OPINION

Are agents taking personal branding too far?

As an industry, we need to pause and take stock of what good real estate marketing really is

BY ELIZABETH ANN STRIBLING-KIVLAN

Thirty-eight years ago, when my mother founded Stribling & Associates, the firm of which I am now president, many people had an unfavorable
perception of real estate agents. The profession was on par with used car salesmen in popular consciousness because there was little transparency and a significant lack of communication.

Back then, many people who worked in real estate had a primary career outside of our industry. And in those days, one wouldn’t find many young children aspiring to grow up to be a real estate agent or broker.

Today, not only do many top tier universities offer diverse courses in real estate, there are also graduate studies and advanced degrees. Brokerages now have internship programs, and the industry is plucking people from other businesses such as entertainment, architecture, psychology and professional sports.

It’s like everyone wants to sell real estate nowadays — but can you blame them? TV and social media make it seem like a party for agents, and the hunger for “fame” is ever-growing.
But real estate agents should be careful not to let personal branding overshadow the most important part of the job — providing unparalleled customer service to every real estate client they take on.

**Fame game**

The daily routines of luxury agents play out on television screens across the globe in reality shows such as *Million Dollar Listing*. In the press, agents who oversee celebrity sales are now celebrities themselves with their names in the headlines.

The seismic shift in the perception of the real estate industry has elevated the profession to something almost larger than life. And while these are welcome changes in many respects, the surge in popularity also presents newfound challenges for agents and brokerages, especially when it comes to marketing and branding.

As the real estate industry has become increasingly synonymous with fame, agents are grappling with how best to market themselves and increase business. But more often than not, brokerages are diverting more funds to advertise the agents themselves rather than the inventory they are tasked with moving.
Everyone wants to stand out (just head over to Instagram, and you’ll see prima facia evidence), but at what point are you sacrificing marketing your properties in order to brand yourself?

**Clients shouldn’t have to choose brand vs. agent**

Some of my competitors would say that agents are bigger than the brand — that brands are vapor and don’t have real meaning. However, I feel that brands are an extension of the people who build them. Chanel is still synonymous with the little black dress; Apple has cornered the market on tech integration; Amazon allows you to get both Apple and Chanel products with two-day shipping — free!

All of these aforementioned names are successful because they are trusted. They are quality. Their customer is the nucleus of their overall brand experience.

To that end, agents need to put themselves in the shoes of their clients. If their sellers aren’t seeing optimal marketing placements for their properties, but they see a whole lot of agent branding, they might begin to wonder how serious their agent is about selling their home.

And when sellers become disenchanted, agents lose business — and then they lose money.

As an industry, we need to pause and take stock of what good real estate
marketing is. Agents absolutely should have the right to differentiate themselves in a very crowded space, but only as long as they are putting forth the same effort and dollar amount toward marketing their listings. You need steak in order to have sizzle, after all — otherwise, it’s just vapor.

Elizabeth Ann Stribling-Kivlan is the president of Stribling & Associates.

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