

Use Me! Try Me! No, Me!; Even though they can't measure its effectiveness, some Realtors are sold on self-promotion. Some of these "screaming me-mes" are resorting to wacky tactics.

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

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Once content to distribute refrigerator magnets or note pads bearing their names, more and more agents are taking self-promotion to new levels, launching elaborate advertising campaigns with slick Web sites or throwing lavish parties accented with ice sculptures.

Images of the Fred Sands agents are plastered on shopping carts and bus benches all over Calabasas, and they appear in ads shown at local movie theaters and in newspapers. The two women are so high on Calabasas that they even have their mailers, which are sent out three times a month to 5,000 homeowners, printed in shades of peach and green to capture the community's Mediterranean feel.

FULL TEXT

Some real estate agents will do anything to get your attention.

There's the agent who hired a farmer to deliver 500 pumpkins to San Fernando Valley homes at Halloween.

And the one who throws an annual "baby party" at her Hancock Park home where new mothers--some former clients, some not--are invited to show off their cherubs.

And then there's the agent who sends 40,000 mailers--each month-- to homeowners and apartment owners in the cities surrounding his Whittier office.

"The worst thing that can happen is for people to forget your name," said Jim Joseph, owner of Century 21 Grisham-Joseph, who, besides the 40,000 mailers, sends press releases and photos of himself to 100 media organizations twice a month.

Once content to distribute refrigerator magnets or note pads bearing their names, more and more agents are taking self-promotion to new levels, launching elaborate advertising campaigns with slick Web sites or throwing lavish parties accented with ice sculptures.

Others rely on the outrageous to attract clients. Like the Colorado agent who stood on a corner with a sign that read "Will Sell Real Estate for Food" and donated 10% of his commissions to a local food bank.

Or the Florida agent who used a western "Wanted" theme to advertise himself on a cable television show only to have a homeowner mistake him for a real criminal and call police when he showed up in the neighborhood.

Of course, not all real estate agents think high-profile self-promotion is the key to success. But for many, figuring out ways to get home buyers thinking about them is just another part of doing business.

"It's not about bragging or boasting," said Don Hobbs, chairman of Hobbs-Herder Advertising, a Newport Beach-based company that specializes in helping Realtors market themselves. "It's about creating an image that people can't forget."

How real estate agents choose to craft a persona these days varies widely.

Joseph, for example, recently sent out photos of himself posing with 2-foot-high numerals making up the number 1,265. An accompanying press release says the figure represents the number of apartment units he had sold to date.

Joseph said he got the idea for the gimmick after seeing toddlers' birthday photos that featured kids posing with oversized numbers. So he and his 3-year-old daughter headed to Sears portrait studio together for her birthday picture and his latest promo shot.

"It's tough not to be goofy, and I don't know where that line is, obviously," Joseph said. "But you just have to do this stuff, otherwise you're lost in the shuffle."

Other agents distinguish themselves by blanketing their communities with their names and faces. Case in point: Heidi Adams and Myra Turek.

Images of the Fred Sands agents are plastered on shopping carts and bus benches all over Calabasas, and they appear in ads shown at local movie theaters and in newspapers. The two women are so high on Calabasas that they even have their mailers, which are sent out three times a month to 5,000 homeowners, printed in shades of peach and green to capture the community's Mediterranean feel.

Myra Turek's Infiniti, meanwhile, carries a license plate that reads 91302--the community ZIP Code--while Heidi Adams' BMW sports a CALBSAS plate.

The advertising comes at a cost, however.

Though agents are often advised to invest at least 10% of their earnings in marketing themselves, Adams said she and Turek spend much more. The movie house ads cost \$600 a month, she said, and they spend more than \$25,000 a year to advertise on the shopping carts alone, knowing that if they don't do it, another agent will.

"The more [advertising] we do, the more everybody else does," said Adams, who with Turek sells about 70 homes a year in the affluent enclave. "It's like we've created this monster."

Though he did not invent self-promotion in real estate, Mike Glickman is frequently cited by industry observers as

the agent who took self-promotion to new heights.

In the late 1980s and early '90s, before the market went south and took Mike Glickman Realty with it, Glickman gave ice cream to neighborhood kids, held contests to choose the father and mother of the year and offered trips to Las Vegas as door prizes at open houses. He even arranged private trash removal in one San Fernando Valley community when there was a garbage strike.

Serial Postcards

Blanketed Area

Clever agents have been quick to pick up where Glickman left off.

Agents like Coldwell Banker agent Nancy Lavigne, who once sent a weekly series of postcards to 500 homes in a Laguna Beach neighborhood she "farms" for new business.

The cards featured the same black and white photo of Lavigne, but each had a different colored background with a single word printed across the front, such as "Innovative" or "Professional." Lavigne left the back of the cards blank until the fifth and final week, when she finally revealed her identity.

"The normal thing is to send out a mailer with the homes you've just listed or just sold, but those get tossed," Lavigne said. "This was a campaign that made homeowners wonder, 'Who is this?' or at least 'What is this?'"

Westside Los Angeles residents, meanwhile, may have found themselves wondering "Who is F. Ron Smith?" after driving by one of the 20 bus benches that pose the question and list Smith's Web site address.

Smith reveals on his Web site that he's an accomplished Coldwell Banker agent, plus much more. Visitors, for example, will learn that Smith lives in Brentwood with his wife, Tracy, and his two sons and they can also get Smith's take on the different Westside communities.

(The truly curious can learn that Smith's marketing assistant, Robert M. Harris, was born at Duke Hospital in Durham, N.C., and has written five feature-length screenplays [unproduced] and several short stories and poems.)

"I take a leap of faith with bus-bench advertising to try and drive people--no pun intended--to visit my Web site," Smith said. "It gives them a flavor of the properties I sell and a feel for what I'm about."

Smith's marketing coach, Steve Shull, owner of Brentwood-based Performance Coaching, believes the goal of any good ad campaign is to reveal an agent's personality.

"Instead of saying 'I'm No. 1,' and creating an ad campaign that says this person is very successful," Shull said, "you want to create a feeling of what it would feel like to work with this person."

Home buyers and sellers, Shull believes, choose agents whom they know, they like, they trust and who make an effort to stay in the flow of their lives.

Realtor Janet Loveland uses her annual "baby show-off party" to keep in touch with former clients and woo new ones.

Between 12 and 20 local mothers and their offspring converge on Loveland's Hancock Park home each summer to dine on Chinese chicken salad and "fluffer-nutters"—peanut butter and marshmallow creme sandwiches.

Guests—a mix of past clients and potential ones—spend the afternoon finger-painting or decorating cookies until "fussy time" kicks in. Unofficial rules call for the youngsters to graduate from the party once they turn 3.

The fact that these growing families are bound to need bigger homes is not lost on Loveland, who says each year at least one guest falls into the category.

Throwing the baby party costs her a few hundred dollars, Loveland said, a real bargain compared to the Christmas parties she's thrown, whose tab is more like \$12,000.

But, like other agents, Loveland acknowledges she doesn't have any hard data about how the parties affect her bottom line. "Measurement's always a problem," she said. "I get wonderful thank-you notes and really nice community karma, if you will."

Adds Century 21's Joseph, "The old saying is that half of all advertising works, you just don't know which half."

Watermelons and

Pumpkins in the Valley

Joseph recalled that there were once 15 to 20 Realtors who sold apartments in his area who are no longer around.

"What we went through in apartments was like a neutron bomb. . . . [The promotions] allowed us to survive and thrive during the real estate depression," Joseph said.

Stephanie Vitacco, who has been a top-selling agent at Fred Sands Realtors since 1993, has spent thousands of dollars on her promotions, including having farmers deliver hundreds of watermelons to San Fernando Valley homeowners on the Fourth of July and pumpkins at Halloween.

Vitacco, however, is quick to point out that no single promotion is responsible for her success but attributes it to a combination of things.

Most agents agree that consistently advertising and getting involved in the community and word-of-mouth referrals are a recipe for success in Southern California's ultra-competitive real estate market.

"I think it's a case of preparation meets opportunity," Vitacco said. "When people see your name out there, they see that you're doing things and then hear about you from someone else and they'll say, 'Oh, yeah, I remember her. She's the one agent who gave me a pumpkin.' "

Like the others, ReMax agent Carla McKendry has little evidence that her annual garage sale, now in its 13th year, leads to new business. But she says it gets her name out to the Yorba Linda residents she serves and provides a service to those with cluttered garages.

Each fall she sends mailers to 650 homeowners advertising a neighborhood-wide garage sale, and between 40 and

50 households usually participate.

McKendry takes care of advertising the event, prints up maps that will guide sale-shoppers to each of the participating households, rises at 4:30 a.m. on the appointed Saturday to put up directional signs, delivers five dozen doughnuts and five gallons of coffee to participants and retrieves all the signs after the six-hour sale is over.

"Most of my garage-salers are completely sold out by 11 o'clock," she said. "It's a very, very, very successful promotion."

There are those, however, who contend that real estate agents waste time and money when they market themselves, regardless of their approach.

Mike Ferry, whose Irvine-based Mike Ferry Org. holds seminars designed to teach agents how to sell homes, contends that if agents were better at selling they wouldn't need to advertise.

Consequently, Ferry believes open houses are a no-no, as are exotic brochures that feature photos of agents taken back in high school. Newspaper ads are also a waste.

And don't even get him started on bus benches. ("Generally speaking, people who are riding the bus aren't even qualified to buy a car let alone a home.")

"Agents need to ask themselves, 'Would Bill Gates wear an orange pumpkin suit or would Xerox executives send out 5,000 postcards with pictures of themselves?' " Ferry said. "The answer is 'of course not.'

Perhaps, but it's a rare agent who completely abstains from self-promotion.

There are Realtors, however, who cultivate low profiles, sometimes in an effort to woo high-profile clients who value an agent's ability to be discreet. Members of the breed are jokingly referred to in the industry as "secret agents."

Coldwell Banker's Randy Solakian, for example, relies mainly on referrals and strategically placed advertisements to drum up new business in the toniest parts of Montecito and Santa Barbara, where estates routinely sell for between \$5 million and \$9 million.

Solakian, whose clients typically covet privacy, runs ads in publications like the Wall Street Journal, Architectural Digest and Santa Barbara magazine. The ads feature high-quality color photos of properties but never any of the agent.

"I don't talk about myself and how great I am," Solakian said. "I happen to be lucky to have some very photogenic properties, and those properties generate their own response."

Illustration

Caption: PHOTO: Lavigne photo; PHOTOGRAPHER: Don Bartletti / Los Angeles Times.; PHOTO: Adams and Turek; PHOTOGRAPHER: Emilio Flores / For The Times.; PHOTO: Photo illustration: Realtors Janet Loveland, top left with baby; Nancy Lavigne in flier; Jim Joseph with numbers; Heidi Adams, left, and Myra Turek with cars; Boyd Smith and Maggie Navarro, bottom flier.; PHOTOGRAPHER: KELLI SULLIVAN / Los Angeles Times

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