

AGENT

This weekend will be 'bellwether' for open houses in the spring

Agents Inman spoke to haven't yet seen clients abandoning things like open houses. But handshakes may be going out of style, and some believe the worst is yet to come



Image by: KLH49 and Getty Images

BY **JIM DALRYMPLE II** | Staff Writer

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When Joel Moss held an [open house](#) two weeks ago, the [coronavirus](#) didn't seem like much of a threat. A Warburg Realty agent in Manhattan, Moss told Inman that about 15 groups of people toured the property, which Moss described as a “very typical New York spring market.”

was really taking it seriously.”

At another [open house](#) one week later, though, things had changed.

“At this one everyone was sort of in agreement that we were not going to shake hands,” she said.

Moss mentioned that the [open house](#) was still well attended. And she hasn’t seen dramatic moves in [New York’s](#) real estate market thanks to the worsening spread of the [coronavirus](#). But, clearly, the tone is changing. The virus is looming.

The past two weeks of open houses that Moss held consequently highlight how quickly things can shift, and suggest that when it comes to basic practices like open houses, the worst may still be yet to come. In fact, according to multiple agents who spoke with Inman for this story, the coming days may ultimately be the first real test that pit tantalizingly low interest rates and high demand against [what officials are now calling a pandemic](#).



Joel Moss

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“This weekend will be really telling,” said Moss, who is already liberally using Clorox wipes to wipe down her properties during open houses.



couple of weeks. His open house on March 1, he told Inman, was “very, very healthy.” The second, on March 8, got off to a slower start before picking up, though he attributed that more to daylight saving time kicking in than to the [coronavirus](#).

Steven Gottlieb

But as was the case with Moss, the virus is exerting an influence.

“There’s no doubt about it,” he said, “I’m now seeing people bump elbows.”

Gottlieb is still planning to hold open houses in the near future. But he pointed out how quickly news has been developing — events such as NBA basketball games are being canceled, the stock [market is swinging wildly](#), all of Italy is now on lockdown — and said that the coming days may begin to show the extent of the virus’ real impact on real estate.

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“I feel like strangely enough, next week’s open house, this coming Sunday’s open house, might be a little bit of a bellwether,” Gottlieb added, effectively agreeing with Moss’ take on the importance of the next several days.

Angela Morsa’s experience offers a glimpse into what may await the broader industry on the other side of the coming weekend.



as well as a school district [closure](#) — which happens to be near one of Morsa’s listings. And unlike the agents in New York, who said conditions were on the whole still copacetic, Morsa explained that while inventory is low and demand high, “everything seems so quiet right now” in her area.

Angela Morsa

“We’re worried,” she added. “I’m genuinely worried about the spring market.”

Given the proximity of coronavirus cases, Morsa on Wednesday began marketing virtual showings. Basically, she is offering to do a live video chat with clients via FaceTime or other software as she walks through properties. The whole point is to minimize contact between people, and Morsa said that clients have been supportive of the idea.

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“I talked to a seller and said, ‘would you mind if we found a way to do virtual showings,’” Morsa recalled. “And she said, ‘no, I think that’s a great idea.’”

More significantly still, unless clients absolutely demand them, open houses are basically out of the question.

“I’m not doing open houses right now,” she said. “If I were a seller, I wouldn’t want 100 people in my house right now. So I don’t think I’m going to be recommending that we have an open house.”

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other agents that when it comes to the pandemic, the future could be challenging.

“I definitely think things are going to get worse before they get better,” she said.

Of course, not every agent in every part of the country is bracing for disaster. Tiffany McQuaid — president of Naples, Florida, brokerage McQuaid and Company — told Inman that she sat in on an open house last weekend. Attendance was good and “every single person who came in shook my hand” — which she described as surprising. Elsewhere in her community, restaurants are full and she hasn’t “noticed anyone hunkering down.”

Still, the virus is a presence.

“I just think it’s going to cause everyone from this point forward to probably think through things a little more and be a little more cautious,” she said.

The coronavirus has also made it into McQuaid’s marketing; in her office she is giving away Hershey’s kisses in place of increasingly verboten hugs, and is offering a free condo — with the purchase of a bottle of Purell for \$368,000.



Coronavirus marketing materials at McQuaid's office in Florida. Credit: Tiffany McQuaid

McQuaid's marketing has been well received, she said, and is meant to help soothe people's fears. And it reflects prevailing attitudes in her community toward the virus.

But the takeaway is that even for agents who at this point haven't felt the need to cancel their open houses or avoid their clients, the virus is everywhere. It's pervasive.

And that pervasiveness is likely to continue.

Jim Lee is the co-owner of a [RE/MAX](#) franchise in the Portsmouth, New Hampshire, a state that as of Wednesday had five confirmed cases of coronavirus. But Lee told Inman that he hasn't yet seen much impact from the virus and plans to have open houses for a pair of new listings "as soon as possible."

Jim Lee



And in many ways it is, with Lee saying that people are still shaking hands and overall he expects conditions to stay strong.

But with no sign of the virus is disappearing soon, even Lee agreed the coronavirus and the real estate world may be on a collision course.

“I can’t see how it won’t impact it,” he said. “The question is to what degree.”

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