



If you didn't get a chance to see the Google View car which drove through city streets last year, make way for the ViewPoint Realty camera car. ViewPoint vice-president Mike Smith, left, Mike Cairns, vice-president of technology, and Bill McMullin, founder and CEO, stand by the 2010 Kia Soul with their street view camera attached. (ERIC WYNNIE / Staff)

Real estate's new ViewPoint

Bedford entrepreneur launches online property brokerage

By **BILL POWER**
Business Reporter

ServicePoint Inc., the technology and online services company headed by Bill McMullin of Bedford, has created some buzz in the regional real estate scene with a move into the online brokerage business.

"The dynamics of this industry and of the online technology involved is endlessly fascinating and a perfect challenge for our engineering team," the entrepreneur said of the recent launch of **ViewPoint Realty**.

ViewPoint is Nova Scotia's first — and arguably Canada's first — virtual real estate office.

As with similar operations in the United States, such as **Red Fin**, visitors are asked to register and then have access to a boatload of information de-

signed to advance the property purchase and sale process, including virtual neighbourhood tours and views of homes for sale.

Most importantly, visitors have access to the industry's coveted Multiple Listings Service.

"We are a licensed brokerage and... can provide all the information that a traditional real estate agent can provide; we just provide it in a different way," said Mr. McMullin, founder and CEO of the operation.

ViewPoint launched its Beta online site quietly on Dec. 9 and had about 20,000 specific property searches on its system by the end of the month.

The real estate operation, which pays its licensed Realtors a salary, not a commission like most real estate companies, is a subsidiary of ServicePoint, and

Mr. McMullin, who sold his **InfoInterActive Inc.** business to **America Online** in July 2001 for \$43 million, has national aspirations.

"We've invested heavily in the technology that drives ViewPoint and believe it has huge potential in markets outside of Nova Scotia," he said.

There has been quite a bit of chatter in real estate circles about the implications of a virtual brokerage setting up in the region, but Linda Smardon, president of the Nova Scotia Association of Realtors, said the industry is used to change and also to the increasing technical capabilities of consumers.

"The industry followed its traditional business model up until the early 1990s, and since then has been in a constant state of change," she said.

Mr. McMullin said the concept behind ViewPoint (which has no affiliation to a U.S. operation with a similar name) is that many of today's consumers are comfortable with the tech-

nology and keen to handle details of their real estate transactions themselves until they are ready to complete the deal.

"We do not contact people who register online, but we do expect that some will come to us to advance the transaction after using our information services."

He said the business model is to profit by offering information and by attracting listings — the lifeblood of the industry.

Realtor Mark Stein of **Priority One Property Limited** has a significant online presence in the Halifax-Dartmouth region and suggested no amount of technology can replace the professional skills of a good real estate agent.

"In the end, for many people the decision to proceed with the sale of a home is an emotional affair and they appreciate professional and personal support.

"Technology can do a lot, but it cannot close the deal," he said.

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