



Rising to the Top

Most real estate agents with any amount of ambition strive to reach the level of top producer, but it isn't easy, especially in a competitive market like Chicagoland. Rising to those ranks takes hard work, perseverance and integrity, but the results are worth every effort. We found some top producers in the Chicago area to take time out of their busy schedules to let us know what it takes to rise to success and make it to the top.

K.K. Snyder

While most top producers have their own personal secrets to success, across the board these winning agents attribute that success to a number of commonalities, including honesty, knowledge, strong marketing tactics and communication with clients. While these points may seem like a given, the challenge comes in being consistent and persistent — no excuses.

Though some agents practically kick start their careers as top producers, perhaps going immediately into the luxury market or another specialty and working hard to be at the top, others take the hardscrabble route, by clawing their way up and staying there. Joanne Nemerovski's career resembles that second scenario, with her first sale being a studio apartment at 777 N. Michigan Ave.

Now, Nemerovski is a Koenig & Strey broker associate in Chicagoland with a career spanning 18 years. "It was pretty clear that this could be a career for me. It's a really hard road if you're going to be a

professional. I definitely started at the bottom and worked myself up. I worked long hours and still do, but it is a terrific career choice.”

While she may have started low on the totem pole, Nemerovski made it to the top within three or four years. She became the top producer within her Koenig & Strey office, also the top producer among all 14 offices in the Chicago area and is currently the number three producer nationwide among all 25,000 agents with GMAC, which now owns Koenig & Strey. She was second in that category last year.

Unlike other businesses, she says, it’s easy to measure how a real estate agent is producing — there is no guesswork. A ranking can be determined by simply looking on a computer and reading the numbers, or by picking up a copy of Chicago Agent’s “Real Data” book. “Ours is a completely recordable business,” says Nemerovski, who today handles high-end properties in areas like Lincoln Park, Gold Coast, Lakeview and DePaul.

For Nemerovski, real estate is all about relationships, with about 80 percent of her business coming in referrals from former clients. Her advice for others who aspire to be top producers is to commit to each and every client they have. “Don’t make it a numbers game,” says Nemerovski, who wakes every day to review her listings and ask what else she can do for each of them.

“Sales is a sleepless job. While others are sleeping, you need to be thinking what else you can do; how you can think outside the box,” she says.

Perseverance is also key to maintaining status as a top producer, she adds, discouraging agents from “getting sucked into” the negativity of media reports on the industry. “Do some research and it’ll show the same amount of houses are selling, there are just more on the market than before,” she explains. “Sellers panic and put their houses on the market even though they’re not in an urgent situation to sell.”

She advises clients not to take overpriced listings or those with an unmotivated seller and to make sure pricing is on target. “It’s a very sensitive thing how you price a house,” says Nemerovski, who, above all, loves the entrepreneurial aspect of real estate and the group of people she works with day in and day out. “These are people that I love to see, people that I call friends. I respect and like about 99.9 percent of people in the business. And I do love going in and out of houses.”

She finds great satisfaction in finding the perfect house for her clients and getting correspondence from them following a transaction when they share their satisfaction with her performance.

Kim Wirtz-Prince, a Realtor with Century 21 Pro-Team, became a top producer through determination, drive and cutting-edge marketing. All of this is paying off now for Wirtz-Prince and her clients, says the Centurion Award-winning agent, recognized for both quantity and quality in terms of levels of production. She attributes her success to the attention she gives each client, including virtual tours on every listing, placing her properties on about 1,200 different Web sites, creating an individual site for each listing and being active in various features of Realtor.com.

“A lot of these services are offered by my company and because I’m a top producer. My company offers me a lot of perks and programs. The balance of it I feel I owe to my clients,” she says. “I want them to

have the best advertising and marketing strategies available.”

Wirtz-Prince also advertises heavily, including multiple photos of properties, she sends “just listed” and “just sold” postcards for every listing and takes advantage of the corporate relocation department in her office, a good thing to have for prospective business people moving into the area, she says.

She’s also built her career by selling anything she could list, from a \$25,000 mobile home to a \$2 million luxury property. She works with a variety of client types with a variety of needs, all of which she gives the same quality service, followed by consistent follow up after all transactions.

“I return every phone call and will drop everything to assist with clients’ needs at any given time,” she says, adding constant communication, ongoing education and networking with her peers at conventions as other ways to get a leg up on the competition. “I attend conventions, classes and seminars on the newest technology and latest strategies and changes in the marketplace.”

Succeeding in a challenging market can be done, she says, if agents persist with constant cold calling, work on expired listings, snag FSBO properties and do open houses, then they will be closer to the top after finding a plethora of new clients.

“The bottom line is just not giving up. The market is on an upward swing so they just need the drive and determination, and with that they will succeed,” offers Wirtz-Prince, who also keeps her clients motivated and positive in spite of media reports about the state of the industry. “I don’t give up easily. I’ve always had the drive ... I’ve just really in my life never taken ‘no’ for an answer. If someone tells me ‘no’ I just work harder to reverse that decision.”

Often, people come into the real estate industry after successful careers in other fields. Such was the case with Mona Hellinga, who had enjoyed some success in medical sales. Since she was used to dealing with intelligent, business-savvy corporate individuals in her previous role, she easily transitioned to dealing with much the same type of people in the luxury real estate market, so much so that she led her office in transactions in her first year.

“But I did my share of leases and sales in peripheral towns,” Hellinga admits. “They were not all North Shore luxury properties.”

As her career progressed, however, she became very focused on the luxury market, but continues to list \$100,000 and \$200,000 condos if a client has a need. She claims much of her path to becoming a top producer was paved by the excellent training Baird & Warner offers agents.

“My sales training has been pretty classic,” says Hellinga, who also reads books about selling and takes a pretty regimented approach to the sales process. “I’m certainly focused on client need and that translates into finding the right home and property.”

A proponent of face-to-face selling, Hellinga says agents need to meet people and let them know their profession. Agents should get in front of potential clients at every opportunity, whether it’s an open house, a social event or a Chamber of Commerce function. And once you’ve put yourself out there, be

very responsive to those who come to you for information or advice, as this can always lead to a sale.

Above all, Hellinga makes every effort to do what a client requests, recognizing that her clients come from vast backgrounds and professions and most are used to conducting business in a particular manner.

“If an attorney client wants me to write a six page response to an offer, I’ll do that,” she says. “By nature, I’m very competitive. I have a home and children to support so I’m driven to make money. I want to achieve a high standard of sales in the industry.”

Despite market reports, 2007 was Hellinga’s best year. “We didn’t have a flat real estate market in Lake Forest. We’ve seen sale prices increase. As a whole, the abundant inventory has caused prices to decline. But 2008 is starting out very busy. The calls are there, and to me that equates future sales.”

Like Hellinga, Bernie Cobb Jr. loves the pace of the industry. He joined his parents in real estate 18 years ago, was Rookie of the Year right out of the gate and soon became the top producer in his office. Today, working with RE/MAX Naperville, he thrives on the fast pace of the industry and isn’t bothered about his compulsive personality, as long as it’s helping him close deals.

He suggests agents who want to succeed should picture themselves as successful, have a business plan and if they get off course, figure out how to get right back on track. “Be persistent and consistent. There’s plenty of room. Even within the top producers in my own city I rarely cross paths with anyone. There’s enough business out there for everybody.”

Cobb says agents can ignore, for the most part, the doom and gloom reports about challenging markets. “I sold about 16 percent more homes in ’07 than in ’06 because I was constantly fine tuning,” says Cobb, whose success is due, in part, to the fact that he isn’t “attached to the money.”

“I’m attached to getting the job done and I shield myself from the money side of it ... that’s served me well over the years. I don’t look at my customers as a paycheck.”

Felecia Englert came to real estate in the mid-80s after being a teacher for 12 years. She set up in an office in the area where she had been raised and was very well known, as a result, business picked up quickly. Since she didn’t have children at that point, she worked long hours day after day to establish herself in the industry.

Today, she enjoys top producer status as a broker associate with Prudential First. “Coming from a job as an educator, you’re really a public servant. Coming from the mindset of a servant, you understand people and their needs,” she says, adding that early in her career she emulated the seasoned agents in her office.

“I listened to how they held conversations, how they greeted people, how they negotiated. I was able to absorb all of that,” says Englert, who lives just 15 minutes from the Wisconsin state line and therefore pursued her GRI and broker license for both states. She also found success when her small, independent real estate office joined the Prudential franchise, a must for tapping into the relocation business that was so productive back then.

Englert continues to shine in part because of the ongoing training offered by her company, as well as the luxury-market training offered at the Summit Conference she qualifies to attend as a top producer. “Those roundtable discussions with top-producing agents from around the nation are very valuable,” says Englert.

When Englert and her husband fulfilled their dream of buying a farm and stocking it with all sorts of animals, those daily responsibilities stopped her from attending out-of-town training and conferences. Today, she gets whatever education she can locally and survives solely on the network of clients she’s built over the years.

One thing she insists on is attending all showings of her listings. “Agents who come from different area codes, for example, don’t know the nuances of the area you’re in, the zoning, the schools, the benefits of a conservation district or whatever,” says Englert, who strives to be very hands on and involved with all of her listings.

Always driven to be successful, Englert suggests agents take advantage of the synergy that comes from being in an office and hearing other agents discuss how they do things. “Education, networking, attending sales meetings — grab onto everything that you can,” she advises.

Like Cobb, Steven Senter’s family was also in real estate. Senter even had a top-producing mother when he entered the industry in the mid 90s. He started as a buyer’s agent on a 50/50 split, a do-or-die situation for the rookie, who fielded phone calls and Internet queries to build his client base in a not-so-hot market.

“It wasn’t easy. There was a lot of work and not a lot of contacts. I was selling homes based off my mother’s listings,” says Senter, now a broker/owner with 120 agents at Keller Williams Fox Valley Real Estate, who was burned out on buyers within his first two years and feeling guilty because of that.

“But I realized that was okay, that people usually gravitate toward either buyers or sellers. I gravitated toward builders, selling builders’ products,” says Senter, who is popular among builders due to the way he handles his clients. Today, he sells exclusively in several western suburban subdivisions. “I was working in new construction, popping signs in the ground, working, working, working.”

It would take more than four years for things to finally “roll over” for Senter, and things really started clicking around 2000, when he began to ramp things up, closing 125 to 150 deals a year.

“When times are good, anyone can put a sign in the yard and not understand pricing or marketing. But when you have 12 listings for every buyer out there ... it’s your reputation and relationships you’ve built that help you.”

While Senter says he’s a “product of knowledge” and is constantly impressed by the level of training available through Keller Williams, he hasn’t personally felt the need to seek additional certification or designations. “I value training at the highest level and keep up with the latest trends, but NAR stats show the average consumer doesn’t care.”

Weathering an unusual market can be done by working “very purposely,” he says. “Cut your expenses to the bone because this market is going to be here for a number of years ... you’re going to lose your job very quickly if you get upside down.”

All in all, these Chicagoland top producers have an optimistic outlook for this year’s market. But regardless of the fluctuations that can’t be controlled, staying consistent, persistent and professional is a sure recipe for success for those with the stamina to rise to the top – and stay there. C.A.

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