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IN THE REGION/Westchester

When Independents Team Up

By ELSA BRENNER

AS the housing downturn grinds on, a dozen independent brokerages in Westchester, increasingly worried that large real estate franchises like Sotheby's and Coldwell Banker will crowd them out, have forged an alliance in an effort to grab a piece of the shrinking pie of buyers and sellers.

Acknowledging that there's strength in numbers, the firms have joined a loosely structured year-old group called the Guild of Independent Real Estate Professionals, which is based in Mamaroneck. Their goal is to gain traction through shared networking opportunities and by advertising under a common banner.

"It's a matter of striking a balance between belonging to a huge corporation and going it totally on one's own," said Michelle Mambrino, who founded the guild last spring with Sue Lapham, another Westchester resident (neither is a broker, but both have marketing backgrounds).

Kathleen Zaccagnino, who has owned Rye Port Real Estate in Port Chester since 1985, joined the guild, she said, because too often after a potential client asks her to determine a selling price for a house, he or she ignores the advice and signs a listing agreement with a franchise firm that has more name recognition. Belonging to an overarching organization like the guild, she added, could increase the credibility of smaller independent agencies like hers, in an increasingly competitive marketplace.

Mark J. Seiden, a guild member who owns Mark J. Seiden Real Estate in Briarcliff Manor, shies away from being a franchisee in a big firm, because "too big a company is like the Titanic — a huge ship that can't turn around fast enough in a changing sea."

"The Titanic couldn't move fast enough to miss the iceberg," he said, "and I want to be able to do that. Not that I'm saying that the chains are going to sink, but for me — and especially in times like these — they move too slowly."

Mr. Seiden has experienced the business all three ways: as a franchisee of a national chain, as an independent and, most recently, as a member of the guild. In



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Mark J. Seiden has been a franchisee and an independent and is now in the Guild of Independent Real Estate Professionals.

1998, he sold his agency to Coldwell Banker, and five years later, he took it back, frustrated with world of large real estate entities.

Lester J. Kravitz — who along with his wife, Rosalie, owns an independent brokerage in Pelham Manor — is another former member of a franchise: Better Homes and Gardens Real Estate, before

A brokers' guild offers safety in numbers.

it was sold to GMAC Real Estate. He opted out of that arrangement in the late 1990s, unenamored of the impersonal corporate structure.

"The bottom line is, I have to be my own man," Mr. Kravitz said, explaining that the guild offers him the camaraderie of his peers and the clout of an organization, without jeopardizing his independence.

The guild also lists among its members mortgage bankers, appraisers, lawyers and surveyors. "Many of the big-name real estate companies have a closed-door policy when it comes to outside mortgage providers," explained Vincent DiMella, a sales manager for Real Estate Mort-

gage Network in White Plains, who is joining the guild. "This is a relationship-driven business, and the guild gives us a way in."

Ms. Mambrino and Ms. Lapham are charging \$300 a year for membership — which is open to any independently owned firm. Among the benefits: Guild members save money by negotiating as a group for advertising, and they jointly sponsor events — for example, a two-day auction next month of 25 homes in the county, some in preforeclosure and others with owners who want to sell quickly.

Also, because the guild extends membership rights to other professionals, member firms have a ready-made roster for the convenience of their clients. In addition to about 15 brokerage members, it has a membership of about 10 other real-estate-related companies.

There is another similar organization in the county, called Westchester Real Estate, but it allows membership by invitation only. The reason for the limit is to avoid competition, said Gail Fattizzi, the executive director: only one real estate firm per sales area. Moreover, she asserted that according to sales figures, the group's members were the "market leaders" in their areas.

Unlike the guild, this group does not allow lawyers, surveyors or other real estate-related professionals to join. Based in

Eastchester and now several years old, it has 14 real estate companies serving Westchester, Putnam, Dutchess and Fairfield Counties, as well as parts of New York City.

But even taking these two groups into account, the potential pool of members for alliances of independent real estate companies in Westchester is substantial, according to the County Board of Realtors. More than half of the board's 700 member offices are small independent firms with five or fewer agents, said Richard Haggerty, the deputy executive officer for the board and the Westchester-Putnam Multiple Listing Service.

Reflecting the hardships of the economic climate, Mr. Haggerty said, the number of boutique firms represents an 8 percent decline from a year ago. Also, the number of individual real estate agents has dropped by 10 percent from last year, to about 6,600.

Within this newly streamlined community, there are independents who have found that despite the attractions of a guild or similar organization, the safety offered by the big chain firms is impossible to resist.

"It adds authority to have an affiliation with a worldwide company," said Sona Davidian, a co-owner of C. S. McClellan, a 132-year-old Pelham real estate company that recently allied with Sotheby's. "With the market struggling as it is," she said, "we need that extra edge."

The Pelham real estate company, which will remain locally owned and managed under the new arrangement with Sotheby's, now has access to the global chain's auction house and its clients, "who are among the richest in the world," Ms. Davidian said.

Nationally, guilds of independents do not represent a notable trend, said Stephanie Singer, a spokeswoman for the National Association of Realtors. The Internet yields a few listings: the Realty Guild in Haverhill, Mass.; the Council of Independent Realtors in New Mexico; Independent Real Estate Brokers in Hayward, Calif.; and San Antonio Real Estate Professionals in Texas. If the climate gets still worse, however, an increase in numbers could be just a matter of time.