

Property Line

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SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 11, 2007 SJ

The Philadelphia Inquirer

WWW.PHILLY.COM

They're sold on teams



PETER TOBIA / Inquirer Staff Photographer

Realtors (from left) Hope Avery and Marilyn Silberstein and administrative assistant Ellen Farley listen to Neil Kugelman (at right and below) as he talks about a house for sale. "Having more than one agent offers flexibility," Kugelman says, "and looking at things as a team means we can help one another, and that ultimately benefits the consumer." Silberstein joined the team two years ago; Avery joined in 2006.

Working together can result in greater efficiency

By Alan J. Heavens
INQUIRER REAL ESTATE WRITER

Neil Kugelman, Hope Avery and Marilyn Silberstein aren't just three real estate agents in Elfant Wissahickon's Germantown Avenue office in Mount Airy.

Add administrative assistant Ellen Farley, and you have a team—Kugelman's team, one that he began creating when he hired his first personal assistant 14 years ago to keep up with a growing business.

The team was Allan Domb's idea, Kugelman said, referring to the Center City broker who was one of his instructors at the Temple Real Estate Institute.

"Having more than one agent offers flexibility," Kugelman said, "and looking at things as a team means we can help one another, and that ultimately benefits the consumer."



Mike McCann of Prudential Fox & Roach came up with the idea for his "Five Star Team" in the mid-1990s, at one of the National Association of Realtors' annual conventions, which he regularly attends.

"That's where I also came up with the idea of hiring a personal assistant in 1989, to handle the paperwork, including setting up appointments, marketing and arranging open houses — all the necessary chores that took time away from listing and selling houses," McCann said.

With each strategy, McCann said, he was the first to try it in his area — and was told each time that it wouldn't work or just wasn't done.

"Much of the innovation in real estate sales comes from outside the area, especially California," he said. "We tend to be slow to catch on to it."

Which, of course, is the reason why the first ones who try succeed, and then everyone gets on the bandwagon.

Today, McCann's team — called "five star" to "tout the kind of service that you can expect at a five-star hotel" — includes three administrative assistants and 10 "buyer specialists."

The way the team generally works is that newer agents sign on as buyer's representatives with a veteran, sometimes an associate broker in a large firm, sometimes a top-selling agent.

The new agents typically remain buyer's reps while the team leader handles the listings and the assistants do the rest. When McCann launched his team in 1996, he already had two assistants but "needed someone with a license to help me sell in what was fast becoming a booming market."

In the 11 years since McCann hired his first team player, only one agent has left. Two of the longest-serving members — Jim Onesti and Margo Weil — are now handling listings, as well.

Onesti has been with McCann for six years, longer than the other agents, "so about 70 percent of his business is listings," McCann said. "I'm no longer the sole listing agent, but the newer agents are buyer's representatives exclusively.

"My goal is to hire people for life," he said. "Even my assistants have been with me for a long time. Some teams are filled with shorttimers who learn everything they can and move on, but that's not the way I think it should work."

Kugelman brought on his first team agent five years ago, "when there was too much work to do and I needed help showing houses." He helped his then-administrative assistant, a journalism major, obtain her real estate license and launched her as a buyer's agent.

That agent moved on. Silberstein joined the team two years ago; Avery joined in 2006. While they focus on buyers, "on occasion, they will get listings," Kugelman said.

Though the Realtors' association provides some advice on team organization, it has no relevant data on the number of practitioners among its almost 2 million members nationwide.

Yet it's safe to say that if an office is a large one, there's more than one team. In McCann's Society Hill office, vet-

eran agents John Brown and Kathy Conway also have teams.

McCann said that he considers it very important to have a team composed of people with "the right chemistry and the right work ethic."

A small team so constituted can work better and more effectively than a large one, Kugelman said. "We don't need meetings. At the office, we have two rooms. There is a window between the rooms. I stand all the time in front of the window with my laptop, and Marilyn and Hope and Ellen are in my line of vision."

Of course, they make visits to new listings one day a week, as most agents do, team or no team.

And Farley spends considerable time outside the office, making sure that flyers are distributed and other arrangements are taken care of. She also passes along to team members feedback about the listings from other real estate agents.

In McCann's office, "one assistant takes care of advertising and marketing, another handles conveyancing, and the third sets up appointments and showings.

Each person on the team has a function, but any one of us will do anything that needs doing."

The goal is to keep the buyer's agents on the street "showing and selling houses," he said.

The administrative assistants are employees of the brokerage, but the real estate agents on the Kugelman and McCann teams, are, as always, independent contractors.

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Hope Avery, Neil Kugelman and Marilyn Silberstein in Kugelman's office. A small team whose members have the right qualities can work better than a large one, Kugelman said.

In Kugelman's case, "I pay Elfant Wissahickon, and they pay Ellen," he said. The agents share commissions, and their licenses are held by the brokerage.

McCann said his assistants work for Prudential, not for him. "The agents take money from me, but they, too, are with Prudential Fox & Roach."

The team arrangement works very well for him, Kugelman said, and spreading out the workload has resulted in a hoped-for increase in productivity and efficiency.

And McCann?

"I didn't want to be this big," he said. "When I hired my first assistant in 1989, my wife told me that it would probably mean that I would be doing more, not less."

As it turned out, she was right.

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