

THE REAL DEAL

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NEW YORK REAL ESTATE NEWS

Vol. 8 No. 5 May 2010 \$3.00

Taking the 'I' out of team

Citing time constraints, many agents dismantle their groups

By C.J. HUGHES

A year ago, teaming up looked like a great idea for real estate agents. Industry-wide, there had been a decade-long trend toward consolidation. Plus, in a bad economy, who wouldn't want more bodies scouring the city for leads?

That was then. Now, a handful of agents are disbanding their teams or shelving plans to form them. They say that the larger coalitions, which are also referred to as "groups," add too much bureaucracy and risk. They also note that teams can be ploys to boost gross commissions so that agents or brokers can qualify for higher splits with their firms.

"It was so time-consuming to train [other members of the team], to make sure everything was fine, instead of just being the street broker that I used to be," said Terry Naini, a broker with Prudential Douglas Elliman in Brooklyn Heights.

In February 2009, frustrated by how tough it was to sell a backlog of properties with just an administrative assistant, Naini brought on four less-experienced agents. But consumed by as much as 20 hours a week in training, which included pointers on style and ethics, Naini broke up the team a year later.

Plus, in the end, she said, "I realized I was just creating my own competition in the long

run. In an up market, when the commissions are pouring in, the degree of training a broker has may not matter, since buyers are signing deals without much goading. But when the market turns and more face-to-face interaction is required, a broker with more expertise who can give clients undivided attention is a must, said Darren Sukenik, who also works for Elliman.

around than the one who does the heavier lifting of deal negotiation, for example — which obviously can dilute a broker's total commission.

Of course, there can be benefits to being part of a well-oiled team. If, for example, extra salespeople do actually increase sales volume, the added payouts may be justified because the overall pie is bigger, brokers said.

Last spring, faced with an overwhelming number of inquiries, John Dolle, a rental agent with Century 21 NY Metro, consid-

ered forming a team under a payment structure where he would initially take 60 percent of any commission, with the other 40 percent going to the broker who showed the apartment.

And with experience, that same agent could someday graduate to an 80 percent commission, by shepherding the leasing process from start to finish.

What worried Dolle, though, was putting leads into the hands of agents who were still wet behind the ears, like many he interviewed over an unsuccessful three-month process. "I didn't want to send somebody out with just any Joe Schmo" and squander leasing opportunities, he said.

For other agents, teams are a no-go because they're symptomatic of what's wrong with the way firms rank their highest-producing agents. Indeed, they say, teams are sometimes assembled by more-senior bro-

kers in the interest of jacking up their commission levels to score a larger percentage of pay from their firm, from 60 percent to 70 percent.

"They do it so they can be the big cheese," said Lauren Muss of the Corcoran Group, she noted, likening the experience to her recent two-month absence from work for knee surgery.

Today, Muss operates with a staff of just two: Though one employee is a broker, he does not bring in leads, she said. "It's more about working for me than with me," she said.

Whether teams are created to make brokers seem more successful than they are, or whether they are actually designed to provide a higher level of service for clients, may be a matter of debate.

But what is clear is that teams are still a strong presence in local real estate, despite any backlash against them. Among Halstead Property's New York brokers, for example, 85 are members of 40 teams. That's out of 675 agents citywide, making team members 13 percent of the firm's sales force.

Some others are convinced teams are still the way to go.

For example: This year, Alan Krevis and Frank Russo of Halstead formed RK Group. In addition, Corcoran's eight-broker Blumstein Team, which already includes the husband-and-wife duo of Meris and Kenny, as



well as daughter Sydney, is adding another family member, son Cole, this month.

Why does the concept continue

"Those other brokers were rain catchers, and not rainmakers." Darren Sukenik, Prudential Douglas Elliman

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