

Cindy Brouillette says her brokerage offers the best customer service in her market, a boast she feels free to make because she and her agents focus so intensely on client's needs.

For starters, there's the guarantee that a buyer who calls Cindy B! REALTORS of Fort Wright, KY, will get a call back from an agent within seven minutes.

Cindy B! has five buyer agents, three listing agents, and a staff of seven administrative employees.

When a lead comes into Cindy B!, Brouillette awards the buyer's name to the first agent who responds. If she doesn't get a response within a few minutes, she starts dialing agents' cell phones until she reaches one.

Brouillette also expects her agents to answer client calls until 9 p.m. And she puts her agents on a weekly rotation so that one is always "on call" on weekends and evening.

For her part, Brouillette makes a point of calling every single client once during the transaction to thank them for their business and to ask if they're satisfied with the service they're getting. Then she calls after the closing to find out how the sale went.

"We do 350 sales a year, so that's a lot of phone calls," Brouillette says.

During those calls, she also tries to pry loose referrals by asking, "Can you think of anyone else we should be working with?"

To make sure that everyone in her company stays focused on customer service, Brouillette sends questionnaires to past clients asking how they feel about their experience. The responses are turned into agent-by-agent rankings available to all agents in the office.

Round-the-clock service

Then there's the friendly competition between buyers' agents and listing agents. Brouillette divides them into teams; each year, the team whose sales went up by the greatest percentage is treated to a dinner prepared by the losers.

Brouillette aims to make this competition good-natured and fun, but Cindy B! clearly wants customer service and performance to be an obsession in her office.

"It is a form of peer pressure," she says.

But is there a downside? The real estate industry increasingly has begun to pay attention to the issue of work-life balance, and the National Association of Realtors even has launched the "Family Time" campaign to encourage brokers and agents not to ignore their personal lives.

Brouillette says her company's extensive support staff and the on-call rotation let agents spend quality time with their families. But Brouillette also says she's just as concerned about happy customers, and customers are happy when agents promptly return that crucial first call.

"Those who want to make money respond right away," she says. "And I guess those that don't want to make money are on family time."

Well-paid agents

That's not to say Brouillette doesn't reward her agents for long hours. To the contrary, all are highly productive and make at least \$50,000 a year. "A third of my agents are making well over a six-digit income," she says.

Meantime, Brouillette covers their marketing costs and other expenses.

"There's not a thing that they pay for," Brouillette says.

Cindy B! also takes pains to free agents to work on deals rather than paperwork. The company's seven-person support staff includes two transaction coordinators and in-house ad agency.

Brouillette says she wants her agents to stay focused on money-making tasks such as prospecting and driving around with buyers, not monitoring the fax machine.

"They're not sidetracked with administrative duties," she says.

Brouillette's thoughts about customer service were formed when she worked for large corporations and owned a marketing agency. And her philosophy was refined during her years as a top producer. She often was frustrated when she tried to pass on leads to other agents in her office only to see promising prospects ignored.

So Brouillette hired a buyer's agent to work with some of her overflow business. Then, in 1998, she decided to start her own company.

When she first started, Brouillette says, she hired any agent who was willing to join an upstart company. These days, though, she's more particular.

She likes to hire agents who have at least half a year in the business so that they know the rudiments. But she steers clear of experienced agents, whom she finds unwilling to prospect and too likely to impose their own opinions on clients.

"They have so many bad habits that are so hard to break," Brouillette says.

Menu of commission plans

And as the discount-versus-full-service war rages, Cindy B! straddles both sides of the debate. Sellers can choose from one of five commission plans:

Premier service. The seller pays 7 percent and gets "the best of everything," including virtual tours. All meetings are held at the seller's home or other location of his choosing.

Full service. The seller pays 6 percent and gets a monthly meeting with an agent to review the marketing strategy.

Loyalty program. A seller pays 5 percent for the full-service plan - so long as the seller also agrees to work with a Cindy B! buyer's agent when buying his next home.

Flat-fee MLS service. For \$3,500, a seller gets an MLS listing, photos, a yard sign, and showings by Cindy B! agents. If another company brings the buyer, the seller pays a 3 percent fee to that agent. The seller pays a \$500 nonrefundable deposit upfront and an additional \$3,000 when the deal closes.

Contract service. For \$1,500 a seller or buyer gets help writing a contract and closing the deal.

Brouillette says she's been offering such choices since the early 1990s. And while the traditional 6 percent option remains the most popular choice, Brouillette says it's better to be flexible than to lose a client altogether.

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