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Family believes it has a winning formula in HomeLink

Residential real estate venture has market obstacles

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KATHLEEN CABBLE

Pam Kauten and her sons, Adam and Nick Kauten, in their new business venture, Florida HomeLink.

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TAMPA -- Pamela Kauten could have easily retired after selling Florida CareerLink last year, an online job-finding database she founded in 1997 with her husband.

But who has time to retire when there's a new company to run?

Kauten, along with sons Nick and Adam Kauten, is hoping to emulate past successes by applying the technical concept behind Florida CareerLink in a new company, **Florida HomeLink**.

"We already had a winning concept, so why not do this for real estate?" said Pam Kauten from the Westchase office space that was used by CareerLink before its sale last year to **RegionalHelpWanted.com** in Poughkeepsie, N.Y.

Right time, right market?

Florida HomeLink is already online, but it still has a lot of room to grow.

It has just four employees as well as a pair of contractors who work on the Web side. The company is just starting to find real estate practitioners, such as Heidi Joy and Tim Kizer, looking to buy in and feature properties on the site.

"The way our system works, there are literally over 100 Web sites that we get linked to when we upload properties," said Heidi Joy Kizer, who along with husband Tim Kizer, practice real estate in Palm Harbor. The Kizers are listed as featured agents on HomeLink, but that's because the agency they work for, Future Home Realty, is a HomeLink client.

While there can never be too many ways to seek out buyers, Kizer said she's worried that it might not be the right time to get this new site up.

"They're looking to start up something new in a market where agents are struggling and the market is down," she said. "That's probably a good place to start before the market picks back up again, but a lot of agents just don't have extra money right now to do additional advertising."

The market, however, is perfect for a new marketing venture -- at least according to the Kauten family.

"We're asked all the time about why we're coming in at such a tough time," said Nick Kauten, HomeLink's director of sales. "If the market is great, then no one needs to advertise. We'd prefer not to jump in when the market is getting negative press, but we think we found a happy medium for us. And we're starting to see a lot more people start to spend money now."

Angel's touch needed

Pam Kauten is bootstrapping some of Florida HomeLink's initial expenses with money she earned from CareerLink as well as its sale. However, compared to CareerLink, HomeLink is going to require a larger staff -- probably as many as 30 to 40 employees when it gets into full swing -- and that will mean a need for startup capital, about \$600,000 to be exact.

Kauten said she will look for seed funding from lenders she's worked with in the past and isn't worried too much about the stigma that the housing market carries right now.

"Angel investors in Florida are really looking for the same thing: a solid management team," said Robin Kovalski, executive director of the **Florida Venture Forum**. "They're also looking for some proprietary technology and what's being used as a growth driver. It really has to be a good business model in order for people to invest."

That's perfect for Kauten, who already has been successful in the past and who is growing a new product based on already proven concepts.

"She has seen [CareerLink] go from the fetal stages all the way to being big enough to sell," said Adam Kauten, who will take on the role of president of the company. "She knows exactly the challenges that has to be overcome and what the next step is going to be."

Where Realtors are stars

Florida HomeLink is designed to give home shoppers the ability to search for properties locally either by price range or size, or to find a specific featured Realtor.

Real estate practitioners commonly list their properties on **Realtor.com**, a national listing site, one of the top 250 most-visited Web sites in the nation, according to traffic aggregator Alexa.

"They're not really competitors to us," said Nick Kauten, sales director for Florida HomeLink. "We compare a lot more to something like **Monster.com**. What we want to do is really promote the Realtors in the area, and they can't do that if they are listed all the way on Page 83."

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