

COVER



LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

By ALICIA HARTGROVE

If you want to make it in 2009, you better get with the program — or at least with the plan.

That's the word from some of the city's smartest brokers who are warning that those who are unprepared for what the New Year will bring could find themselves on the sidelines of a business that's undergoing its biggest change in decades.

"It is absolutely necessary for strategic planning and thinking to be in effect in the 21st century," said Esther Muller, co-founder of the New York Real Estate Academy.

"From a new agent coming into the business to a leader running the business, they should all know what the plan is: who their clients are, where their clients (sellers or buyers) are, how they're going to get business, and why they are in the business," said Muller.

At CitiHabitats, Gary Malin, president and CEO, sits down with his 10 department heads to work out the company's business plan. "We look at what didn't work, what did, where we want to experiment and we get everyone's feedback."

However, it's not an overnight process, according to Malin, who said, "Business plans evolve throughout the year. We're a very collaborative company and the management team meets on a monthly basis and tries to get as much feedback as possible. It's important to get information from a variety of sources. We get feedback from the public on customer service, we look at where Internet traffic was coming from, word of mouth is very important to us — we look to see what's effective."

John Reinhardt, president of Fillmore Realty likes to have a plan A — and a plan B and C. "If the market takes a dive, we have a C plan, and if the market picks up it's a B plan, and if it stays the same, that's our current A plan."

Company budgets form the backbone of a good business plan: knowing how much you have to spend and where you're going to spend it.

Lisa Breier Urban, managing partner and founder of law firm Breier Deutschmeister Urban & Fromme, said, "Don't spend more than you make, especially this year. Keep an eye on what you've spent in the past. It's such a different market from last year, so it's hard to really judge where we are going to be in six months to a year, but hopefully, we are at the tail end of it."

Reinhardt said one of his first ports of call is always with the "financial people."

He believes most companies will cut back on spending next year, but while some will look for an across-the-board reduction, he prefers to examine where the

money is best spent.

"Some advertising doesn't work. We've seen that our classified ads are less effective and we're cutting that back by 40% there. Certainly, we've cut back on entertainment and

become more creative in getting vendors to sponsor those — we're reducing budget, but not reducing the number of events."

Reinhardt will be increasing spending on agent training and has hired top regional trainers to drill his team — "We are making our agents the best agents. We believe quality is the key to success," — and the company is spending more on producing professional brochures for each listing — "It's an opportunity for consumers to see value and quality."

Claudia Saez-Fromm, co-founder of Mark David & Company, is in the throes of preparing her 2009 business plan. One of the big issues in that is catering more specifically to the needs of individual agents.

"Rewarding our team when they meet certain quotas definitely generates business," said Saez-Fromm. "It creates a culture of 'we invest in you and you invest in us.'"

This year, the Mark David & Company management team met its quota. In recognition, the whole team was treated to a Tony Robbins seminar. There's also the monthly Power Breakfast Club that gives agents who have met quotas the opportunity to talk about what they'd like to see more of, whether it's coaching seminars or incentives. Past rewards have included stays at top hotels, store gift certificates, and vacations.

Saez-Fromm said the company is considering even more getaway incentive packages for 2009.

Many firms are expanding their business platform. Several residential firms have already announced new ventures into the commercial real estate sector. Others are looking beyond US shores for business.

Luigi Rosabianca, principal attorney and founder of Rosabianca & Associates, opened an office in Milan two years ago.

"We'd been allocating resources to that office just to grow that side of the business," He said. "We realize that our law firm was once a grass root enterprise, but now it's a cross border and we need to be aware of that aspect. It's almost like starting a new business."

Marc Spector, AIA, principal at the architectural firm, the Spector Group, said it's the economy that dictates where much of his firm's work will be.

"The economy is leading us to do more international work, like Grade A office buildings in China, Middle Eastern projects, medical facilities in Eastern Europe ... we are well positioned to do so in 2009. The use of the web really allows us to be so international in a viral sense of fashion that paper media can't accomplish."

The use of new technology is playing a major part

in 2009 business plans around the city. Taking a lead from some of the major brokerage houses, several boutique firms have plans to expand their websites and use more interactive technology to attract potential clients.

In recent years, Adina Azarian, president and founder of Adina Equities, has focused on creating the perfect website. This year, she's upping the ante and planning to invest much more on Internet marketing.

"Now it's time to take it to the next level and spend some time, effort and investment to make sure we are taking full advantage of what the World Wide Web has to offer small boutique firms like mine."

At CitiHabitats, Malin said a goal of 2009 is also increasing traffic to the company's website, which underwent a major remodeling earlier this year.

"The most important thing that we've been working

From a new agent coming into the business to a leader running the business, they should all know what the plan is: who their clients are, where their clients are, how they're going to get business, and why they are in the business.

— ESTHER MULLER.

on for a while is the website," said Malin. "We want to make sure it's high traffic, using a variety of online mediums, adding more techology features for agents. The aim is to make a better resource for our agents, create a blog for agents and, basically, make things easier on our agents."

An expert coach in the real estate for many years, Muller calls this current market a "transitional era." There are so many real estate agents in New York City all vying for success in the same slow market, Muller said a good business plan is a key to succes. A big part of that is feeding agents the knowledge that will set them apart in the sea of brokers.

All of the firms Brokers Weekly spoke with agreed.

CitiHabitats is also planning more training at the company's in-house center. Ongoing sessions cover everything from negotiating techniques to time management to administration. "At our in-house training center that holds 130 people, We have training every other week for new agents and almost weekly for other agents. Most managers are hold weekly training on variety of issues and our managers have one-on-one sessions with their agents — we call them Power Hours, when we bring in senior corporate staff to listen to agents plans and offer advice.

"It's important to arm agents with as much information as possible," Malin said. "We try to challenge our agents and encourage them to have their own, individual business plans."

FAVORITE THINGS

Winter weather getaways

BY BILL CRESENZO & ALICIA HARTGROVE

The winter chill has certainly settled into the city and, with a cool market to contend with too, who could blame you for taking a well-earned warm-weather break right now?

So this week, we asked the city's real estate folks about their vacation plans and, it turns out, not everyone likes it hot ...

Citi Habitats' Kamila Mysiak heads for the hills of Stowe, Vermont, for some snow sports.

"First of all, it's not as popular as Stratton, so it is much less crowded," she told us. "The mountain itself has some amazing trails for skiers and snowboarders. On top of one of the peaks is a gorgeous restaurant with great food, mulled wine and the most fantastic views.

"Afternoons are either romantic by the fireplace at the hotel with your other half, or you could spend time in a super luxury spa called Top Notch, which is top-notch at providing relaxing massages and all the latest treatments. In the evening, usually my husband and I end up in a super bar called Rusty Nail where a live band is playing and everyone is super friendly."

Susan Karlic, also of **Citi Habitats**, says a ski trip is a tradition in her family.

"During the holiday season, we always see Radio City's Christmas Spectacular and visit Rockefeller Center and the tree," she said.

"My yearly treat is buying some Dark Chocolate Truffles and Champagne Truffles at La Maison du Chocolate and Teuscher Chocolates of Switzerland. Skiing is a must during February's holiday week and any other available weekend. Other activities include ice skating, tubing, and at least one Broadway show."

Eugene Litvak and his friends head for a rented cottage in Lake Harmony, Pa. every New Year.

The **Citi Habitats** agent said, "The weekend is usually filled with board games, poker and a very competitive game of charades. Also, we make sure that the house has an outdoor hot tub. The mix of cold air and hot water is really therapeutic.

"One year was really great, the guys were in the hot tub smoking cigars, drinking scotch and it was snowing on top of us. It was really something."

John Reinhardt, CEO/president at **Fillmore Realty**, just sold his winter getaway in the Poconos. He's

owned the house along Lake Wallenpaupack in Pa.

for the last eight years.

"That was always a nice place to go to retreat and slow down in low gear."

Reinhardt said he often skied with his three kids at Tanglewood Resort and plans to buy another lake house soon; one in a differ-



ent community with more amenities. "I'm positioning myself to get a great deal," he said.

Kimberly Casciaro of **Citi Habitats** said her idea of a great winter getaway is East Hampton. "It is a lovely scene in the winter ... very quiet, calm and peaceful. East Hampton is where I met my husband and also where we got engaged, so it holds a very special place in my heart."

Robin Schneiderman's family has had a ski house at Windham Mountain for over 20 years. The **Citi Habitats** agent said, "It's the perfect escape from the grind, especially for only being two hours from the city. Just getting outdoors in the mountains and having a drink apres ski with family and friends is my winter vice!"

Gary Malin, president of **Citi Habitats**, typically doesn't go away this time of year.

"During December, my wife and I spend time in New York. We'll relax and decompress then determine where we will go with the kids in February when they have a break from school."

As of now, Malin and his family have not made any travel plans, but he said he is a warm-weather kind of person and loves beaches. "I've never put a ski boot on a day in my life."

Corcoran's Richard Silver said he used to love going some place warm like Puerto Rico because it was a cheap and quick way to refresh.

This time of the year, **Zhann Jochinke** of **Argo Residential**, heads back home to Australia. "It's summer there and I love being with my family and friends and heading right for the beach," he said.

If you don't know where **Esther Muller** of the **Real Estate Academy** is, she's either in California or Israel, which are her two favorite getaways.

Muller visits her two young grandsons one weekend a month in Pacific Palisades, Calif., where it is always warm and beautiful.

"We play football, baseball, tennis ... they don't call me grandma; they call me Esther and I usually leave all black and blue," joked Muller, who also visits her parents four times a year in her hometown of Netanya, Israel.

"I have a great apartment in Israel where I veg out at the Four Seasons Hotel and swim in the Mediterranean Sea," she said.

Michael Camacho of **Citi Habitats** loves to go to the island of Florianopolis, Brazil.

"Our winter is their summer time and it

is unbelievable," he said. "It's an amazing beach town where the old and new meet in the city center. Luxury modern buildings line the beach with a Miami vibe, and behind modern glass, an Old World Brazil makes a historical statement.

"Off the beaten path, fishermen serve the catch of the day at small beach restaurants and where everyone says 'Tudo Bem', which means everything is okay. After a vacation there, everything is okay!"

Claudia Saez-Fromm, co-founder and chief operating officer at **Mark David & Company**, is another who prefers sun and sand over snow come vacation time.

"We (husband Mark Fromm of Mark David & Company) used to always go to an island or a beach in the winter ... Costa Rica, Barbados

"But now we have kids and last year we went to Argentina for a month with our young son because I have family there. This year, we are really excited about bringing our new baby, Sophie, to Argentina in February to meet my family."

Saez-Fromm has 144 family members throughout South America — plenty of vacation choices for anyone.



JOHN REINHARDT



ESTHER MULLER