

The Miami Herald

April 8, 2013

Tech-savvy Zilbert International Realty aims for high-end clients

BY MARTHA BRANNIGAN



Mark Zilbert, left, president and CEO of Zilbert International Realty, in his South Beach offices.

ZILBERT INTERNATIONAL REALTY

- Launched: 2004
- Founder, president and CEO: Mark Zilbert
- Agents: 30
- Headquarters: 1129 Fifth Street, Miami Beach
- Business: Residential real estate brokerage
- Sales: \$250 million in 2012

In Miami, where real-estate brokers are in high supply, Mark Zilbert is taking pains to stand out from the pack.

At the heart of the tech-savvy broker's strategic plans for growing Zilbert International Realty is branding: Trumpeting what the firm stands for has informed every facet of the business from where he put the headquarters (South Beach) to what colors and designs go in brochures (bold shapes and distinctive colors.)

"Everything we do has a strategy," said Zilbert, a 48-year-old Montreal native with a computer-science degree and the energy level of a motivational speaker.

Zilbert says his calculated approach is adding up: Last year, the residential real-estate brokerage, which has 30 agents, sold \$250 million in properties, its best year ever and up from \$200 million in 2011.

Zilbert says he will be “very happy” if the firm can hit \$300 million in sales this year, fueled by the voracious appetite of international buyers and wealthy New Yorkers.

He is positioning the firm to cater to high-end residential buyers and sellers, and not infrequently he will refer would-be clients elsewhere if they’re looking for a lower-end condo or house.

In January, Zilbert agent Jeff Miller represented the buyer in the \$27 million Setai Resort penthouse sale that set a record for a Miami-Dade condo, which arguably was broken by the recent sale of two penthouse units at the Miami Beach Edition for a combined price of \$34 million.

The company’s headquarters at 1129 Fifth Street is a testament to Zilbert’s focus on branding. Zilbert, who had been based in a second-floor office on Lincoln Road, scoped out a retail site in The Shops at Fifth & Alton that the property manager had envisioned as a restaurant.

“I go to the Apple Store, and it amazes me: So simple and so full of people. I wanted to do an Apple Store for real estate,” said Zilbert.

The 4,000-square-foot headquarters feels like a tech-savvy retail store, not an office. The spare, open space posts lists of available properties for sale and recent transactions on the walls. Apple computers and screens add to the ambiance, and Zilbert plans to add tablets for customers.

He always has focused heavily on the internet and operates websites in English, French, Italian and Portuguese. He is about to add Russian. “Ultimately, I want to have a Spanish version,” he said. That may sound like a no-brainer, especially for a Miami-based business. But he says he has found that it’s not as important to be “in language” for Spanish speakers because so many of them also speak English.

The content of the sites varies based on the country, and Zilbert agents can chat live with customers. Zilbert has experimented with initiating chats with visitors to the site, but said it often resulted in their disappearing from the site. “It’s like they’ve been caught,” he said.



Luxury home broker, Mark Zilbert, show the elegant staircase as he tours a Palm Island mansion that is up for sale for \$23.4 million.

He closely tracks where the traffic is coming from and follows up with emails to users, tailored to the sorts of properties they have been searching.

Zilbert, who is sharp with numbers, is mulling how much additional data to put online. “People have limited bandwidth. We try not to inundate people with data,” he said.

He said his sites attract 70,000 visitors a month, up from about 55,000 six months ago.

Zilbert is rolling out plans to embrace the current boom in pre-construction condos. “We’re allocating more resources to pre-construction, and when that wave passes, we’ll direct attention back to re-sales,” he said. While his focus remains on condos, he also has been broadening out to single-family homes.

Zilbert’s foray into real estate wasn’t as meticulously planned as his current devotion to strategy might suggest.

In late 2002, he was laid off from a tech-consulting job and decided to get a real-estate license. He’d also done some acting, including bit parts on *General Hospital* in the 1990s and as a day actor in two episodes of *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, where he played a Starfleet officer without dialogue.

“I figured, ‘I don’t know what I want to do, but real estate is hot,’ ” he said.

In 2003, he joined Esslinger-Wooten-Maxwell Realtors as a fledgling agent, initially handling floor duty and selling \$80,000 condo units.

“I noticed developers didn’t have good websites,” Zilbert said. He started one, markzilbert.com, which later changed to zilbert.com. In 2004, he got a broker’s license and stepped out on his own, plunging into controversy with the launch of condoflip.com, a marketplace for speculators with contracts on pre-construction condos to find buyers.

That got him a lot of attention — and criticism for fueling the bubble. “I could wallpaper with the cease-and-desist letters from developers,” he said.

Zilbert insists he was responding to the state of the condo market, not whipping up the froth.

When the bubble burst, he changed tack and focused for a time on short sales.

Last year, when Zilbert made a deliberate effort to take the firm to the next level, he hired a New York consulting firm, And Partners. Some of the feedback to come out of it: Zilbert was shouldering all the management duties himself and had to let go.

In February, he hired a chief operating officer, James Hitchcock, who has worked in investment banking and real estate.

The idea is to free up Zilbert to focus more on expanding the brand and the use of technology.

He plans to boost the roster of agents to 50 from 30. They will be hand-picked to fit the culture. “You can’t come in with a Rolodex,” Zilbert said. “We want people who will propagate our brand identity.”