes sent within the United States cost 10 cents a minute, and you'll be charged a minimum of 30 seconds for each fax. You must pay a minimum of \$10 up front, from which the company will deduct your costs as you use the service.

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