

“We refuse to buy into it”: Has StreetEasy finally gone too far with its latest fee?

Even as Premier Agent backlash grows, brokers remain wary of Agent Spotlight

By [Meenal Vamburkar](#) | March 22, 2019 07:00AM



Steep fees and logistical hurdles has kept agents skeptical of the StreetEasy's Agent Spotlight program (Credit: iStock)

Every new StreetEasy fee spurs a familiar cycle among brokers: outrage, pay up, rinse, repeat. But its latest program, designed to appease some of those worries, may break the cycle.

In the two years since [Zillow Group](#) launched its Premier Agent program on StreetEasy, it's been a persistent source of frustration for the city's brokers. To assuage their concerns — and bring in additional revenue — the company launched another initiative this year, dubbed Agent Spotlight. It allows brokers to bypass [Premier Agents](#) on their listings. But the steep fee, logistical hurdles and general mistrust of StreetEasy has kept agents skeptical of the program, industry players said.

“It doesn't seem to be on the radar of people I work with,” said [Elizabeth Ann Stribling-Kivlan](#), president of Stribling & Associates. “I'm sure there are people using it, but agents I work with are sick and tired of being charged for new things every day.”

Through Agent Spotlight, brokers can pay — [\\$333 per listing per month](#) — to post sales listings that will only feature the listing agent's name and photo, and will not display contact information for a Premier Agent. The initiative, which rolled out in February, quickly drew criticism from brokers, who disliked the idea of paying for their own listings, to Premier Agents, who worried the the [value of the program would](#)

be diluted.

While the program is still new, agents said they're wary of the value of it provides, especially given the price tag. Stribling-Kivlan noted that it's not a program the brokerage will provide to agents, but that she hasn't been approached by agents who want to partake either.

Similarly the co-founders of [broker advocacy group NYRAC](#) — Compass' Heather McDonough Domi and Sotheby's International Realty's Cathy Taub — said they haven't seen much interest in the program. But at the same time, agents have grown more frustrated with the StreetEasy's recently tweaked contact box on listings, which many brokers feel further obscures the listing agent's information. In January, StreetEasy said the contact box "has been redesigned to educate buyers about buyer's agents and provide Premier Agents with more quality and better-informed leads."

Malessa Rambarran, of Halstead's Milano-Rambarran team, said she's seen an effect on their listings from the tweak. Their listing at 270 Water Street in Manhattan, asking \$1.5 million, has seen fewer direct inquiries through the site. But Rambarran and her partner Candice Milano aren't looking to Agent Spotlight as a solution.

"We feel that it's directly impacted us but we refuse to buy into it," Rambarran said. "It feels like a waste of our marketing dollars."

Instead, the pair is looking at other approaches to boost leads outside StreetEasy. They're focusing largely on social media to attract younger consumers, Milano said. And also on networking and publicity they get through their group, The Organization by Women in Real Estate, or TOWRE.

Some brokers are already buying into other StreetEasy products and see no need to change. Steve Snider, an agent at [CORE](#), said he prefers to stick with paying for Featured Listings and the Building Expert tools. Both have driven more traffic to his listings, he said. And the Pro account, for \$75 per month, is a relatively cheap way to access detailed analytics. Snider also tried Premier Agent for six months but said it wasn't worth it after "just barely" breaking even on the investment.

Not to mention, Agent Spotlight is only available to agents who manually enter their listings, through StreetEasy's Listing Tools, while many of the city's top firms — including the Corcoran Group and Compass — automatically feed listings to StreetEasy via their own back-end systems. If brokerages aren't going to change their model, agents would have to go against their firms' wishes to use the program, Snider said.

"It accomplishes what agents want, to you have your own listings," he said. "But it compromises your relationship with your firm."

For its part, StreetEasy noted that the program is still new. "It's still early," a spokesperson said. "We're

happy with the early engagement and adoption we've seen."

In 2018, Premier Agent accounted for \$898 million in Zillow's revenue — an 18 percent increase over the \$762 million the program generated in 2017, but changes to the program led to [slower-than-expected growth](#) and coincided with a change in leadership.

StreetEasy, whose parent firm still depends on Premier Agent even as it [pivots to a homeflipping model](#), declined to provide any specific data on Agent Spotlight.

It's possible that Agent Spotlight may appeal to brokers who are newer to the industry or have a lower volume of business that they're trying to maintain, agents said. [Compass'](#) Leonard Steinberg noted that it could help brokers who are starting out to gain visibility. Similarly, [Douglas Elliman's](#) Fran Katzen said the "new crop" of brokers may choose to opt in.

"It's so competitive," she said. "Some of the younger agents who don't have much to lose and have an ad budget to pay for it will stick with it."

But for lower end listings, the cost may outweigh the benefits.

"It's difficult to know what value it delivers until it delivers," Steinberg said. "You have to make sure your brand associations are aligned with your own personal brand."

For all the griping about the ways StreetEasy monetizes its services, a few agents noted that it's simply [the cost of doing business](#). Paying for advertising and investing in yourself isn't new in the real estate business, said CORE's Elizabeth Kee.

"Some people don't feel like investing in your own personal business is part of this job," she said. Especially in New York, where firms may provide marketing budgets, some agents may be reluctant to invest their own money, Kee added. But "you're the CEO of your own company as a real estate agent."

Reba Miller, a broker at Berkshire Hathaway HomeServices, shared that sentiment. She recalled paying \$24.90 per line for an ad in the New York Times in the 1990s, noting that agents were upset then, too. "When the Times was the only game in town, everybody felt the same way," she said. Although Miller hasn't tried out Agent Spotlight, she said she's not ruling it out if she takes on listings she feels may benefit from it.

"Unless you had blinders on, none of this should be a surprise," she said. "Whether we like it or not, they're here to make money."

Tags: [Premier Agent](#), [streeteasy](#), [zillow](#)



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