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Weichert in Blue Bell a top performer for national company

By GARY PULEO
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Posted: Monday, 08/19/13 06:10 pm
 Updated: Monday, 08/19/13 06:11 pm



Inside the Weichert Realtors in Blue Bell are L-R Realtor, ABR, ASR Brian Tuner, Realtor, ABR, ASR Mariano and ABR, ASP, CRS, GRI, SRES, Associate Broker Diane Williams. (21st Century Media/Gene Walsh)

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WHITPAIN — From a quaint old farmhouse on Skippack Pike, the Blue Bell office of Weichert Realtors has built a booming operation that ranks among the company's top performing agencies in the state.

The Blue Bell enterprise, which opened in 1996, remains one of 200 branches that are still company-owned, since founder and president Jim Weichert opened up his 44-year-old company to franchisees beginning in 2002.

"It's kind of astronomical and unusual today for one man to own a couple hundred offices across the country," said Shelia Banner, office manager. "A single ownership really makes a difference, because that way he can control the quality of the company and how it's run. We have our own mortgage, insurance and loan services, and it's been that way since Jim started."

As in so many industries, the Internet has forever changed the real estate world, and Weichert's top agents are savvy online marketers in a company that spends \$11 million annually to fortify its Internet presence.

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"Everybody is on the Internet, but it's how you're on the Internet that makes a difference," said Diane Williams, a seasoned realtor with 30 years of experience — 20 of them with Weichert. "Weichert owns their own syndication company and they don't outsource their material to another company. That's a key difference. The others all do it, but they can't do it in the same way as Weichert because they don't have the funds to own their own syndication company."

In 2002 Weichert Lead Network debuted a one-of-a-kind lead generating customer contact center, which uses state-of-the-art technology so that online and 800-number callers can receive personalized service seven days a week.

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"If you want to sell your house, it's the same thing," said agent Brian Tuner, an 11-year Weichert veteran. "If you call the call center and you'll be able to talk to a live person within 10 minutes. It's really based on providing premier service, and that's what's different about our company."

It's Blue Bell address notwithstanding, Weichert helps match homebuyers with the ideal properties in the five surrounding counties, from Beverly Hills-style mansions to the most modest domiciles.

"We do it all, and you never want to fit into a niche where people think you're only selling high-end homes," Williams noted. "The million dollar properties will sit for a while. Your bread and butter are the \$200,000 and \$400,000 properties. You really have to nurture that. Because it's very satisfying to help that person find their first home."

Jordan Mariano, a relative newbie with nearly a decade

at Weichert, allowed that the advent of the smart phone era has dramatically altered the business in the same way the Internet once did.

"That's a big change in our business, with the number of people that have smart phones now, where in 2006 it was about one out of 10," Mariano said. "People can get instant gratification and answers now and they expect it. I've found it's still most important to follow up with people, and think of your clients first and have their best interests in mind. And that turns into repeat business."

And therein lies one aspect of the business that hasn't changed, Tuner pointed out.

"This business is built on referrals," said Tuner, one of Weichert's top agents, with 56 sales to his credit last year. "Without referrals, you're going to fail. About 50 to 70 percent of new realtors aren't around two years from now because they don't make it in this business. And it's not from lack of knowledge. They just don't have the clients or what it takes to build a client base."

Williams, now in the rare position of having helped three generations of home buyers, agreed.

"The first thing you do is write a thank you note to a client for a referral, because you're so grateful," said Williams, who likes to keep in touch with clients, which often results in handsome payoffs. "I talked to a client last year who I had sold a house to in 1986 and kept in contact all that time. They got in touch not long ago when they were ready to sell the property. It's important to people that you're their realtor and they remember you."

The agents agreed that the emotional upshot is one of the most rewarding parts of the business.

"I sold a house in Green Lane for someone who wanted to live in Montana," Williams said. "And out of the blue I got an e-mail that said 'we wouldn't be living our dream out here if it weren't for you selling our home for us.' And that's so gratifying. It's like an early Christmas gift."

Tuner added: "I love the feeling at the end of the day that you helped somebody find

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