

Brokers With Benefits

FANCY-PANTS OPEN HOUSES OFFER UP ALTERNATE ATTRACTIONS

If you list it, they will come

The next time you're tasked with unloading a \$22.8 million Upper East Side townhouse, here's an idea for you: host a book signing. Such was the strategy devised by Douglas Eliman Real Estate executive vice president Corinne Pulitzer, who's in the process of selling the stately, six-story Central Park-side dream home at 18 East 73rd Street.

At a recent open house, Ms. Pulitzer not only offered brokers a glimpse inside the magnificent 146-year-old abode, but she also gave them the chance to meet famed architectural and interior photographer Evan Joseph and to check out his new book; *New York Then and Now*, co-written by Marcia Reiss, which contrasts old, historic photos of the city with modern ones in the same locations taken by Mr. Joseph, (He also photographed the interior of the 73rd Street home.)

"It was an effective marketing ploy to get brokers in so that they could really appreciate the house and benefit from meeting Evan," said Ms. Pulitzer. "I really think that making open houses special pays off. Ms. Pulitzer is not alone. For the agents of New York's high-end real estate market, fancy open houses have become de rigueur for selling luxury homes. And we're not just talking about sandwiches and punch bowls; from book signings to fashion shows to spa treatments, these glitzy, out-of-box open houses are showing up on all the city's high-end blocks.

Just ask star broker **Wendy J. Sarasohn** of the Corcoran Group, who credits herself with introducing the creative open house concept to New York City. It started in 1990, when Ms. Sarasohn was trying to sell Andy Warhol's townhouse, and the market, she said, "was at its softest." An entertainer at heart, Ms. Sarasohn decided to put together an attraction that would make brokers *look forward* to attending the open house. She brought in tarot card readers, a caricaturist and a harpist, and she never looked back.

Since then, Ms. Sarasohn has been spicing up her showings whenever she feels it's suitable. On one such occasion, the innovative broker turned an open house into an Oscar-night party—complete with a red carpet and gold statues. At a different showing, she orchestrated a fashion show around a reflecting pool inside the home. And once Ms. Sarasohn even treated her guests to a temporary sampling of Harry Winston jewelry.

"The most fun one I ever think I did was the one with Harry Winston, because I got to wear all these jewels, and my guests got to wear them," she said. "And afterward, when the bodyguards took the jewels back, it was all okay, and the apartment sold."

And while Ms. Sarasohn acknowledged that a creative open house won't necessarily result in an immediate sale,

she said it will at least increase brokers' awareness of a particular listing.

"It's a way to try to capture attention," said Douglas Eliman Real Estate executive vice president **Jessica Cohen**. "Ultimately what we are looking to do [with creative open houses] is to increase the eyes that are on the property."

Last September, for example, Ms. Cohen used her entertainment skills to spread the word about a little-known penthouse listing in Tudor City.

"It's a spectacular property, but it's not something you would expect in that complex," Ms. Cohen said. "We had to do something creative to get the brokers in the door to see the property. It happened to coincide with the time that I was turning 35, so we did my 35th birthday bash as an open house. We had a fridge full of champagne, and I even had a palm reader. We had a really big turnout."

Ms. Sarasohn and Ms. Cohen seem to agree that in today's technological landscape, where properties are visible at the click of a mouse, promises of chocolate-dipped strawberries and strings of diamonds are sometimes the only ways to draw brokers to a luxury listing in person.

"It seems that it's harder to get people to come look at property," Ms. Sarasohn said. "And a property always sells when someone has actually seen it. It feels much different in real life than it does on the computer. It's kind of like the difference between Match.com and actually meeting a man."

And with the recent upswing in the U.S. housing market, creative open houses are becoming a way for the real estate industry to raise a glass to a brighter future.

"During the downturn, you had a lot of building permits and holes in the ground, but nothing was happening," she said. "Now our market has totally rebounded. It's a celebration."

Ms. Cohen said she feels like she has an invitation to a swanky showing every night.

"There's a feeling that the markets are moving and brokers are running all over the place," Ms. Cohen said. "We go through times [when] we keep walking into a brick wall. When things are moving again, it's nice to see everyone again. We're all alive here."

Based on the reactions Ms. Pulitzer received from her late-February book signing/open house, the future is indeed looking brighter. "I have a lot of appointments that are coming up this week," she noted.

And even if the multimillion-dollar property on East 73rd Street doesn't sell right away, Ms. Pulitzer isn't ready to put away her party-planning hat. Next up: she will bring in a gardening expert to talk about maximizing the mansion's rear garden.