

NO LIMITS

20/20 FORESIGHT

Cindy Brouillette, CRS, e-PRO

Company: Cindy B! REALTORS,
Fort Wright, Ky.

Annual Transactions: 220

2002 Gross Sales: \$35.4 million

Her Philosophy: Embrace change, don't sanction incompetence and be willing to delegate.

She says: "Be open to criticism and use the information you gather as a way to improve."

Cindy Brouillette, CRS, e-PRO, can see and feel things before they happen. No, she's not a seer or a psychic, just a savvy real estate broker who parlayed years of marketing experience into a successful real estate career.

"I have an intuitive sense in the area of marketing," says Brouillette, broker and REALTOR® in Fort Wright, Ky. "I can actually feel changes in the industry before they're visible."

Take technology. In 1998 — years before virtual-tour firms began offering their services to agents — Brouillette had already figured out the value of putting 360-degree photos of her listings online. "I was the first agent in Greater Cincinnati to use virtual tours," she says, "and the first in Northern Kentucky to have a Web site."

Today, Brouillette's entire six-agent team is e-PRO certified and represents 60 percent of all agents in Northern Kentucky who have completed the technology certification. Oddly enough, the company makes up just

1 percent of the REALTORS® population in the region.

Brouillette's forward-looking perspective works. In 2002, Cindy B! REALTORS® grossed \$35.4 million, closing 220 transactions on an average home price of \$165,000. The *Cincinnati Business Courier* no doubt factored all of these numbers into its decision to name Cindy B! one of its top 25 real estate firms of 2002.

In real estate for 14 years, Brouillette started the firm in 1998 after working for West Shell REALTORS® for nine years. Brouillette's company was a one-agent operation for the first two years, netting 84 sales in 1998 and 112 in 1999. She credits a Fortune 100 corporate marketing background and five years of owning her own marketing firm with accelerating her real estate success.

"I was already accustomed to the three things that real estate offered: good money, flexible hours and no boss," Brouillette says. "I asked myself, 'how can I duplicate this?' and found the answer in real estate — an industry that originally enticed me for its investment opportunities. I ended up falling in love with sales."

Eye on Marketing

But Brouillette didn't give up marketing. In fact, she still relies on those years of marketing experience to navigate a customer-centric industry in which early insights and unparalleled customer service often pay off handsomely. "I've always relied on marketing research to make decisions," she says. "I didn't see real estate as being any different."

Brouillette's marketing plan relies in large part on customer surveys and

a core group of client advisers. Both have helped her tailor her firm's services to client wants and needs.

After-closing surveys help her determine what clients like most and least about their buying or selling experience. She then uses the information — both positive and negative — to differentiate her company from the rest of the marketplace. After closing, Brouillette sends each client a survey and a self-addressed, stamped envelope by mail. On it is a series of open-ended questions, including the most important one: How can we improve our service? Return rates are strong, typically around 53 percent.

The results are then translated into



Profiles of Top Producers

a numeric scale and broken down by buyers, sellers and expired listings. Though only a small percentage of surveys come back with suggestions for improvement, Brouillette finds even the tiniest nuggets extremely valuable. "When a suggestion comes back about adjusting one of our systems, we make sure we never hear that comment again," she says.

From a database of 2,000 contacts, Brouillette has also selected 175 people to serve as the firm's Client Advisory Council. She turns to the Council for advice on major business decisions. Four years ago, for example, Brouillette was toying with the idea of unbundling services and offering a "choice commission" plan to customers, rather than a flat commission rate.

With an eye on maintaining her firm's premier image, Brouillette created a mockup commission plan and survey, including such questions as "How would you view an agent who offered commission choices?" and polled the council members.

Their responses were revealing. "Much to my surprise, I found out that clients would have a much higher image of agents who offer choices, and switching over would only help our image," Brouillette says. "So we went with a choice commission plan."

To agents and brokers who don't have their own crystal balls, she suggests using client surveys and advisory polls to help bring the picture into focus. But brace yourself for the comments, she warns, because they may not always be positive.

"There are only so many things that can go wrong," Brouillette says. "If you're constantly working to minimize and eliminate those things, you'll see a positive influence on your image that translates into more repeat and referral business." ■

Reach **Cindy Brouillette, CRS**, at 859.331.6200, cindyb@cindyb.com or www.cindyb.com.

CONNECT THE DOTS

Marcie Maxwell, CRS

Company: Windermere Real Estate, Renton, Wash.

Annual Transactions: 150 – 170

2002 Gross Sales: About \$40 million

Her Philosophy: Partnerships are the key to success.

She says: "My job is to help clients get what they want and solve problems along the way. Together we can maximize resources for everyone."

Her clients never know where they might spot **Marcie Maxwell, CRS**. The Renton, Wash., REALTOR® might be planting flowers on a public street median, leading other real estate



agents on a bus tour, meeting with legislators or campaigning for a school bond issue. The associate broker gets involved in almost every aspect of community building in her town just south of Seattle.

On a Friday in June, Maxwell helped paint someone else's house as part of the Windermere Community Service Day. The Seattle-based company shuts down for the day, and its 6,500 associates do volunteer work in their communities. The company also donates a portion of each transaction to the Windermere Foundation.

Windermere launched its foundation in 1989, the same year Maxwell joined the agency. But that was no coincidence. For 16 years, she had worked in banking, starting as a teller for a regional bank and working her way up through branch manager and area manager. When Maxwell realized that the next promotion would take

her away from customers, she started looking for a new career.

Borrowed from Banking

That banking career gave Maxwell experience in almost every aspect of real estate lending. She worked on originating loans, servicing loans and foreclosures. Each would add value to her real estate career, in which she could retain the customer involvement she so enjoyed.

Using the same focused approach that ushered her up the ranks in banking, Maxwell launched an effort to identify the most progressive, community-minded REALTOR® in the area. She researched companies and surveyed dozens in the business.

Windermere came out on top. The agency leads the Puget Sound area in residential sales volume and has more than 200 independently owned offices in seven states and British Columbia.

The first year, she completed 30 transactions. By year five, she topped the 100 mark. Maxwell now ranks in the top 1 percent nationally in the number of transactions completed per year. She's the only salesperson in her office, but she has three assistants who help with marketing and administrative tasks.

How does she do it? She starts with individual plans for each customer. "Real estate isn't just getting people into a dream house," she says. "Sometimes, people are facing difficult issues — death, divorce or financial ruin. That means tailoring efforts to a wide variety of circumstances."

Her success is based in part on her deep understanding of the community and in part on her uncanny ability to connect problems with solutions. A lifelong resident of the Puget Sound area, Maxwell is a past Chairman of the Greater Renton Chamber of Commerce (GRCC) and currently chairs its Community Development committee. In 2001, voters elected her to the Renton School Board, where she serves as its legislative representative on education issues.

In 1998, Maxwell and her husband, a police officer, started the Maxwell Fund for Youth & Families. Administered through the Renton Community Foundation, the fund this year awarded grants for preschool parent nights, a parent-involvement effort and a mentoring program. "Education is the heartbeat of the community," Maxwell says. "In terms of quality of life and economic development, educating kids prepares for our future."

More recently, she helped create a cooperative marketing effort between the school district, the city, the regional hospital, a technical college and the Chamber of Commerce. The objective: to promote Renton's economic development and quality of life.

Connected for Good

Her efforts haven't gone unrecognized in the community. Maxwell won the City of Renton's 2001 Outstanding Citizen Award. The same year, the chamber named her its Outstanding Business Citizen. "I do a lot of connecting," she says. "Community partnerships are effective."

Maxwell nurtures her business connections in the same caring way. Every year, for example, she rents an area theater and invites all 1,900 of her clients to a movie party. She also co-sponsors and leads an annual REALTOR® Tour of Renton. A sizable chunk of Maxwell's business comes from repeat customers or referrals — another indication that her partnership efforts are paying off at work as well.

Even on the micro-level, Maxwell works to connect people. One last case in point: the "Homeowner Help Directory" on her Web site was created so that customers would know whom to call for everything from appliance repair to window cleaning.

It's all about making the right connections. ■

Reach **Marcie Maxwell, CRS**, at 206.949.1696, marcie@marciemaxwell.com, www.marciemaxwell.com.

TIME WELL SPENT

Nancy Argo, CRS, LTG

Company: Coldwell Banker Burnet of Minneapolis

Annual Transactions: 40+ in nine months

2002 Gross Sales: More than \$7 million

Her Philosophy: Conduct business during the business day.

She says: "My approach to work is to make a lot of things happen in a short amount of time."

Nancy Argo, CRS, LTG, of Coldwell Banker Burnet in Minneapolis, doesn't waste any time getting down to business. In fact, to hear her tell it, that's what she's all about — at least during productive business hours.

For many real estate professionals, the typical business day starts early and ends late to accommodate their customers' hectic lifestyles. Weekend appointments generally go with the territory, as well. Not so for Argo.

Her ideal day shapes up something like this. Argo promises to make three eyeball-to-eyeball appointments each day. She schedules her first client meeting from 7 to 8 a.m., another from 11 a.m. to noon and a third from 3 to 4 p.m. But first the early riser checks her e-mail and forwards all office calls to her cell phone, so she can avoid a long list of e-mails and callbacks later in the day. After her last appointment, she checks e-mail again and sorts out a few administrative details for an hour or so. But then she's done. Her workday is complete.

"I conduct business during the best business hours of the day," she says. "So on Friday, I may be done at noon. In our area, it's hard to do good work after that time. Most people have checked out for the weekend."

You might think clients would balk at Argo's time-sensitive work habits. But they are willing to accept them. "Seldom will I meet at 5 or 6 p.m. — even to sign a contract," she says. "But I explain my thinking up front. So my



clients are okay with it. They know that we and they are all too tired to get our best work done at that time."

Argo works solo from two offices, one in her home and another in the heart of downtown Minneapolis — from which she covers the city's seven counties. She'll tell you she has zero paid assistants and four unpaid: three computers (two Dell's and a Toshiba) and a PDA (a Palm Pilot). All four assistants are going at one time, tackling different tasks.

One is spitting out MLS listings while another downloads a client presentation. Argo is sorting through 80 to 100 e-mails on the third, a notebook, before syncing her Palm for the day. She moves deftly from one station to another — meanwhile confirming tomorrow's three appointments on the phone. Online Agent helps keep track of it all. Not a moment is wasted.

Homework Time

Argo doesn't give her clients much slack either. Even before their first meeting, she sends them homework. Buyers receive an orientation packet, and sellers get a pre-list packet. The color-coded materials — blue for buyers and green for sellers — provide clients with all the background information they'll need to know to get down to the business at hand.



Profiles of Top Producers

Each packet includes a market overview, the company's mission statement and Argo's list of "I Will" statements. Leaving little to interpretation, she clearly spells out how she does business and what she will do for her customers. Statements such as "I will give you extraordinary service," "I will be accessible to answer your needs" and "I will involve you in the marketing of your home" set realistic expectations of what lies ahead.

Argo asks clients to carefully review the materials before their appointment — going so far as to warn of a test upon her arrival. More often than not, she says, clients meet her at the door with some mention of having studied. "It saves tons of time," she says, "I don't talk about any of that preliminary information unless they raise questions or concerns."

Argo extends the same respect to

other professionals, such as bankers. "You need to let people do what they do best," she says. "Don't call 10 times on a loan in progress. I give them the work and trust them to do their job. Otherwise, you waste time and actually slow the process down."

A mother of three, Argo understands the value of work — and play. "When my kids were young, I used to tell them, 'When we work, we work hard. And when we play, we play hard.'" And she still does. Her dollar-productive days allow Argo to work nine months each year.

She and her husband of 36 years spend the rest of the year traveling — February and March in warmer climates and another month's worth of weeklong jaunts to places they've always wanted to visit. "Sure I could do more volume and work 12 months out of the year," Argo says. "But that's just not what I want to do with my life."

What advice would Argo give newcomers to real estate? "Surround yourself with successful people," she says, "and get as much education in as many places as possible." In her nearly 30 years in the business, Argo has attended more than 50 NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF REALTORS® Conferences, earned her CRS Designation and networked like crazy. She also makes time to pass along all that knowledge, making 15 or more professional-development presentations a year.

"When people ask me how many I have on my team, I tell them more than 9,000. That's roughly how many colleagues I consult with across the state and around the country." ■

Reach **Nancy Argo, CRS, LTG**, at 612.924.4384, nancy@minneapolisrelocation.com, www.minneapolis.com.