

Real estate broker serves buyers only

Personal choice led Hull to unexplored business model

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Treat Hull may be the only real estate agent in the province who doesn't care about getting listings.

As he worked toward his broker's licence during the past year, Hull contemplated his chosen career and decided he'd try to alter his business model to one that only serves buyers.

"It wasn't a complicated business strategy, it was a personal ethical preference," Hull said. "When selling real estate before, I was personally uncomfortable when I was representing the buyer and the seller at the same time — it is completely legal, but for my money it's a conflict of interest."

Hull recalled a situation where he was representing buyers looking to move to Prince Edward County. He showed them a number of properties, but in the end, the home they wanted was one of his listings. Under the province's multiple representation laws, Hull could represent both parties in the deal, but he couldn't advise either. He felt his hands were tied to do the best job for his clients.

"They were extremely uncomfortable," he recalled. "It was too late to switch horses. In theory, they could have fired me. In practice, they couldn't. There were other people interested in the property, too. I went forward. They were profoundly uncomfortable, and to be honest, so was I."

The multiple representation laws apply not just to realtors, but to entire brokerages, so if one agency has two different agents on opposite ends of a real estate transaction, they're still limited to what they're able to offer in terms of advice. In Toronto, where there are tens of thousands of realtors, it isn't a huge concern, Hull says. Here in the county, however, he said an average of 40 per cent of all transactions fall under the multiple representation category.

Determined to go into business himself in February after completing his broker examination, Hull decided



DIFFERENT APPROACH Upon starting his own real estate brokerage, Treat Hull decided he was going to only represent buyers in real estate transactions. He says the concept has attracted more interest than he originally envisioned. (Submitted photo)

he'd take a risk and try to be exclusive to buyers. Thus far, he said he's found some traction, particularly among repeat home buyers. Some, he said, might have felt their interests were compromised in a past deal, while others might just be looking for a different type of service.

"In hindsight, it has turned out to be an excellent business decision," he said. "There is a much larger market need than what I set out to serve. Though it was a personal preference, it turns out there is a sizeable market of people who would prefer to be represented by somebody entirely on their side."

Hull spent time surfing

the Internet and talking to industry contacts about his preference. To date, he said he has not found anyone else in Ontario limiting themselves to just buyers. He said in some American states, there are laws that realtors must declare allegiance to one side of the other. In British Columbia, where the real estate market is spinning out of control, there was a proposal to ban the practice of multiple rep-

resentation.

While promoting his venture, Hull said he doesn't want to disparage any colleagues in the field who are working the traditional model, noting "there are some highly talented and highly ethical people in the field." He simply stated he might have stumbled upon an unmet need because he had the ability to take a risk.

"It would take a particular sort of individual to go way out on a limb. If I was 35 and had a kid who was going to go to university in five years and had a big house mortgage, would I have taken the risk to do something like this? I don't know. I'm at the point in my life where those types of challenges are behind me."

Despite the positive response, Hull said there is no mistaking the fact he is taking a risk. For most real estate agents, business comes from listings. They'll post an advertisement on the Internet or in the paper, prospective buyers will call about the property and they'll strike up a relationship, he said. Without listings to offer, marketing becomes a challenge.

"I don't have any bait in a conventional sense to attract attention. I have to work harder at marketing than you normally would."

Hull said he has worked to establish himself as an authoritative source on the local market through regular blog entries and social media posts. He also said referrals are a big part of his marketing plan. He dismissed the notion that a connection to a brokerage is the only path to success.

Asked about how his industry colleagues have accepted his course of action, Hull said he's received support and congratulatory e-mails. He felt their reaction reinforced his contention most competition is for listings.

"People who are successful in this business are confident, they're not worried about me," he said.

Hull has also said he tries to work with those colleagues who are trying to sell or list properties when prospecting on behalf of his clients. Most are co-operative because they're eager to make sales.

A question on the minds of many is how he gets paid. Hull said he works like any other realtor would on an MLS transaction, receiving the normal commission paid by the seller. On owner sales, he negotiates a percentage.

Currently, Hull works out of his own home. While he would like to eventually have space to meet with clients, the former marketing executive and consultant understand his biggest investment right now should be on spreading his buyer-centric messaging to attract clientele. His hope is to work evenly in the commercial and residential markets.

Given the demand for realtors offering similar services, Hull said he could see a time where he could employ other agents or expand to different markets in the Quinte region and elsewhere in the province.

"It's a business, it's not a self-employment project. I'm not at a point where it would make sense to do justice to someone else. I have to prove the concept, fine tune the marketing, and have a product that works. When I get that far, I'd be open to expanding within and outside this community."