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How to Hide a Celebrity Home Buyer

In an age of social media and cellphones, real-estate agents use spy tactics to shield the identities of famous clients.



Code names. Clandestine meetings. Camouflage. High-end real-estate agents are increasingly turning to devices found in Hollywood thrillers to shield the identities of big-name clients.

When he's taking a well-known client to a showing, Tony Sargent of Manhattan-based brokerage Core said he won't tell the listing agent who the prospective buyer is—or he'll offer a different name. In Hawaii, Matt Beall of Hawai'i Life Real Estate Brokers, whose firm has worked with Julia Roberts and Neil Young, will borrow his wife's car for select showings, as paparazzi can recognize the autos of real-estate agents. During house tours, some agents impose a no-cellphone rule, or have the homeowner's staff vacate the property. And in other cases, home inspectors, listing photographers and other vendors sign confidentiality agreements.

In the age of social media, camera phones, online property records and hyper-focused news outlets, real-estate agents are finding that maintaining a high-profile client's privacy is an essential—though sometimes futile—service.

For many years, buyers have purchased homes through limited-liability corporations to hide their identities. Some put their business managers' or attorneys' names in the LLC and presumably have a separate, private agreement establishing ownership. "Really private celebrities will not even be the partner on the LLC," said Alexa Lambert, an agent with Manhattan-based Stribling & Associates.

In recent years, however, that hasn't been enough. Given that some news outlets pay for tips, anyone who knows about a transaction can be a spy. Veteran agents suggest that the fewer people who see a notable buyer's paperwork, the better. Mr. Sargent said he would have his team focus on other deals while he handles celebrity documents himself. "Nobody gets to know who I was working with and they don't get to see any of the details," he said.

A Douglas Elliman agent based in Los Angeles, Josh Altman appears on "Million Dollar Listing Los Angeles" and said he has worked with Kim Kardashian West, actress Mila Kunis and others. Mr. Altman said he would ask the listing agent to leave the home with the gate unlocked and the garage door open to give his buyers unfettered access. Disguises aren't unheard of. "Sometimes my client will wear a hat and sunglasses," Mr. Altman said. In other cases, a celebrity can slip under a doorman's nose flanked by an assistant and nanny or, alternatively, show up on foot without staff and blend in on the sidewalk.

Despite such efforts, however, keeping the client's name hidden can be almost impossible. "It's become this cat-and-mouse game of doing everything that you can to try to hide [celebrity sales]," Mr. Altman said. "And then three weeks later, a Google alert comes up" and someone has identified his client.

Some prominent sellers throw in the towel from the get-go and decide to use their fame to bring attention to a listing. That can potentially lead to a quicker sale and a higher price.

Best-selling novelist Candace Bushnell recently listed her Roxbury, Conn., farmhouse for \$1.365 million. "We didn't list it saying, 'Oh, we're going to go and get publicity for this house,'" she said. But after local newspapers, and then New York-based journalists, expressed interest in the property, she decided to talk about her home to The Wall Street Journal. The "Sex and the City" author, 58, said she wasn't worried about her privacy, given her level of fame—"Believe me, nobody's driving by my door," she said—and because the association would become public knowledge anyway. "Somehow even if you don't use your name, people find out," she said.

As a celebrity link often leaks out, some agents try to convince sellers to go to a media outlet first, both to better control the story and to publicize the property to buyers outside the local market.



Best-selling author of “The Good House,” Ann Leary is married to actor, writer and producer Denis Leary, who is known for his acerbic comedy and the television series “Rescue Me.” She said the publicity attracted by their names was worth it to give them a better shot at finding a buyer for their atypical property, a 50-acre Connecticut estate with a farmhouse, horse barn and sport court that doubles as an ice rink, asking \$4.9 million. “We didn’t have any reason not to do it,” Ms. Leary, 54, said. “We felt like we needed maybe a broader audience for people to see it.”

One small scare: After a brokers’ open house Ms. Leary noticed her husband had left a book about having a loved one with Alzheimer’s on his bedside table. “We all missed putting it away,” said Mr. Leary, 59. The book is research for a television script, but the couple worried that neighbors would conclude that one of them was ill. “People started asking if everything was OK shortly thereafter,” Mr. Leary said. The house is still on the market.

Mr. Young, the singer, sold his estate on Hawaii’s Big Island in 2015 for \$20 million. It was common knowledge that the musician owned the home, said Mr. Beall, whose firm had the listing, so he spoke to Mr. Young’s representatives early on to map out a media strategy. “You’re using the star power to broaden the reach of the listing,” Mr. Beall said. After receiving coverage in the international press, the property, listed for \$24.5 million, sold in about two months—a fraction of the time as comparable sales, Mr. Beall said.

Still, Mr. Altman in Los Angeles said he discourages his clients from giving interviews or promoting their homes on social media. Their names alone are enough to get press, and sellers are typically not experts in marketing luxury homes. “We really don’t want the celebrity to be involved. The name does enough.”

Real-estate developer Doug Steiner is used to keeping mum about celebrities thanks to Steiner Studios, the Brooklyn film-production facility he owns. “People who work for me won’t stay employed if they leak anything,” said Mr. Steiner, who is currently developing Steiner East Village, an 82-unit building in Manhattan where prices for listed condos range from \$1.395 million to \$5.25 million. “That’s a pretty heavy sword over their heads.”