

The Sag Harbor Express.

Simon Harrison is Happy to Be Local in a Digital World

By Annette Hinkle

It's an unavoidable fact of life — we live in an increasingly digital world and businesses of all shapes and sizes are scrambling to “take it on line” or up their social media game.

The real estate industry is no exception.

But as corporate real estate firms around the world shift their strategies by putting more resources into mobile and digital solutions, when it comes in selling houses Simon Harrison, owner of Simon Harrison Realty in Sag Harbor, still sees great value in being a local mom and pop operation.

On a recent blustery morning, Mr. Simon sat in his office on Long Wharf and checked a text message on his phone. It was from a client who had recently bought a home from him who was interested in coming by for a chat.

“She probably wants me to give her guidance on a pool guy or contractor suggestions,” says Mr. Harrison. “I think that’s a prime example of being available and knowing how to help people.”

Mr. Harrison, who has been a broker on the East End for 28 years, knows a lot about the local landscape. He began his career with Carl Marino at Harbor Cove Realty in Sag Harbor and recalls what it was like before computers found their way into the office.

“I may be talking like an old-timer, but when I started, we had index cards with pictures of houses on one side and contact information on the other side,” explains

Mr. Harrison. "It was manual filing. When a home was sold or rented you turned the card around and made notes on the back. I remember notes from 15 different pens, just like a library book."

But Mr. Harrison is by no means against progress and over his nearly three decades in the real estate business, he has embraced plenty of new innovations that have come along and changed the way things are done.

"Every five to seven years, there's been a disruption in the way the business worked, from data management to computer technology and systems," says Mr. Harrison.

"None of it felt foreign. My father was a computer scientist in the '60s – at the dinner table I understood there would be larger and larger changes coming."

Mr. Harrison adds that while technology has brought sudden and drastic changes to businesses like taxicabs and travel agencies, every business has an economy of scale that can be made more efficient by the use of computer technology — including real estate. But he cautions that even the most advanced digital systems can't make up for the experience that comes from using seasoned local real estate professionals to make the big financial decision of buying or selling a house.

"There's an accusation now that people in real estate are order takers, because buyers and sellers are much more educated than they were 28 years ago," he says. "But there's still no substitute for hard work. Computer technology can also get in the way of reality. You have to know your product and market — and digest and relay it properly."

"I think a lot of people are touting a technical platform, but if somebody from another type of business in New Jersey comes out here to do real estate, organically they will have a void in local knowledge which I think is vital in helping people make an effective decision," adds Mr. Harrison, who notes that ninety five percent of people who get real estate licenses are not in the business in two years.

"I have about a dozen brokers here, a lot of them have 25 plus years experience," he adds. "It's a lot of efficiency and everybody knows where Bay Point is."

But beyond having knowledge and experience of the area's geography and demographics, Mr. Harrison notes there is another big benefit to patronizing a truly local real estate firm.

"The money they earn gets spent locally. That means I get my signs from local sign makers. I get my provisions locally," he says. "There are exceptions, but when people are looking for a pool guy or a builder or engineer, or an architect familiar with the nuances of getting permits, or the importance of wetlands regulations, I refer them to someone who's out here."

Mr. Harrison's firm focuses on the Sag Harbor, North Haven and Noyac market, and he notes that much of his business comes from home sales in these areas, as well as the year round rental business, including people eager to get their children into the Sag Harbor school district. In 2014, two thirds of the units sold by the firm were between \$500,000 and \$2 million.

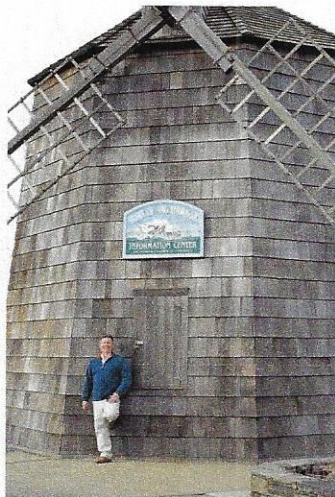
"Our market is mostly middle class homes and I think it's fair to say anyone who lives here year round sees my signs more than any others and those people reach out to me probably to a larger degree," he says. "The houses that we've sold in the last year include big new waterfront houses, tiny houses on nice pieces of property, rental properties — people who buy a house for \$750,000 to rent out year around — and the trade up houses."

While Compass, the newest player on the East End real estate scene, recently put out a press release in which Sag Harbor was referred to as an "important and increasingly popular sub-market in the Hamptons," Mr. Harrison doesn't feel there is anything second rate about where he lives and works.

"There are huge players [real estate agents] that do a \$100 million a year and I've done deals with all of them in the last year," he says. "I have a distinct impression that Sag Harbor is a market that brings the Hamptons together. We have a big year round population and we also have the boats and the sunset and the schools."

"I don't know how any of that could be of less than primary interest in investments involving money or quality of life," adds Mr. Harrison.

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Real Estate Broker Simon Harrison, photographed in his Sag Harbor office. Michael Heller photo.