



DOLLY LENZ: The \$7 Billion Sales Whiz

How a real estate star keeps her numbers in the stratosphere

BY JULIE EARLE-LEVINE

Dolly Lenz, vice chairman at Prudential Douglas Elliman, sells more real estate than any other broker in the United States, some \$7 billion to date. Happy to plead guilty to an almost manic obsession with her job, Lenz—who is frequently working her BlackBerry (one of 12) at 3 a.m.—admits to “not sleeping a lot.” She closed three deals while in labor with her first child and hasn’t vacationed in years.

To say she goes the distance is an understatement: When trying to finalize a sale with a Chinese mogul, she hopped a plane to Hong Kong, then flew straight back to New York—a 16-hour flight each way—within a 48-hour span. For another closing, Lenz jetted to and from Moscow, also in less than 48 hours. Lenz, who started her working life as an accountant in the Bronx, then as a fledgling broker specializing in studio apartments, now caters to big-time players, chartering Sikorsky helicopters (at \$20,000 a pop, out of her own pocket) to take prospective clients to see eight-figure Hamptons properties.



PHOTO COURTESY OF DOUGLAS ELLIMAN



Do you really work through the night?

Many of my clients live in Asia, so it is a habit I developed out of necessity. On a bad night, I sleep three hours. On a good night, maybe five hours.

Once a buyer emailed me at 3 a.m. He was in California and he was interested in an apartment on the West Side. He gave me his parameters. At 5 a.m., I gave him a list of apartments to consider, and within 24 hours of viewing the properties, we had a handshake deal on his favorite. After we closed, ten days later, he told me that he had been working with several brokers but was impressed that I had responded to his email in “real time.”

How do you get it all done?

I’ve always been a high-energy person. I run ten miles every day in Central Park, and I eat lots of carbs, especially bread topped with any type of spread you can think of.

You get done what needs to be done, as opposed to what should be done.

What are your shortcuts? You have a reputation for not returning phone calls and appearing at industry events last minute. Recently, there was a media report that you didn’t turn up at your own awards ceremony.

Not true. Obviously, if I didn’t return phone calls I wouldn’t be successful for very long. It’s a matter of prioritizing. You might not be first on the list, but you are definitely going to get a call back.

Industry events are not about the client. Recently, there was the Douglas Elliman’s Awards Breakfast, an internal company ceremony. Normally this event lasts four hours, and I’m too busy to be out of commission—pardon the pun—for that length of time. So I prearranged to have them text me about 15 minutes before they needed me, which they did, and I came right over.

Why do you think you have been so successful?

I have been developing long-term business relationships for over 20 years, and they provide me with recurring business. Over 60 percent of my revenue is generated from either repeat business or referrals. Real estate brokerage is not a get-rich-quick business, and developing a revenue base is critical, especially for riding out economic downturns.

How do you close the deal?

I have to be the ultimate problem solver. It’s my job to address each and every set of issues, the problems that must be overcome. So much of the transaction is not under your control. Add to that the emotional and psychological factors that are part of every deal, and you get an idea of how difficult a job brokering really is. There are no formulas. Critical thinking will only take you so far. Truly successful brokers have a gut feel for what needs to be done in a given situation.

Give us an example.

I once had a couple who were interested in purchasing a full-floor prewar co-op on either Park or Fifth Avenue. I had the perfect apartment for them. The only problem was that it was in a brand-new, modern, glass-enclosed condo on the West Side. I asked them to see it, but they refused. No matter what I said, no matter how often I tried, they insisted it would be a waste of their time. I continued to show them prewar co-ops on the East Side, but they didn’t like anything. Finally, I invited them to have dinner with me. I picked a restaurant one block away from the condo. After dinner I walked them toward the building and told them I had the key to a fabulous apartment if they wanted to go up and take a quick look. I was afraid they’d shoot me, but they said yes. Naturally, they fell in love with it, and signed a contract the following day. I never give up.

Tell us about one of the your toughest sales, and how you nailed it.

There was a deal I’d been working on for 18 months. The board initially made a mistake and rejected the package. It was a whole job to reverse that decision. I can tell you it almost never happens. It is a very big deal.

I had to turn around the entire board, person by person. I had to recast the buyers (among the wealthiest people in New York) so they were the most wonderful, fabulous people on the planet, and I had to show every board member that there was a mistake, they were confused with someone else. Because they were related by some distant blood, that they were not accountable [for what the board had heard about them]. That they were wonderful, philanthropic people. So I more than performed.

We went to the closing, and the seller, who was a very wealthy woman, says to me a few hours before the closing, You know, Dolly, I don’t think the transaction was worth, on reflection, a million and change. I said, I’m sorry, we have a signed agreement, and I expect to get that check at the closing later today.

On this particular one, I thought, You know what, I have to give her something. If I don’t, she will leave this table unhappy. So, I told her lawyer, instead of \$1,025,000 I’ll take \$1,020,000. I will take off \$5,000 if that makes her happy. And it did make her happy. My back would have been up more with a man. I would have been more affronted.

Give us some best practices for making the sale.

One of the first things I tell new brokers is that their main job is to gather as much information as they can about the client. You can’t sell if you don’t know who you are selling to, and the more information you can gather, the more effective you will be. The second thing is to talk less and listen more. It is amazing how many deals are lost because a broker

will unknowingly say the wrong thing. When the right buyer comes along, most property will sell itself if only the broker is smart enough to avoid getting in the way. The third thing is the importance of following up. Many buyers are not ready to purchase at the time you meet them, but you can bet that they eventually will be. When they are ready to buy, you want them to call you first. Stay in touch with them and the likelihood of them calling you rises exponentially.

How has selling changed with the subprime crisis?

As the credit crunch has led to tighter credit standards, brokers have been forced to get much more involved in the mortgage process. Prequalifying buyers has become absolutely essential, since now you need much more of a down payment and a better credit score than you needed just a few months ago.

Where will this real estate debacle take us?

I don’t think it is a debacle. There are some markets in the country that have been overbuilt, and prices are adjusting to reflect that excess. Sales are happening and inventories are declining, but this is a process that will take some time.

Do you ever take a vacation?

The last vacation I took was about 20 years ago, and it was a three-day break in Hawaii from a long business trip I was on. I was miserable. I know I’m a workaholic, but I love what I do and can’t imagine anything that I would enjoy more.

What’s your biggest extravagance?

I don’t spend much on myself personally, but I do spend a lot of money on my business. The largest expense I have is business attire. I spend upwards of \$20,000 a month. I hate to shop but I need to do it, so typically I spend

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"I've owned maybe 70 or 80 properties, up to 40 at one time."

about ten minutes at Bergdorf Goodman. I run in. I really only wear Valentino, Akris, Dolce & Gabbana, that's it. I try them on, get fitted, and I'm done.

When do you schedule in children and other family members?

I don't schedule them.

Do you have a daily routine?

My normal routine is jogging in Central Park every morning for a couple of hours. I get two uninterrupted hours to think, plan, and problem-solve. Both my kids lead pretty busy lives, either at school or at work during the summer. I keep track of them throughout the day on my BlackBerry. I usually have business dinners at night, so I grab a bite with them before or after my meetings. Yes, I eat twice. Wherever possible, I take my family on business trips. I work, they sightsee. It works for us.

What about your own real estate ventures?

I've owned maybe 70 or 80 properties, but I haven't lived in them all. Most I have rented out. I always look for unique properties that are priced well and have excellent appreciation potential. For me, real estate is an investment, whether you live in it or not. The numbers have to make sense first, then I can fall in love.

How many do you currently own?

Eight properties. That is not a lot for me. I've owned up to 40 at one time. But owning property requires so much work, and I just don't have the time.

What did you pay for your first apartment?

Sixty-three thousand dollars. It was a studio

in a Park Avenue co-op, facing a brick wall, and my dad helped me buy it.

Any advice for young women and men starting out in real estate?

If you want a career in real estate brokerage, you have to realize that for at least the first year and probably longer, you are not going to make very much money, if anything at all. If this is not something you can live with, then I would suggest getting a salaried sales position. The rewards are less, but at least you'll get a monthly paycheck. If you can get a position that pays both a salary and commissions, you'll have the best of both worlds. If you decide to go the strictly commission route, choose a market and learn it. Building by building, apartment by apartment, even if it's just one square city block. Then expand from there. The investment you make to acquire the knowledge you need will pay off in time.

You really have to be able to deal with failure. Many times you will work on a deal for many months or years and have the deal fall through, earning you nothing. I spent more than a year, including many months in Hong Kong, putting together the deal on the Columbus Center Development site, representing the Island Shangri-La Hotel for the hotel component of Donald Trump's proposal. We lost out to the Related Companies and the Mandarin Oriental Hotel. At the time it was a very hard pill to swallow, but the experience helped me significantly later on in my career.

If you can wake up the next morning after a deal falls apart and get back to work with the same passion and enthusiasm you had when you first entered this business, then you have what it takes.

New York-based journalist Julie Earle-Levine has written for the Financial Times and New York Magazine.



At the Four Seasons for a client lunch



Lenz shows prospective buyers an apartment at the Cipriani Club Residences on Wall Street



JAMES HAMILTON/NY OBSERVER; FRANCES ROBERTS FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES/REDUX; SHOWCASE/PIXNEWS.COM

Lenz by the numbers

BLACKBERRYS OWNED

Yes, I have 12, but I usually don't have more than three on me. Lately I've been trying to keep it to just one.

CELL PHONES

One, but I have additional phone lines on my BlackBerrys.

EMAILS PER DAY

700 to 800. The IT department had to install an extra [BlackBerry] server just to handle my volume.

BIGGEST DEAL (IN DOLLARS)

In terms of contract price, a \$200 million development site on Fifth Avenue and 38th Street.

THE BIGGEST COMMISSION

About \$2 million for a penthouse at Time Warner Center.

SALES VOLUME LAST YEAR

\$748 million and change.

SALES VOLUME OVER COURSE OF CAREER

About \$7 billion.

TAKE-HOME SALARY

I don't get a salary. It's all commissions. [Sources estimate between \$9 and \$10 million.]