

Clareity Consulting Profile:

# Onboard Informatics

Enhancing Real Estate Search with  
Enriched Community Content

February 2010



Clareity Consulting, Inc.

(480) 368-8100

[www.CallClareity.com](http://www.CallClareity.com)

## Who should read this paper?

- MLS Executives, staff, and leadership interested in enriching the information they provide their professional users within their subscriber-only systems
- Association Executives and MLSs that operate a public-facing consumer web site and wish to increase web traffic and provide more leads to their subscribers
- Brokers interested in offering additional information to their agents or adding content to their web sites to differentiate themselves from competitors, increase web traffic and provide more leads to their agents
- Real estate portals and technology providers seeking to enhance the localized content and neighborhood-level information that they provide

## Introduction

Clareity Consulting typically publishes multi-product, multi-vendor papers and case studies so our readers can learn about the competitive landscape in a certain product category or sector. This paper is more of an educational profile of a single information company that is established in real estate, media, and financial publications, but is fairly new to many of our clients. The company is Onboard Informatics (Onboard), which provides a wide variety of demographic, community, AVM, and other statistical information products that complement MLS listings. Clareity believes their offerings are timely for our industry.

Clareity Consulting has a 14 year history of recommending its broker, MLS, and real estate portal clients provide as much information as possible to their agents and to consumers. One example of this is when Clareity first introduced the notion of Automated Valuation Models (AVMs) to the industry at the CMLS meetings in 2002 and encouraged the industry to offer AVMs to agents as another tool to complement the classic CMA. Since consumers on public sites craved valuation information, why not have Realtor owned sites provide AVMs? Unfortunately, nobody listened and quite a few people thought we were nuts (that's a technical term) because AVMs would devalue the role of the agent and their CMAs and completely incense appraiser subscribers. Then, in January of 2006, Zillow launched a site that was initially completely focused on "Zestimates" (property valuations) and the industry woke up and took notice. Many people underestimated the consumer interest and demand for AVMs and chided Zillow for being inaccurate. However, Zestimates have improved (they should after tens of millions of dollars have been invested) and not only is Zillow here to stay, but today there are many sites that include some form of AVM for consumers, and agents have learned to cope with consumers armed with AVMs, accurate or not. The best agents even use AVMs preemptively to support their CMA, or at a minimum, to be prepared for the AVM armed consumer. AVM is now a classic example of the real estate industry

being forced into change because of consumer demand and an outside innovator. The type of data and functionality Onboard offers to MLSs now has similar importance.

Unless you have been on a sabbatical since November 2009, you have heard that NAR will launch the Realtors Property Resource (RPR) in mid 2010 to provide its REALTOR® members additional property, demographic, school, neighborhood, and sales analytics information. And yes, RPR will offer a “RVM” or Realtor Valuation Model that is intended to be an AVM on steroids by utilizing the freshest MLS information and the collective knowledge of real estate professionals to create a very accurate AVM. The quality of the RVM should improve over time if agents participate in adding local knowledge of properties and market conditions. The RVM is RPR’s primary product initially and will be available to REALTORS® and sold to lenders, government, and financial organizations. Much as the ‘statewide’ MLS initiative in California (calREDD) helped spur increased regionalization and cooperation among California MLSs, RPR is likely to inspire some MLSs to explore competitive solutions for demographic, neighborhood, school and AVM data for seamless integration into MLS solutions.

Given this background, there are several reasons MLS operators, brokers, portals and technology providers should be aware of Onboard’s products:

- Every MLS operator should want to offer their subscribers more information to remain relevant, add value for subscribers and compete with other MLSs. Onboard brings a wealth of scrubbed, standardized, valuable local content together in one place.
- Any company with a public site is competing for eyeballs. Rich content can have a positive SEO effect while creating customer interest and loyalty.
- RPR will offer a rich data set to REALTORS®, and some MLS operators may consider offering a similar depth of content to their subscribers within their MLS system or on their subscribers’ IDX sites, even if that MLS decides to partner with and link to RPR.
- Most MLSs have a substantial number of non-REALTOR® subscribers including appraisers, non NAR agents and brokers, lenders, and other affiliate members. These subscribers will not have access to RPR, so therefore innovative MLS operators can retain and attract subscribers by providing similar information to *all* of their subscribers.

Adding demographic, community, AVM, and other statistical information that complement MLS listings is a strategy Clarity recommends, and this short paper will help the reader understand how Onboard can be a good strategic partner in that effort.

## **Company History**

Onboard has been around since 2001 and is a growing and profitable company. Onboard was founded in Lower Manhattan in the wake of the September 11, 2001 attacks. Partners Marc Siden and Jonathan Bednarsh were fresh from MonsterData, a data and technology provider, which worked with companies such as Money.com to produce “Best Places to Live” articles. When Jon Bednarsh informed Money.com

of MonsterData's unfortunate demise because of the attacks, they insisted on building the relationship with the newly formed Onboard.

The two partners founded Onboard to satisfy a need in the real estate industry to transform local information on home sales, communities, schools and neighborhoods into powerful online tools for real estate professionals. They engaged information expert Peter Goldey, and what began as a three-person operation in an East Village basement is now a national company with hundreds of clients ranging from the largest residential retail brokerages in the country to small content developers. Onboard Informatics' major service markets now include brokerages, publishing companies, developers of websites and mobile applications, real estate portals, and several large regional MLS operators, including Connecticut MLS, RealComp II, and NJMLS.

### Onboard's Key Customers

Here are a few Onboard clients with instantly recognizable logos:



## **Why Did These Customers Choose Onboard?**

Every week, Onboard processes, cleans, and aggregates hundreds of data feeds from hundreds of local and national data sources. Each data source is filtered through Onboard's proprietary standardization processes improving data accuracy with their unique scripts and algorithms. Onboard's engineers combine multiple sources to create the best information on a single property, school, or community. From address standardization to code translations, Onboard constantly enhances its processes adding value to its content and services.

Onboard's data is also extremely granular, going beneath census tracts and block groups based on a set of processes developed over the last fifteen years. The Data Services team constantly monitors and modifies the area definitions provided to clients to reflect real world boundary and neighborhood changes.

Providing accurate, up-to-date data that drills down to the neighborhood and property levels and Onboard's ability to deliver content in a variety of flexible and functional formats made Onboard the choice for the companies previously listed.

Here is one example of how a customer improved their web site traffic and user experience by having Onboard's enriched data on its site:

NRT LLC, the nation's largest residential real estate brokerage, sought to enhance its online user experience for the Coldwell Banker Residential Brokerage California website. Together with the Onboard Informatics team, NRT was able to boost traffic to community and school reports by 160% through a custom enhancement of Onboard's Neighborhood Navigator solution. Subsequently, several other NRT companies have requested the same implementation on their sites.

"Consumers today expect comprehensive information from real estate websites," said Evan Cony, NRT's Manager of Internet Marketing. "By integrating Onboard's community and school reports more seamlessly into our sites, we have been able to deliver on that expectation."

## **Onboard as an IDX Provider**

Onboard also plays the role of an IDX provider to technology development companies and multi-MLS brokerages that wish to outsource IDX data management. The "Listings Web Service" provides unique property listing and community data search capabilities based on parameters beyond just listing attributes and amenities. The Listings Web Service plug-in enables national and regional real estate brokerages and web application developers to display Internet Data Exchange (IDX) for sale property listings through a single interface saving time, money and resources.

The service is designed to allow integration of IDX search capabilities into MLS approved agent and broker websites quickly and efficiently with consistent search across markets, allowing the customer more time to focus on branding and user experience. Onboard's listings web service content is directly integrated into the website's pages delivering the full benefits of search engine indexing & SEO optimization strategies, something a framed IDX solution cannot easily offer. Access to listings through Onboard's web service offers the flexibility to seamlessly integrate all Onboard's community data offerings, including community, school, neighborhood, geographic and other real estate data.

To obtain the IDX information, Onboard's team works directly with MLSs to understand their individual rules and regulations in obtaining and utilizing data feeds. Note that in order for clients to utilize this product, they must have appropriate MLS credentials and follow all MLS compliance rules in order to access, use, and display the respective MLS content.

### **Onboard's Web Service and API - Controversy and Confusion**

There are assumptions that providing content via a web service interface or application programming interface (API) means that there is "unfettered" access. On the contrary, because the data is provided in this way, rigorous security measures are in place.

For starters, in order to gain access to the web service, clients must first have an account that is established as a result of direct discussion with Onboard compliance staff –rather than just online sign-up. Second, in order to gain access to data, the account holder must have approved MLS credentials from an agent or broker with whom they are doing business. But it doesn't stop at the credentials; Onboard also validates each and every authorization request directly with the MLS prior to granting access to the data. The multiple layers of credentials ensure only authorized users are allowed in.

When credentials are created, the client must then request an encrypted software access token for each individual site that will utilize the IDX content. Generating a token requires a combination of three distinct "keys", two of which are randomly generated by Onboard.

Security goes further than this, though. In order for anyone to access the system, Onboard requires the specific IP addresses of the requesting servers in a "white list." This means that requests other than those from white listed servers are blocked.

For front-end websites (agent or broker sites) there is an added level of security as well. Each site has an individual tracking token that allows Onboard to audit usage. If site usage does not match the usage to the web service, Onboard can quickly isolate and cut off access from individual sites. This closed-loop system presents various "gates" to gain access and rigorous checks and balances to maintain access.

Beyond the security specific to the web service, the entire system is built on a system with strong technology-based and physical security. The management system is built on top of a system that boasts 24x7 security monitoring, network protection, secure transmission protocols (SSL 3.0/TLS 1.0) as well as

biometric scanning and multi-level physical access requirements. Also, all of Onboard's systems are hosted at a SAS 70 Type II Certified data center that employs security mechanisms required to fulfill HIPAA and Sarbanes-Oxley requirements for both physical and IT security.

Onboard treats MLS data and the access to it with top priority. The company has a devoted compliance team, multiple layers of security built into its systems, and evidenced by the choices the company has made in IT and data centers, the level of commitment to protecting the data is apparent.

### **Onboard's MLS Product Suite – MLS OneSource:**

Onboard provides a wealth of localized data to complement listing content and is an efficient 'one stop shop' for local content. This content is of high quality, delivered from hundreds of sources and put through rigorous quality control processes to provide clients with the most accurate data. Onboard offers a variety of solutions from fully customizable integration to easy plug-in search tools, designed to conform to the customer's branding, budget, and business.

Onboard can enable enhanced search functionality – tying basic property information into lifestyle and neighborhood related information culminating in enhanced search and listing display capabilities. This can be used inside an MLS application, a broker or agent tool, or on a public-facing web site. If the project is a public-facing web site, Onboard can help its customers build it effectively, enhance the overall search experience and provide SEO benefit and lead generation tools to achieve the objective of getting the agent more leads.

With a variety of content and service bundles and cost models, there is a solution for every budget. Customers can even engage with Onboard products and services with very low cost commitment profit share partnership (wholesale-retail) models.

Following is a concise overview of Onboard's data offerings:

#### **Community Profiles and Demographics**

Websites need more than just property listings for today's homebuyer. Onboard's community profiles and demographic data allows your visitors to see information beyond the basic property listing details and into the heart of the local community; cost of living, percentage of families in a neighborhood, the weather, crime rates, education, average income, population growth, and more. Onboard provides coverage across all of these categories for over 99% of total in the market place.

- Demographics
- Educational Climate Cost of Living/Relative Cost Index
- Consumer Behavior
- Housing Stability
- Employment and Finance

### **School Information with Schools Ratings and Parent Reviews**

Onboard offers detailed, comprehensive school profiles which go "beyond the numbers" to include a school's culture and skill set, state test scores, teacher profiles, and even the physical condition of the building which can be compared at a zip, address, city and state level. As exclusive partners with GreatSchools.net, Onboard provides invaluable information, allowing you to show your visitors first hand parental testimonies, far better than any statistics. Onboard provides coverage across 99%+ of total in the market place (95% of public schools), and through GreatSchools: 400,000 School Reviews and Ratings and 62,000 Parent Ratings with 5,000 - 6,000 updates per month. School reviews and ratings are updated semi-monthly. School profiles, test scores, and GreatSchools ratings are updated quarterly. Data covers the following:

- School Profiles
- NCLB State Test Scores
- GreatSchools Ratings
- School Ratings and Reviews

### **Market Information including Home Sale Trends and AVMs**

Onboard offers a full suite of information tools to give customers the full picture and increase buyer confidence. Recent sales transactions, market trends, and Onboard's Automated Valuation Model give consumers the pulse of their prospective community.

*Home Sales Trends* - Onboard's granular market trend and property reports, based on recent home sales data, get the consumer interested and educated. Onboard covers 90% of U.S. households at the county, zip code, and neighborhood level, showing average sales prices and price fluctuations from quarter-to-quarter and year-to-year.

*Automated Valuation Model (AVM)* - Onboard's AVM (automated valuation model) is a premium property valuation tool. Unlike typical AVM models that rely solely on nearby sales calculations, Onboard uses over 15,000 separate valuation models and algorithms to determine property values, with unique models for different regions of the country.

### **Points of Interest - Nearby Establishments with YELP! Ratings and Reviews**

Points of Interest are mapped to property listings to give the consumer an instant picture of their prospective community. Corresponding Yelp reviews and ratings bring the voice of the neighborhood to life.

Onboard provides coverage with access to over 4 million public and private local establishments nationwide across more than 60 categories including over 3 million Yelp Reviews, representing 99%+ of total in the market place. Categories include eateries, health care, shopping, places of worship, personal service, banks, travel, government and more.

Monthly updates of establishments and weekly updates of reviews ensure the most recent information possible.

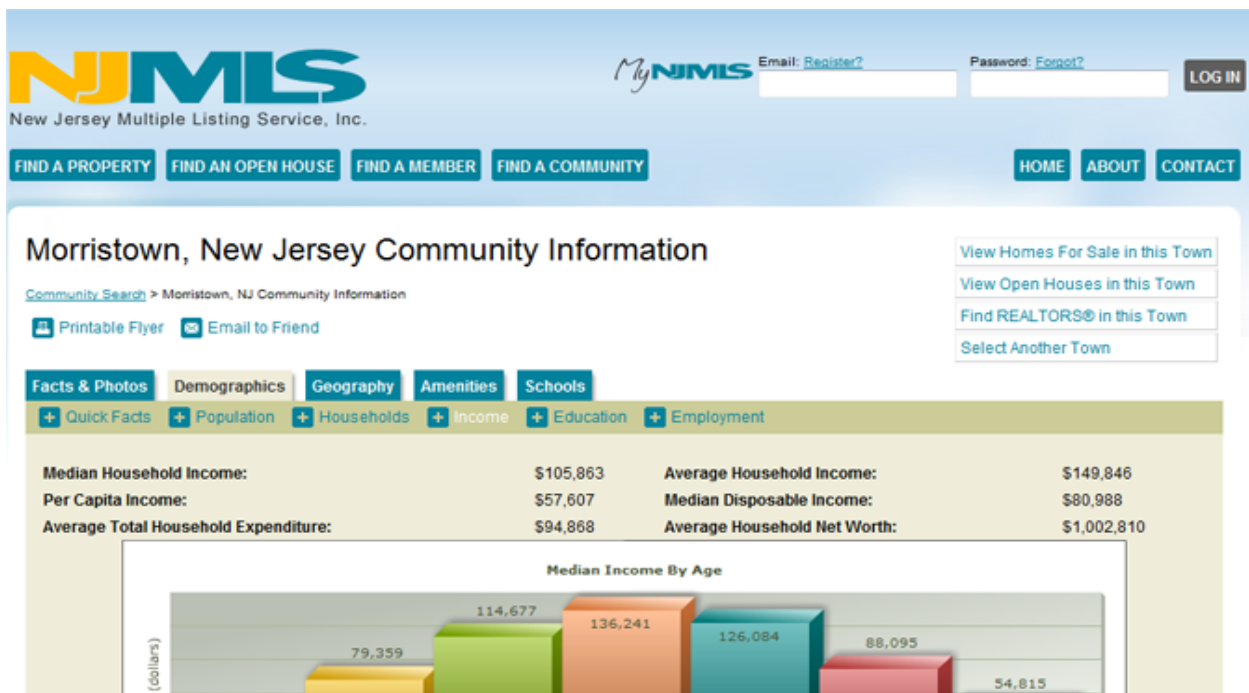
### **Neighborhood Level Information**

We all live in neighborhoods, not zip codes, so why do most real estate sites only have the capacity to search by zip codes or addresses? Neighborhoods define people and the way they live, whether it's SoHo in NYC or SOMA in San Francisco. Onboard provides coverage of 99%+ of total in the market place in the U.S. plus 116 Canadian markets and 2,000 Canadian neighborhoods. Companies have the ability to create their own neighborhood definitions. Onboard can deliver neighborhood files that are compatible with Google Earth, MapInfo, and Arcinfo among other formats for custom mapping.

*Onboard's Neighborhood Boundaries* - allows companies the option to define a community through Onboard's advanced polygon layering. Neighborhood Boundaries is the perfect solution if you are looking to dominate a hyper-local market or to differentiate your site to win over picky searchers looking for sharp functionality.

*Onboard's Neighborhood Mapping* - provides polygons for all of its neighborhoods. These boundaries files can be used to draw the shapes of distinct neighborhoods and mark off every neighborhood in a marketplace and pin-point local listings, recent home sales, nearby schools and businesses to the map. They are designed to help clients build custom search, content and display solutions that tie in their own content for any type of neighborhood map.

The following illustrates Onboard's community, amenity, school and demographic content integrated in an MLS public web site:



Tina Griffin, CEO of NJMLS said, "We are pleased with the rich content Onboard provides us and have found them to be a very professional group to work with."

## **Real Estate Customer Quotes**

Following are additional quotes obtained from some of Onboard's real estate customers:

"We consider the Onboard team not just a data provider, but a strategic partner that has provided invaluable insight into our product implementation." -Helen Galasso, Vice President of Interactive Marketing, Coldwell Banker Real Estate, LLC

"What I love about working with Onboard is that they share our core values and work ethic. Unlike other partners who sometimes brush you off, their team listens to our needs and are always very responsive." –Karin Slaughter, Director of Business Operations, Z57

"Sometimes I find Onboard is paying more attention to our needs than we are." –Mayur Raichura, VP of Application Development, Long & Foster

"Our customer base is the type that wants to be on the cutting edge. Onboard's data gives us the advantage of being progressive and generating loyalty among our clients' consumers." –Morgan Carey, President/CEO, Real Estate Webmasters

"We chose Onboard's data for our public web site because it was the most cost effective solution we could find. The data is kept current and we recommend that our MLS subscribers use the school data as well as provide it for consumers." - Cameron Paine, CEO, Connecticut MLS

## **Conclusion**

Clareity has had the opportunity to work with Onboard on a few projects involving other consulting clients and is pleased to see the company develop products and services for the MLS industry. Onboard is an innovative company that is committed to the real estate information industry and one of only a handful of companies that can dramatically improve the online offering of an MLS, broker or agent web site with a single-source set of robust content and tools. Onboard's data and tools deliver a competitive advantage and differentiation for its customers.

Onboard has clearly demonstrated its integrity and willingness to respect and work within the established rules of MLS and IDX nationwide. The company has also had the same ownership and senior management team since its inception, so their stability as an information partner is refreshing. In summary, Clareity Consulting feels confident that Onboard is one of the "good guys" in our industry and can be a trusted partner. As an independent consulting firm, we encourage our clients to take a closer look at companies like Onboard that can upgrade the information offering for an MLS, Association, broker, and agent and improve the consumer experience and professionalism of our industry, while

keeping the real estate professional ahead of the curve, and your organization on pace or ahead of the competition.

If you are interested in more product information or pricing for your organization, you may contact Onboard via:

Kim Cipriano Prior  
Director of Market Development, MLS  
Onboard Informatics  
646.747.4396 Direct  
[kprior@onboardinformatics.com](mailto:kprior@onboardinformatics.com)  
[www.onboardinformatics.com](http://www.onboardinformatics.com)