



REAL ESTATE BROKER'S INSIDER

Management and sales tools for the residential real estate broker

Agency Marketing

Broker uses lengthy, detailed ads to sell homes quickly in a down market

"God is in the details," architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe famously said. Home sales are in the details, too, says an Austin, TX, broker.

Stan Barron, broker-owner of Stan Barron Properties, takes an unusually detailed approach to marketing properties, all in attempt to attach a story and some emotional pull to each listing.

His ads might include a count of exactly how many trees are on a well-landscaped property. Or he might describe the background of the architect who designed the home or of the builder who built it. If the details aren't in the home's favor, he might include those, too.

The unconventional marketing approach is responsible for the success of his one-man shop, Barron says. His typical sale price is more than \$600,000, and, he says, he sells almost every property he lists.

Take the Madison Avenue approach

Barron says his approach to telling a story about each home stems from his background in the advertising industry in the 1980s.

"I'm not smart enough to have invented any of this stuff," Barron

says. "I stole it all from Madison Avenue."

Barron entered real estate in 1988, another difficult market for Austin. Barron remembers it as a "bloodbath."

As a rookie, he tested his marketing approach on nine houses that weren't selling. They quickly sold, and Barron soon committed to telling a story about every listing.

He stuck with the strategy through the boom years. And now that the tech bust has hit Austin's housing market, Barron says his stories are more important than ever.

In July 2000, only 3,500 homes were available in the Austin market. By July 2003, that inventory had grown to 11,000 homes waiting to be sold.

"It's a classic case where you've got more houses than buyers, so marketing becomes very important," he says.

While every broker talks about the importance of marketing, Barron does it differently than most. His strategy goes against the industry's received wisdom about marketing homes.

Typically, agents take a reductionist approach when they write real

estate ads. There's room for only a few basics. That tactic saves precious space in newspaper ads, but it also makes all properties sound alike. There's only enough room to describe the number of bedrooms and bathrooms and throw in a cookie-cutter adjective like "spacious," "charming," or "fixer-upper."

"Everything gets boiled down to a commodity," Barron says. "It's kind of boring. I study what makes a home special, then I write a customized ad."

Barron typically takes a week to research a property and write the ad, a task he calls his favorite part of the job.

Specifics — and sometimes sex — sell

If it's a high-end home with a particularly attractive swimming pool, for instance, he'll hire a professional photographer to shoot it at night. He'll describe the torches in the yard and the wind in the trees. Barron says he wants to make potential buyers envision sitting by the pool with a glass of wine.

And, as any Madison Avenue exec knows, sex sells.

"If it's got privacy that allows for bathing-suits-optional swimming, I'm certainly going to mention that," Barron says.

It's not only sex that sells. It's

"Some of the best ads admit fault."

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also details. In an ad for a high-end home, he included a photo of the antique-style tub and marble floors in the master bath. And he described the living arrangements of the seller's parents: They lived in the guest house, which was secluded enough that parents and child didn't have to see each other every day.

He once sold a home designed by an associate of Frank Lloyd Wright. Barron called the architect and learned of details such as a skylight that let a beam of sunshine travel across the room, illuminating fossils inside the home's rock walls.

In another property description posted recently on his website, Barron mentioned that a home's "beautiful, manicured yard" includes 44 trees.

"Instead of just saying the house had a lot of trees, it's better to give a specific number," he says. "Specifics sell more than generalities."

Mentions good with the bad

Barron bucks another piece of conventional wisdom: He occasionally mentions the downsides of a property.

In one recent property description on his website, Barron writes of a \$1.25 million listing, "This is not a transaction for novice buyers because you must be construction-savvy. Why? The catch is you must buy the home as it sits. It is partially complete."

Your customer is going to find out about the issue sooner or later, Barron says, so why not address it up front? It's a strategy that gives you credibility, he says. It also weeds out buyers who aren't serious. "Some of the best ads admit fault," Barron says.

Of course, Barron doesn't list all of a property's problems in an ad. He prefers to accentuate the positive.

"Specifics sell more than generalities."

If a home doesn't seem to justify the seller's asking price, he'll stress the location of the land, or the view.

Barron also is sure to include addresses, asking prices, and square footage in his ads, something else buyers can't always find in ads.

"I write these ads in such a way that the consumer doesn't really need to call me," Barron says. "There's enough information that they can decide if they want to pursue it."

Again, he's going against the grain. Most agents write general ads so they can generate a large number of phone calls from people that they might be able to convince to buy another property.

"That's not what the consumer wants to be — some sort of a lead who has to give their name and phone number," he says. "I'm not trying to generate that call just to get their name and phone number."

Instead, Barron is looking for a strong connection with a small group that has a real interest in that proper-

Creative ads: Broker uses different approach to house ads

Austin, TX, broker Stan Barron wants an ad to read not like a boilerplate ad but like a story about the listing.

Some examples of his story lines:

- High-end home described on his website: "Here is a chance to make a tempting buy on a trophy waterfront home, but there is a catch. This is not a transaction for novice buyers because you must be construction-savvy. Why? The catch is you must buy the home as it sits. It is partially complete. This home is on a two-acre lot located on a deep water pocket cove that is totally private. The home has an exotic pool, guest house, and approximately 5,700 square feet. Waterfront access is down a gentle slope. The home was \$1,950,000. It is now \$1,250,000, but you must buy it as-is and close quickly. NorthShore on Lake Travis is the neighborhood that was the site of the 2000 Parade Of Homes."

- From a two-page brochure for a home that sold in 11 days: "Hilltop setting in Westlake will make you think you are living at the edge of a tropical lagoon. The pool area is so beautiful it has already been the site of one wedding. In the afternoon, all this outdoor living space is in the shade. Exotically beautiful home includes a guest house for mom and dad, a guest apartment, and a set of Wall Street-caliber offices — all for the tempting price of \$1.29 million."

- Foreclosure described on his website: "This home was just foreclosed. It is a new home. It was \$308,900 — now \$199,500, but you must be able to finish the house. The four bedroom home is in the neighborhood called The Forest at Colorado Crossing. Sheetrock is in and painted. Cabinets are in place in the kitchen and bathrooms. The house needs all the flooring, plumbing and electric fixtures. When I walked the house, I was surprised to discover an apartment was built-in over the detached garage."

- New home described on his website: "Did you know that Texas builder Brighton Homes sold out? Their main operations are in Dallas and Houston. When they sold the company to a large, New Jersey-based homebuilder, the new owners said the Austin market is too small. The new owners have decided not to build any more homes in Austin, and all existing homes are being sold. This is one of the last two remaining. This one is complete and ready to sell. Located in the country club neighborhood of River Place, the home has 4 bedrooms, 3 baths, and 3,305 square feet. The impressive-looking home sits at the end of a dead-end street, and it has something you would never expect to see at this price — a very nice hill country view. On a big lot, too. There is one hurdle: You must be able to close immediately."

ty. Barron swears this approach works. He charges a six percent commission and has built up a large base of referral business.

In a hot market like Austin was in a few years ago, his approach typically brings a premium price, he says. In the cool market of today, the stories mean he can achieve a sale price at or near the list price.

Costly approach

Barron says he might spend \$5,000 to \$6,000 marketing a typical \$600,000 listing, an amount he esti-

mates is 10 times what an agent usually spends. He says the cost is worth it: His listings sell quickly.

“My rough calculation is I spend about 10 times per listing, which makes no sense, until you consider I sell virtually everything I get my hands on,” Barron says. Barron devotes a full-page ad to each property, although he doesn’t bother to buy space in the local newspaper. The broad circulation of newspapers means too many tire-kickers call about properties listed there. He prefers home publications.

Barron also puts his stories on the fliers that accompany yard signs.

The headline is the most important part of the ad, he says. He recalls the seller who wanted \$450,000 for a 1,000-square-foot lakefront home, a steep price in the Austin area. The headline on the ad read: “Ultimate weekend house on Lake Travis. Priced high enough to insure satisfaction.”

The headline worked, Barron says. The home sold in a few days.

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