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AAG taps tech to build 2,700-strong team, close deals speedily

BY CHARLENE CHIN

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When a computer crunches troves of data, its machinery purrs, sometimes the only indication that it is hard at work. But underlying that is a complex ecosystem of distinct parts, each relying on others to function: The processor acts as the central nervous system, ensuring each activity runs well; the RAM determines the speed at which each event unfolds; while the motherboard functions like a home, accommodating all the components.

The Apex Achievers Group, better known as AAG, operates much like the computer system: A well-run, intricate web of components. Led by Lester Tan, the group is the largest division under OrangeTee & Tie (OTT), comprising 2,700 property agents under its care as at Aug 19. Heavyweight leaders who have joined the group include Jeffrey Sim, who specialises in the sale of Good Class Bungalows; Elson Chia, who works on the high-end property market segment; and Lawrence Tan, whose focus is on new launches.

Key to its fast expansion, the leaders of AAG attest, has been the app coded by Tan from scratch. Called InstantPro, it is Tan's pet project that is 14 years in the making. The app enables agents to access data on property listings nearby, across asset types like condominiums, landed housing, HDB, commercial or industrial. Tan, who had worked as a software programmer for a decade before switching to real estate, tries to solve challenges that realtors face in the field, incorporating them as in-app features.

"Each leader has his own strength and while I'm like the technology arm of my group, I still depend on others," says Tan, who is a senior associate executive director at the firm. "When the entire team comes together, it forms an ecosystem, and that's how we grew very fast," agrees Perry Siow, an existing AAG leader who is responsible for the training and growth of agents. When the group first started, it had only three

people, including Tan.

Notwithstanding leaders with unique strengths, AAG has its own in-house media production team of five people — all real estate agents — who are in charge of scripts, photos and video shoots. In a time when everyone is glued to their phones, marketing properties online has been a surefire way to increase the reach of a listing.

With just a 'tap of the phone'

Today, social media caters to the short attention span of a wider audience, and the preference of having instant gratification has also spread to potential homebuyers. "The patience of customers today is getting shorter and shorter. They want information now," says Tan. This comes across as problematic when agents go into a conversation with a client but are only able to talk about what they prepared for, such as information on a specific property. But conversations are fluid, and may steer towards other properties too, he notes.

To that end, the app is able to pull up suitable resale and new launch listings within three clicks, allowing agents to showcase alternatives instantaneously. Designing the user interface to access any feature within three clicks, explains Tan, is "the easiest way to get people to adopt technology".

Indeed, the function has helped AAG's agents close deals swiftly. Tan recounts one of his agents who managed to convert a potential buyer who was keen to purchase a 1,001 sq ft, HDB resale in the Dawson neighbourhood at \$850,000, into purchasing a 635 sq ft unit at Stirling Residences instead, which costs \$1.22 million. This all happened within the same day.

"We go in with just our app in our hands. And whatever property customers ask us about, we just tap our phones and we are able to engage the customer in any conversation across all market segments," says Tan.

"I always tell my agents that the moment the buyer rejects your property, you must be equipped to recommend another property nearby," Tan notes. "Gone are the days when you

can let a buyer go back home and assume he will wait for your follow-up call. Today, buyers are all so empowered. The moment you let them leave the door, they will already find what they want. And you already lost the opportunity."

In a way, this line of thinking guides AAG's current strategy. "We do not park our agents in a showflat, because if you do that, you are waiting for walk-in customers, which is a very thin crowd today," he says. "Instead of waiting on customers, we go out and look for homebuyers who are keen on purchasing resale properties, and we convince them to buy a new launch project," he says. The app helps bolster the sales pitch by providing hard data on the purchase of a property, which may include past transactions within close vicinity and macro property trends.

There is also an integrated calculator function within the app that enables agents to punch in numbers and come up with a solution for the client. This helps when they are advising customers who reside in HDBs on how to purchase a private property, the segment of buyers otherwise referred to in the industry as HDB upgraders.

The calculator function will take into account a client's financial constraints and the financial risks involved. Its solution will also include a financial prudence feature which shows how long a homebuyer can juggle his debt obligations and lifestyle should he lose his job. This in-app feature is especially helpful for new agents who are not familiar with financial planning, says Tan.

Harder times; easier sales

Even though the economy is downbeat, Tan reveals that closing deals has actually been easier for the team. "We notice that buyers today are more willing to explore buying property, because they are under the impression that this is the period where they can pick up some good deals," says Tan, adding that they are also "enticed by the low-interest environment." On the other hand, "sellers are also more realistic in

their pricing," says Tan.

This is in contrast before the pandemic hit, when sellers' expectations were higher, and buyers were more resistant, he says.

When the "circuit breaker" measures took effect on April 7, AAG came up with a business continuity framework after three days. "We spelt out exactly how an agent can transit from a physical world into a virtual world to continue their business," says Tan. Among the initiatives launched include the service of digital signatures and a point-to-point courier service, where physical documents and cheques could be ferried to-and-from customers. In fact, "we were closing deals right at home," he says.

To overcome the challenge of not being able to view properties physically, AAG also provided video services to homeowners looking to sell their properties, for just \$10. "We came up with a video to teach the owners how to shoot their house for us. After sending us the raw footage via WhatsApp, we would edit the videos together, add a professional voiceover and music, and host it on YouTube and Facebook," says Tan. Such a move resulted in one of AAG's agents selling three landed properties during circuit breaker. The deals, at \$7.94 million, comprised one bungalow and two semi-detached homes.

In the future, Tan believes that the number of agents will shrink over time. "We're going to enter into a future where more and more technology companies will try to displace agents." Already, PropTech companies are sprouting up, trying to streamline complex real estate processes. For instance, co-living, which is a way of renting homes on flexible terms without dealing with agents.

"It's a tall order, but we see ourselves as the defendant against tech disruptors. Instead of getting cut out of the process, we will constantly build technology to make ourselves relevant to the market and stay ahead of the competitors," says Tan. Together with its new members, and armed with tech know-how, AAG, like an elaborate but well-oiled machinery, whirrs on. ■