

PROFILE

Michael Simon, founder and chief executive officer, Century 21 NY Metro

Simon snags the golden ticket

By MAGGIE HAWRYLUK

He's been running for a major portion of his life, but real estate has finally caught up to Michael Simon, president and chief executive officer of Century 21 NY Metro.

"I knew that I wanted to do everything in my power to avoid it," he said, laughing. "My dad was a real estate lawyer. I swore that I wouldn't have anything to do with it. It just wasn't a direction I wanted to follow."

Though he worked as a rental agent at Gardner Realty after earning a degree in history at Ithaca College in the 1980s, the Long Island native said the two-year stint was used mostly as a chance to figure out what he really wanted to do. After 20 years of working in various industries, avoiding real estate's constant pull, Simon said he's willingly given in.

"I guess what's happened is that I've taken everything that I've learned in my career — marketing, business development and acquisitions — and just said,

I view real estate as the fifth major sport; it is truly a spectator sport. In the city, it may be bigger than hockey — people are just attracted to it.

"Alright," he admitted. "No matter how hard I've tried since 1985 to get away from it, I keep getting brought back in. So I decided to stop fighting, and finally succumbed to the fact that I know it. I really do like it."

And Simon is especially enjoying the challenge presented by his role at the helm of one of the world's most recognized brands. Though Century 21's symbolic golden logo is respected in 57 countries, New Yorkers haven't exactly welcomed the brand with open arms.

"Any national brand that is not viewed as home-grown New York always has a hard time getting established. I think I could've started Mike's Real Estate and it would've succeeded because it's viewed as being homegrown New York," Simon said. "Century 21's logo is a California Ranch roofline and that's viewed as very middle America. Combine that with the perspective of New Yorkers that they embrace their brands; they embrace the upper end of the market the way they see fit, not necessarily the way the rest of the market tells them to. We have a lot of things working against us."

Simon is the relative new kid on the block of real estate, joining Century 21 about 20 months ago, but that doesn't mean that he's a rookie. During his 20-year hiatus from real estate, he was unknowingly training for his current role the entire time.

tion with Coldwell Banker in California. Within two days on the job the firm was acquired by the Cendant Organization — now Realogy, which also owns Century 21 — bringing Simon to a career in business development with the organization.

Through his executive roles with Cendant, Simon spent time working at the firm's European headquarters in London managing several departments over the years and eventually taking over as chief operating officer of Coldwell Banker's European Franchise Division.

After getting a taste of the franchise business overseas, Simon, along with his partners, formed RealStar LLC and began the acquisition process in early 2006, closing the deal and beginning operations as Century 21 NY Metro in August 2006.

"I've succumbed to the pressure, it's all over now. I'm in it for the long run," he said. "I do like [real estate] and I'm having a lot of fun building the business. I have a lot to learn. It's been 20 months and I've figured out a little bit of what makes the business tick, but

if you want to build a business with longevity — I've got a great brand, why not build on that."

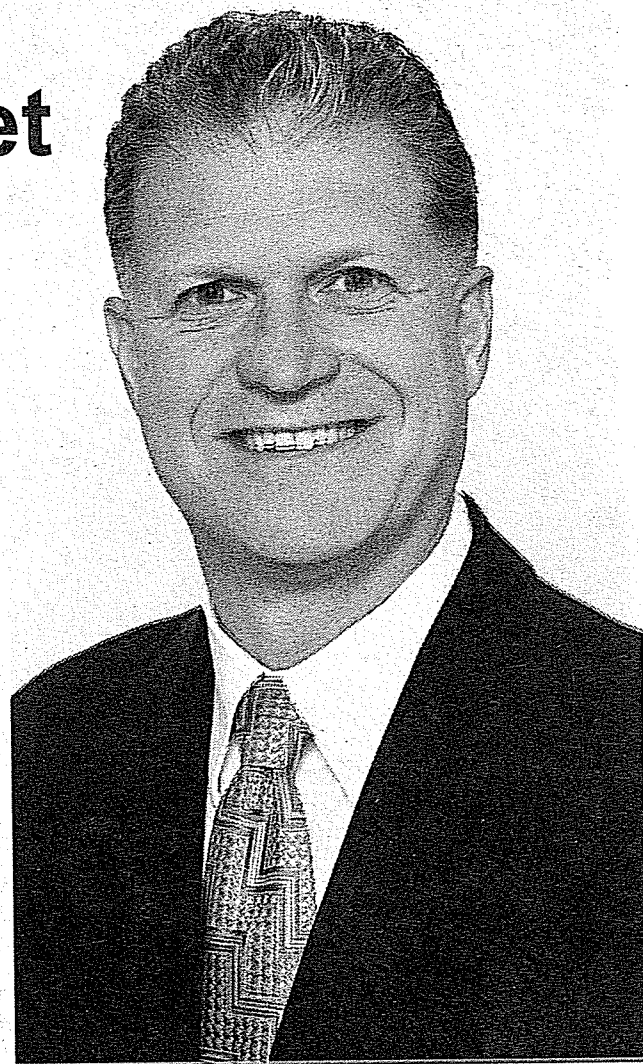
Simon's first step in building was cleaning house by bringing in a management team, which includes one sales and two rental managers, that is working toward a unified goal.

"We just got caught up in trying to do too many things at once," he recalled of his early days on the job. "We were trying to acquire other companies, trying to rebuild the management team, rebuild systems and launch the brand in New York City. And that's just a lot and if you don't have a clean slate in management where you're all unified on the same page on which direction you're going in. It makes it difficult."

Once bringing in the new team, Simon began growing Century 21's rental division, something he considers an essential real estate niche to train agents and provide a firm some flexibility in the market.

Among his responsibilities, his current focus is ensuring that brand recognition — both national and international — is being leveraged properly. And while this branding can pose problems, it also presents an advantage.

"A lot of the competitors will talk about offshore



in China. The guys in the UK resurrected the brand and now there are 11 offices between Scotland and England.

"And nobody else can really say that. When you're looking at a true global real estate brand, where on any main street it's going to be well known, I think that really differentiates us."

Simon said he's seeing positive feedback from the changes. The 155-agent firm has signed 20 exclusives just in the past month and is being consistently ranked in top ten rankings for Manhattan brokerages.

When Simon isn't busy building his business, he's concentrating on building a tight-knit relationship with his family. The single father of two — Zachary, 9, and Nicholas, 5 — makes time to take his sons to school every morning and help with homework every afternoon, taking a break from the workday to catch up his boys over the phone. And though he's busy, Simon is happy with this chapter in his life.

"I view real estate as the fifth major sport; it is truly a spectator sport. In the city, it may be bigger than hockey — people are just attracted to it. It really is a dynamic, evolving business," Simon noted. "There's no reason to