

# Real Living Takes a Feminine Twist and Finds Growth

*By Lesley Geary*

**C**olumbus, Ohio real estate agent Susan Wainfor is having a banner year. She has sold more homes and made more money than ever before in her 18 years of selling houses. The big question is: Were all the stars aligned just right for her to break personal records after many years in the business, or does her hard-earned success have something to do with her brokerage's hot new brand?

Wainfor is a leading agent in Columbus, one of Ohio's major metropolitan areas, and Real Living is a real estate firm that in less than two years has quietly become the fifth largest residential real estate company in the United States.

Real Living was created in 2002, by merging three successful, 50-year-old brokerages into a new company—one

focused on changing the face of residential real estate. According to Chief Marketing Officer, Kaira Rouda, Real Living was determined to shake things up in the traditionally staid, often male-dominated world of real estate, as it created this new company—and new brand—from the ground up.

“With the launch of Real Living, we had a phenomenal opportunity,” said Rouda. “We could build a successful future on the foundation of three long-established brokerage histories, while also creating a new, powerful, highly-differentiated brand. It’s a great challenge—and offers us the best of both worlds: the stability of 50+ years of business success and the excitement and energy of a new company.”

With the launch of this new brand, Real Living’s leadership team also wanted to make residential real estate fun and engaging, elevating the pursuit of sales beyond quotes and commissions. The company’s goals were to generate agent passion and excitement, and to create marketing and advertising materials that would appeal to women—the consumer segment that Real Living believes drives most home buying and selling decisions.

“In the past, many real estate brands have been decidedly masculine. They’ve been created by men, intending to appeal to men. That’s why many real estate brands are characterized by sports metaphors, staid and literal imagery and visuals that are very similar to those used in the banking and insurance industries,” Rouda explains.

“We decided to take a different approach. The home buying and selling process is a highly emotional, very exciting experience. We want our brand materials to communicate that. And to communicate our passion for helping both consumers and agents make that experience as easy, convenient and enjoyable as possible. Our goal is to convey, through every marketing touch with our brand, who we

are as a company. Our branding aims to let both agents and consumers know that we’re a very different kind of real estate company. One focused on growth, innovation, and constantly improving the agent-consumer connection.”

Largely as a result of the merger, and this new vision, the newly minted firm closed \$7 billion in sales last

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year. Based on this new model and a daring new brand, and in a true departure from traditional real estate branding, Real Living unveiled a bright new look, largely red, assuredly feminine, anchored by a round red logo and a brand look that captures consumer attention with imaginative, bold and fun visuals.

The branding concept even extends to Real Living’s physical office space. The company is reinforcing this new brand image and culture by revamping its offices through the “Real Living Office of the Future.” This office prototype design calls for a “Real Living Room,” where clients can relax in front of a large fireplace; a children’s play area where busy moms can park their children while conferring with their real estate agent; and even a Real Living Café, where agents and clients can meet in a comfortable, yet high-tech environment.

And forget the traditional browns and beiges. Real Living’s office color palette features reds, purples and

other brilliant hues—selected to inspire innovation, energy and the high, positive emotion of the home buying and selling process.

But perhaps the biggest change, Rouda says, was to market more directly to female consumers. “Women now are having a more overt voice in the home purchase than ever before, and we want to be the brand that says ‘we know what you need.’ ”

Real Living’s business results show that the strategy is succeeding. Women, says Rouda, also make up the lion’s share of Real Living agents. “Real estate is really one of the first career fields where a woman could earn as much money as a man. Real estate is a major area of enterprise for entrepreneurial women.” And so Real Living says it wants its marketing to attract those agents, help them succeed, and retain them.

Agent Wainfor says Real Living is succeeding at creating a culture that appeals to women agents and brokers and an environment where women can succeed. “The new brand makes our presence professional, but it also makes us approachable. It’s vibrant and conveys the excitement of buying and selling homes.”

And while Wainfor says it is difficult to specifically quantify the new brand’s impact on the bottom line, she says, “Our new concept is colorful and upbeat, I know it has given us greater recognition—and that is a big part of success in this business.”

One strong boost to her sales is the Real Living business model and brand approach. The company provides an array of agent advertising materials—from e-newsletters, agent Web sites, e-cards, presentations and more—free of charge. The company also splits the cost of billboard, radio and TV advertising with agents—and they provide professionally-produced brand materials free of charge as well.

The company does all this because they believe the brand is truly brought

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to life when consumers interact with agents—so Real Living views it as the company’s responsibility to deliver agents compelling, consistent brand materials to build that customer connection.

The Real Living model also is winning applause from members of the investment community. Charles DelGrande, the managing partner at San Francisco-based Presidio Merchant Partners, an investment banking firm with a heavy emphasis on real estate, says the firm is doing most everything right.

“Real Living is constantly improving the way it makes the firm attractive to sales associates, and that carries over to the customer and client retention. It just all works very well in terms of a holistic strategy.”

DelGrande also sees that the way Real Living has created its umbrella brand for the founding companies—and future franchises—is a key. Real Living has been able to retain the underlying strengths of its legacy brands while layering a powerful new brand on top. In Columbus, Ohio, for instance, Real Living operates as HER Real Living and in Cleveland, the firm operates as Realty One Real Living. This enables the firm to retain much local recognition and the goodwill of its founding brand, while also infusing the energy and excitement of the new brand.

Another reason DelGrande likes the brand is its “clear value proposition,” and that direct connection from brand to agent to customer is showing up on the bottom line.

“They’re doing more things right than most. They care for the culture, take care of sales associates, provide training, execute brand strategy, maintain focus, and work on the service offering.”

Brand focus is critical for Real Living’s future success, DelGrande says. “The key to a great brand, and a possible downside, is that the devil is always in the details, and if there is any inconsistency, the brand gets muddled, there is

confusion and you end up seeing the negative results financially. So they have to always stay two steps ahead and keep things crisp.” DelGrande says so far so good for Real Living.

With rapid growth, consistency is not so simple to maintain, but it is at the essence of Real Living’s growth formula. With more than 100 offices in Florida and the Midwest, and 5,000 sales associates, Rouda is not resting. In the two years since launching the new brand, she has significantly restructured her marketing staff, ensuring that the brand can constantly scale for rapid growth.

Regional Real Living marketing directors are responsible for visiting individual sales offices, explaining the brand, working to keep sales staff fired up, morale high and problems low. To keep the brand fresh, the marketing team is always on the lookout for new ways of making the brand different, fun and powerful.

And while a brand’s impact is difficult to quantify, “It’s working—visits to major broker Web sites in the Real Living Network increased by more than 20 percent within five to six months of the launch of the new brand. And Web visits, length of stay and other metrics continue to rise. This translates into new customers, new listings and more sales, and more sales translate into better paid and even more highly motivated associates,” Rouda says.

She is already working on new strategies to keep the upstart brand fresh in the future. She won’t tell what all the new elements may be, but says, “The key to any great brand is that you are always planning several moves ahead of the market and the competition. We are just listening to what our agents and customers are saying and working to deliver a Real Living reality that is full of life.” □