

MANSION



SPREAD SHEET | SANETTE TANAKA

FANCY LISTING, FANCIER VERBIAGE

The pricier a house for sale, the lengthier the marketing language used to try to sell it; the risk of avoiding ‘empty enthusiasm’ words

SAVVY REAL-ESTATE agents know it's not just what you say. It's how long it takes you to say it.

More-expensive homes go hand-in-hand with longer real-estate agents' remarks—the language written by the agent that supplements the house description and photos in a listing. Agents use a median 250 characters for homes listed under \$100,000, according to an analysis for The Wall Street Journal by real-estate listings company Zillow. For homes priced over \$1 million, they go nearly twice as long, with a median 487 characters. (That's about the length of this paragraph.)

“Generally, what you find is that regardless of the region, the more expensive the home is, the more characters are used to describe that home,” says Stan Humphries, chief economist at Zillow.

Zillow examined the length of agents' remarks by counting the number of characters, including spaces, in all active listings as of April 4. Some local multiple-listing services limit the number of characters allowed, but Zillow says the vast majority of local limits exceeded the median character counts found by Zillow.

Agents write shorter remarks for lower-end properties because they tend to have less square footage and fewer features, says Jeff Burns, a real-estate agent with Royal Shell Real Estate based in Sanibel and Captiva, Fla. “There's not as much to describe,” he says.

Mr. Burns reserves longer remarks for his more expensive

listings, though his local MLS caps remarks at 700 characters. For properties over \$500,000, he says, “I generally try to max out.” He shifts from flowery descriptions to hard statistics, like square footage and number of bedrooms. The final sentence is part teaser, part pitch: “Enjoy your little slice of paradise,” something like that. End on a good note,” he says.

It may not matter—41.5% of home buyers didn't read the remarks at all in online listings, according to a recent study by Michael Seiler, professor of real estate at the College of William & Mary. That said, remarks become more important once

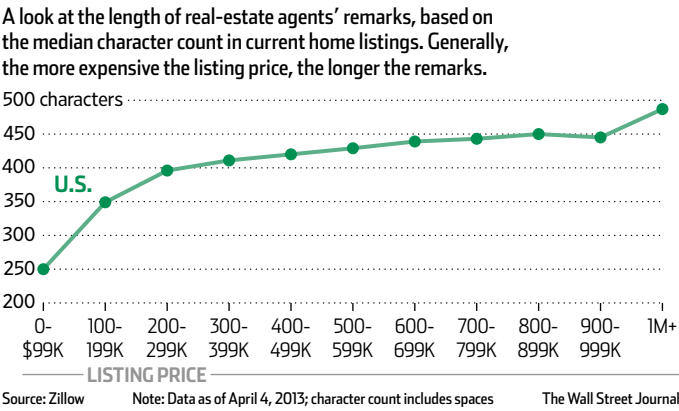
home buyers narrow down their list of potential properties, he notes.

To make the most of his character allowance, Mr. Burns focuses on the pertinent details first and trims out the fat, like using “2bdrm” instead of “two bedrooms,” he says.

That's fine, says Mark Liberman, a linguistics professor at the University of Pennsylvania, but too much shortening might confuse readers, like “vw” for “view.”

Writing long for pricier homes has become standard practice in real estate, Mr. Liberman says. In fact, a short remark or a lack of hyped-up adjectives could suggest that there's something wrong with the home, he adds. “Given that all the descriptions of better properties are full of these empty-enthusiasm words, it might be interpreted by readers as an indication of problems if they're absent,” he says.

The Worth of Words



SO MUCH TO SAY The 696-character description of this Captiva, Fla., home listed for \$4.895 million praises its ‘sprawling breezeways’ and ‘abundant bay views.’ The property went into contract after 38 days for \$4.3 million.

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