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# Entrepreneurs hope to bring computer dating principals to real estate sales

INSIDE TECHNOLOGY BY JON VAN

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Consumers soon may put the same kind of research and analysis into deciding where to buy or build a home as corporations do when looking for a site for a new store, predicts *Jack Dangermond*, president of the *Environmental Systems Research Institute Inc.*

Want to live near public transportation or an expressway? Prefer a neighborhood jam-packed with kids or one populated by older college grads? The answers to such questions could become a bigger part of home-buying within a few years, said Dangermond, whose California-based firm designs and develops geographic information systems, or GIS, technology.

"Some people want to live in a place with nice views," he said.

"Others are more concerned with good schools or general safety. Everyone's a little different. They can feed their preferences in a computer and weigh which are higher priorities than others. You do that now with houses themselves—how many bedrooms, how many baths. Why not do it with locations?"

The company held a conference in Chicago last month where attendees swapped ideas and described their companies' use of geographic-based computer modeling.

*Dave Miller*, director of geographic information services at *Walgreens* and a keynote speaker, showed how computerized maps with demographic and economic information enable the company to operate six drugstores within a square mile of each other in Lakeview.

A decade ago, computer programs providing such analysis cost hundreds of thousands of dollars and were accessible only to companies with deep pockets, Dangermond said. Today, any mom-and-pop business can go online and get a site analysis loaded with demographic, economic and marketing information for \$25.

"Walgreens and Starbucks still have their own models that tweak the information in ways they want," he said, "but a basic service for \$25 gives any small operator almost as much analytic insight as the big guys have."

While in Chicago, Dangermond talked to real estate industry representatives about setting up a Web-based service for home buyers.

"People already do this intuitively," Dangermond said, "but this service would open a lot of places to look they



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may not have known about or considered."

The average Internet user has become increasingly aware of geography's usefulness, thanks to such programs as Google Earth, which marry satellite photos with mapping information.

"The services from Google and Microsoft are very thin, but very broad," he said. "They enable others to overlay their own geographic-based information to provide some very helpful analytics."

Such awareness and familiarity could translate to benefits in the real estate sector.

"This won't be terribly different than online dating services," he said. "It's dating applied to real estate."

*Speed is critical:* Computerized financial trading has triggered a race among carriers who supply network connections.

"They have black-box trading, sending out trades on a constant basis," said *Richard Kingston*, chief of Westmont-based *Business Only Broadband*. "Microseconds can make a difference whether the trade gets filled at the price offered."

Kingston's company, which serves Chicago and New York using wireless technology, recently tested a network upgrade sending signals 14 miles between Evanston and a location on Cermak Road in Chicago and found the time the signal traveled was in the submilliseconds.

In seeking financial houses as customers, these performance results can be critical, Kingston said.

"We're competing with fiber," he said. "It depends on what kind of routing and regeneration you have, the electronics you use. In some instances, we may be faster. In others, fiber is faster. It's always a race."

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