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Catwalk models stimulate sales in upscale New York

RESIDENTIAL

Realtors are hiring chic girls to push condos, writes **Julie Earle-Levine**

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DEALING with cut-throat real estate agents can be like floating on your back in the sea as hungry sharks circle ever closer.

Recently some Manhattan brokers seem even more desperate to secure sales in a slowing market -- arriving at showings stressed and sweaty, with bags and black circles under their eyes.

Would it ease the pain if these brokers were chic, beautiful young women?

One boutique agency thinks so, and has hired fashion models from the catwalk to be real estate agents.

Paramount Realty, in downtown Soho, has six models on its books and some have already made multi-million-dollar apartment sales.

These women are extremely attractive and dress accordingly. Forget the usual broker attire of casual jeans and sneakers -- these women are decked out in Gucci and Jimmy Choo.

Clients are driven to showings in a 2007 Rolls-Royce phantom and get to have lunch with blonde beauties.

"We are transforming the experience of buying and selling real estate in much the same way the fashion houses and other premium brands are leaving the imprint of a memorable living experience," said Paolo Zampolli, co-chairman of the Paramount Group.

Zampolli is also the founder of ID Models in New York, and is a relative newcomer to real estate. He started Paramount two years ago, at the suggestion of his friend Donald Trump, the property mogul.

Zampolli introduced Melania Knauss, a former Slovenian model, to Trump and they were married last year.

Zampolli is also Trump's head of international project development and takes care of the "big, big, money" like those shopping for a \$US30 million (\$39 million) penthouse. His clients include Ron Burkle, the Beverly Hills supermarket billionaire, for whom he has been trying to find a New York residence.

"I tried to buy Soho House (the private members' club) for him but they wouldn't sell," he says.

Zampolli believes his models will compete well with more seasoned brokers. "Modelling and real estate are much the same. It is all about who you know and making it big."

One model broker is shopping for a New York apartment for a London buyer who wants to spend \$US25 million, he says over lunch at Cipriani restaurant in Soho, where he dines twice a day.

At the hangout for wealthy Europeans and locals, Elle Macpherson's ex, Arki Busson, wanders over to say hello to Zampolli, then crosses the street to Sotheby's International Realty.

"Hmm. Maybe he is buying a house here," Zampolli wonders out loud. He will check on this later. After lunch, we visit his Greene Street, Soho, offices. His model brokers are all out, some on fashion bookings or travel and another is studying at Colombia University and works part-time for him.

ID, where he remains president, is in the same building but his model recruits are from various model agencies. Perhaps the best known is Angie Everhart, 37, a stunning redhead model and actor.

"I know a lot of wealthy people around the world, so it made sense for me to get paid to tell them about apartments," she says, adding that some models are very, very smart.

"They are beautiful and confident, having travelled the world. They are also very ambitious."

Maria Markova, a 21-year-old blonde, blue-eyed Russian model completed her real estate licensing course, necessary in New York to work as a broker, a year and a half ago.

She has already sold two multi-million-dollar apartments at 55 Wall Street, a Cipriani residence and a luxury condo building. She simply showed them to friends.

"Models are very well connected and are used to operating in a high-net-worth environment. Everyone wants to know a model."

Zampolli says modelling is an incredibly competitive industry and these women were accustomed to fighting for success at a young age.

"They start at 16 or 17 and can finish at 24, so they have to work very, very hard. Helping some of them get their real estate licences was just a formality.

"Many of them were born to do this and are very successful." Not all his brokers are models.

"The most important thing is that the person is driven and has the ability to service our clients."

Zampolli himself has a \$US3 million Gramercy Park apartment, and collects Picassos and Miro's. He wears Hermes ties and personalised shirts.

At a recent dinner concert at 55 Wall Street, where guests included Harvey Weinstein and Sharon Stone, Zampolli booked several \$US125,000 tables and was surrounded by gorgeous models and celebrities.

The dinner conversation veered from that night's entertainment -- Duran Duran -- to real estate. Is real estate as sexy as fashion?

At that moment, Zampolli received a phone call about a multi-million-dollar deal he said a model had just landed. He jumped to his feet and threw his hands in the air. "Is it sexy? Money is sexy."

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