

RESALE HOMES
SUNDAY HOMELIFE
Super Sellers // Top Agents Tell Their Secrets

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Bruce Hackel belongs to every Chamber of Commerce in his area.

Lori Rowe mails out everything from Alka Seltzer to dice.

Joan Kelly works 15-hour days and seven-day weeks.

They employ different sales and promotion methods but they have one thing in common: They are among the superstars of the real estate business.

Hackel, an agent with Remax South Suburban in Flossmoor, sold 162 homes last year; Rowe, with Coldwell Banker in Buffalo Grove, about 80; Kelly, with Baird & Warner in River Forest, sold 84.

Both Hackel and Rowe attribute some of their success to good support staff; each has two assistants. Kelly simply is a one-woman whirlwind.

Kelly starts her mad rush about 9 a.m., works through lunch, takes a break to see her family at dinnertime, then schedules appointments, phone calls and paper work, finishing around midnight.

And this is the slow season.

"Near the end of January, I say to my family: 'Goodbye, see you in May,'" Kelly said.

Ninety-five percent of her listings are referrals, she said. Because she has lived in Oak Park nearly all her life, she finds homes in the area easy to sell.

"I really believe I know my product," she explained. "You have to be very informed about the market. When I give talks to other Realtors, that is one of the things I stress."

Unlike Hackel and Rowe, Kelly is not a big self-promoter, a process known in real estate jargon as "farming."

"I mail out over 2,000 things a month," Rowe said, "and that has really gotten me good results. I mail everything from hot chocolate to lemonade to little dice - I mailed 4,000 little dice that said, 'Don't take a gamble on your biggest investment.'"

One time she mailed out Alka Seltzer. Other times she gave out 600 pumpkins door to door before Halloween and 800 flags before the Fourth of July.

"I think my message is, if I'm creative about marketing myself, I will be more innovative in selling your home," Rowe said.

Hackel said he also does a lot of aggressive self-promotion through direct mail and advertising.

"I'm also very involved in my community," Hackel said. "I was a village (of Crete) trustee for eight years and I'm active in all the chambers of commerce. In my business, it's very important that your face be known.

"I have no way of knowing if someone is going to sell their house. I can only hope that when they make that decision, I'm one of the people they think of to call."

It's conventional for home sellers to contact about three agents before selecting one to list their home. Hackel, Rowe and Kelly all believe that if they are one of the three invited, they will win the listing.

"The key is service," said Hackel. "We know what the customer will want before they know, and can provide quick response. If someone calls about a house, I qualify them financially on the spot. If someone calls about selling their home, one of my secretaries takes information on the house, so that I've already done a brief market analysis and have a rough idea of its worth before I've even see the property."

Ninety-five percent of Kelly's business comes from referrals, she said.

"That makes it easier," she said. "This is not the most revered business - people think of us as used-car salesmen, but it takes a lot of skill and a lot of hours."

Agents not only need people skills, Kelly added, but must be well-versed in financing, neighborhoods, home markets and prices,

and managing their time.

Does a top sales agent really have time for every listing? Will they pay attention to a \$30,000 condominium?

"Most people who are doing a lot of business are very organized," said Betty Hegner, president of Remax of Northern Illinois. "Some have assistants that enable them to handle more transactions. You could go with someone who does less business and still get good service. But it's not a negative to go with a top producer. They advertise more, and get more exposure to more customers. I think they love what they do."

It's common for people to question whether a top-producing agent has time for every sale, Hacker said.

"But I find the busier I am the more I get done," he said. "If I ever hit a slow period, it amazes me how much my efficiency drops off. I think that if you are honest and have the customer's interests at heart, they aren't going to do business with anybody else."

Top agents make good money: Kelly, for example, averages \$200,000 to \$225,000, including bonuses.

But few agents get paid before the sale is consummated. If the house doesn't sell, they make no money.

Of a typical 5 or 6 percent commission, the listing agent gets one-quarter of the amount, the listing office gets a quarter, and the broker and office working with the buyer get the other half.

Hackel sells in an area of lower-priced homes, so his average sales price is \$110,000. "I wouldn't say we work harder (than agents in high-priced neighborhoods), because their deals may take many months to close. But we have just got to do more units, and be quicker on our feet."

The top producers also stressed the importance of maintaining good relationships with other agents.

"I send them these cutesy flyers when a home is just listed, for example," said Rowe. "Or I do things to get them to sell my stuff, like offer them a gift certificate, or offer to do all the work."

Even though they are competitors, they need each other, added Kelly. "I sell 23 percent of my own listings, which means for the other 67 percent I need (other agents) and they need me."

Kay Severinsen is a free-lance writer.

Joan Kelly of Baird & Warner in River Forest discusses her sales strategy with home sellers Elizabeth and Marc LeSage. See also related story.; Credit: Al Podgorski

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