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Privacy TRUMPS ALL

A Day in the Life of the Agent-Celebrity Client Relationship



The Obamas and Tom Wallace and family at the Aquinnah Lighthouse on Martha's Vineyard in August 2009. Photo courtesy of Wallace & Co. Sotheby's International Realty.

By Stephanie Andre

It's no secret that to successfully work with high profile/celebrity clients, discretion is the name of the game. From A-list actors and CEOs to even a few presidents, there is no price too high for privacy.

Here, four Sotheby's International Realty® brokers tell tales of paparazzi, Secret Service and the common thread that binds them all together—confidentiality.

Silence is Golden

Throughout her 30 years in real estate, Heather Croner has made a very successful career out of doing something very simple—keeping mum.

Principal broker of Heather Croner Real Estate Sotheby's International Realty in Millbrook, New York, Croner has made a reputation for selling distinctive country properties to many high-profile and celeb-status clients.

"My success has been built on keeping silent [about my clients and their lives]," says Croner. "I am privy to lots of information when dealing with buyers. It would be counterproductive to speak out about what I know."

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Croner asserts that privacy matters to everyone—celeb or not.

“Everyone values their privacy,” she says. “Our company is known for its discretion. That’s part of our long-term success.”

That instinct has afforded her a lot of repeat business from her celeb-status clients. “We have earned their trust so they come back to us because they know we will keep things as private as possible,” she says.

That said, Croner is quick to point out that her company does deal with a high number of high-profile clients who, oftentimes, will ask them to sign a confidentiality agreement.

“In addition to our agreement of confidentiality, we typically get our sellers to sign one as well,” she explains. “A lot of our high-profile clients won’t go into a house without it signed. They don’t want their names to get out. It helps because it gives people boundaries.”

Even now, Croner doesn’t name names, only to say, “There are funny things that happen in real estate every day. They are no different.”

Catering to the Individual’s Needs

A broker on Martha’s Vineyard, Tom Wallace deals with high-profile folks on a regular basis. From Hollywood celebs and diplomats, to even a few presidents, Wallace has experienced it all.

“Being on Martha’s Vineyard, we’re obviously a high-profile resort area,” says Wallace, of Tom Wallace of Wallace & Co. Sotheby’s International Realty. “We have a long track record of hosting high-level and profile individuals.”

From Wallace’s perspective, he says there are two basic steps he always follows: the fundamental need for privacy and confidentiality and the insight into the individual’s needs.

Similar to Croner’s group, everyone in Wallace’s camp signs a confidentiality agreement. This became even more important this past summer when Wallace was charged with finding the First Family a summer retreat.

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Sotheby’s International Realty

they vacationed here so we had an understanding of what it took to pull something like that off,” says Wallace.

According to Wallace, the Obamas had a clear perspective on what they wanted—to be the least intrusive to the rest of the island as possible. “They wanted not just an analysis on how it would affect them, but wanted to see what we could do to not create gridlock, and have little interruption in the normal, day-to-day activities that go on here.”

Wallace says the allure of Martha’s Vineyard is the notion that high-profile individuals will be treated like everyone else.

“It’s because everything they do can be ‘newsworthy,’ so the idea is to allow them to have as much of a ‘normal’ focus as possible,” he says.

In fact, Wallace says that years ago Princess Diana made the comment that Martha’s Vineyard is one of the few places in the world

where she felt she didn’t need security. “Jackie O. thought it was equally appealing,” he says. “She told me she loved the wonderful informality of the relationships between the summer and winter residents, even the fishermen—it was the diversity of the individuals that she loved. She said that’s what made it a community.”

Keeping a Lid on the Paparazzi

Located in the San Francisco Bay area, Olivia Hsu Decker has seen what some paparazzi will do to get the “money” shot.

“I understand why [celebrities] don’t want the paparazzi in front of their homes every day,” says Decker, broker/owner of Decker Bullock Sotheby’s International Realty. “Some celebrities have canceled escrows when the news media discovered where they are buying.”

According to Decker, this is the life for some of her high-profile clients.

“I personally would not talk to anyone about the whereabouts of my celebrity clients, but there are other people involved,” she says. “It’s the termite inspectors, the title officers, the insurance brokers, the loan officers; it’s a challenge to make sure the others

Celeb Tidbits from Olivia Hsu Decker

Here are a few, quick tales on the life of a celebrity:

"I showed Cher a \$45 million home in Hillsborough a few years ago and she met the owner of the property. He ended up loaning his home for the catalogs of her celebrity merchandise business for a couple of years."

"Sharon Stone fired her previous real estate agent in front of me on the street after we toured one of my listings. Sharon was demanding, but normally extremely polite and she is a super smart lady.

"Nicolas Cage was extremely polite. He even called me once when he was five minutes late to an appointment. He also replied to my e-mails every time."

don't spill the secrecy."

What's more, Decker says, "I remember shortly after I closed my first \$20 million home sale in Marin County in 1999, the TV trucks were parked in front of the home day and night to broadcast the news and hoping to find my client for an interview."

Despite the sometimes-odd and/or crazy situations that may arise, Decker says most of the celebs she works with just want what any of us wants—a home they love—but at a faster pace.

"Celebrities have busy schedules, so when they want to buy or sell a home, they want to do it right away," she says. "They don't have time to waste."

To move the process along, Decker says she sometimes deals directly with the client themselves.

According to Decker, it takes longer for her celeb clients to buy because they have higher demands. However, it takes less time to sell because many buyers are intrigued by the celebrity homes.

To that end, for the celebs who allow her to use their name, Decker builds custom websites that automatically rank high on the search engines because of their names.

"Each time people Google their names, they hit

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our websites," she says. "This is a unique marketing tool that only celebrity clients can pull off. Some clients love to take advantage of this."

They're Just Our Friends

Wailani and Cormac O'Herlihy don't consider celebrities any different than anyone else you might meet.

"They just would like to be treated like regular people—not stalked all the time," says Wailani O'Herlihy, of Sotheby's International Realty Southern California in Malibu. "To me, there's no difference in working with high-profile clients. A lot of them are our friends. We actually live in a community where being a celebrity is not a big thing. It's not out of the norm to deal with them. Our children play with one another. Everyone is comfortable around each other. There's no pedestal."

That said, according to O'Herlihy, it's gotten so bad for the high-profile residents of Malibu that some of the shops are now a "paparazzi-free zone." "It's helped because no one wants photographers

snapping pictures of their children."

However, when it comes to buying and selling, O'Herlihy acknowledges there is a difference because they need more attention and need privacy. "They appreciate an agent who honors that," she says. "Typically, they come to us by referral or we have personally met them in the community through social functions so they know they can trust us to keep their privacy."

"Most people like privacy, but some people are nosy; our clients don't want somebody asking questions, looking at their artwork, personal photos. They are regular people with expected exposure; however, they still need to be able to live their lives."

To maintain that level of confidentiality, O'Herlihy says that at times, they have fewer photos of the home available for viewing. They also try to do a bit more buyer qualifying before bringing someone to a celeb's home. "Unfortunately, people can lie—you have to do your homework." **RE**

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