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The closing costs

What it takes to please New York City's most elite real estate buyers



Loft six of 17 East 16th Street, near Union Square, is buzzing. It's Saturday night just past 6 p.m. and the elevator hums with activity. Its steel green doors open into the apartment, where geometric paintings line the spacious entry and sparkling lights dangle from the ceiling. The smell of burning candles wafts through the air, mingling with the sounds of a live jazz band tucked by the entrance. Paint chips off the walls; the dark wood floors are trodden and faded.

Everything is in its place, designed to make guests feel chic and rustic — and ready to spend millions of dollars. This is how you sell New York real estate to a guest list of millionaires looking to buy their own slice of the city.

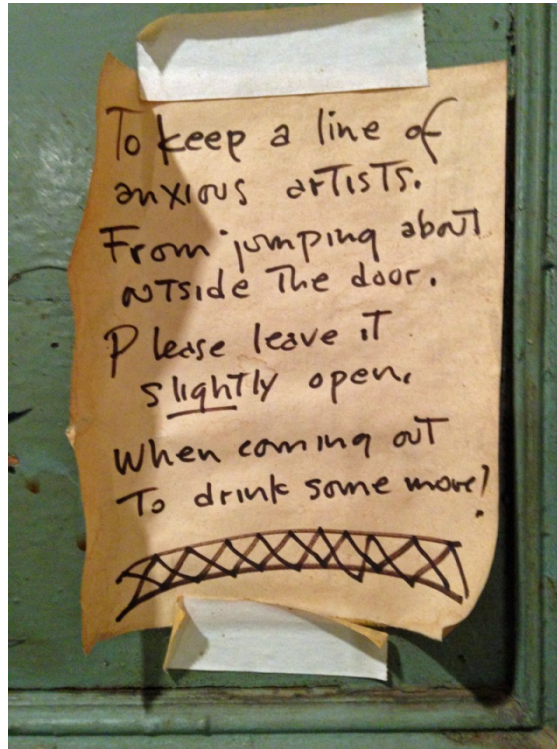
Superstar broker Fabienne Lecole has hired an event-planning company to serve tuna sashimi and champagne. About a hundred of Lecole's clients arrive. In sleek suits and stilettos, they chatter and peruse the artwork.

Lecole, tiny at 5-foot-3, weaves through the crowd. She's put together, as always, wearing black pumps, leather pants and red lipstick. A sleeveless navy blouse shows off her muscular arms.

She recites the story of the loft. Owner Bernice Stacy was a painter, married to another artist. The two bought the place in the early 1970s, when the building converted from manufacturing lofts to residences.

They split the loft in two: their living space and a studio rental for artists. Painters had studied and worked there for years.

A browning note is still taped on one of the room's green doors: "To keep a line of anxious arTisTs. From jumping abouT ouTside The door. Please leave iT slightly open, When coming ouT To drink some more!"



"That was great," she gushes the following day. "They loved it."

Lecole had actually sold the loft days before the event, three months after it had gone on the market. The event gave her a few backup offers, too, though she'd likely not need them. The place had sold for very near the asking price Stacy requested: \$5 million, paid in cash.

Then she's on to the next. She must do more of these events — networking, reconnecting, reminding people she's here. Otherwise she risks becoming another forgettable face in a city full of brokers clawing their way up.



310 West 52nd Street, New York, New York

This Midtown West penthouse condo is on the 43rd and 44th floors of a doorman building. It's 3BR, 3.5BA and 2,022 square feet.



310 West 52nd Street, New York, New York

Listed for \$5.59 million, it falls in Lecole's preferred range as a broker.



*310 West 52nd Street, New York, New York
The terrace off the living room faces east.*



*310 West 52nd Street, New York, New York
The master bedroom's corner window faces west, toward the Hudson River.*

There are about 27,000 licensed real estate salespersons and brokers in Manhattan, *The Real Deal* reported in 2013. Even with tens of thousands in the field, local real estate site *StreetEasy* reported just 4,803 units were sold in the borough in the third quarter of 2014.

The average price of a Manhattan property was \$1.68 million in 2014, an all-time high, according to the *Wall Street Journal*. The median price was \$911,000.

For brokers aiming for homes (and commissions) higher than New York's average, competition gets even steeper. Agents like Lecole, who has sold homes up to \$20 million, have to roll out the red carpet at all hours of the day.

If you're not doing more today than you were yesterday, you're dying.

It's a field where you must be "always growing every single day," says broker Ryan Serhant, star of Bravo's *Million Dollar Listing New York*. Like Lecole, he is one of the city's busiest and most sought after brokers. "If you're not doing more today than you were yesterday, you're dying."

"I'm never satisfied," echoes Lecole.

Born in 1963 and originally from Montauban, France, Lecole relocated to the U.S. after completing a law degree in 1987. "Everything was big," she says of her lifelong attraction to the country. "The cities, the towers, the skyscrapers."

She moved in with family friends in Los Angeles, where she ultimately cofounded a company to import gourmet French foods to the U.S. One of her company's first clients was Trader Joe's.

Her business travels in the late '80s led her to New York, where she would ultimately relocate.

"When I came here everybody was in a rush, stressed," she says of her first visit. "That's me. I'm always rushed. I like being stressed."

In the city she met and fell in love with her future husband, another French expat, in late 1992. They had three sons, Louis, in 1994, Martin (1996) and Arnaud (1999). Just before Arnaud's birth, tired of travel and ready to invest fully in motherhood, Lecole quit her gourmet food business.

Soon, however, she got restless. So she secured her real estate license in 2001.

Lecole completed the necessary 75-hour course and qualifying exam at the New York Real Estate Institute in Manhattan, a requirement for becoming an agent in the state. That's when Barbara Corcoran, cofounder of one of New York's top real estate firms The Corcoran Group, offered Lecole a job.

My kids say I breathe real estate.

Lecole quickly climbed the ranks to become one of the company's top 2% of brokers (there are over 1,900 in the group). Over 13 years, she sold high-end homes to buyers like actor Neil Patrick Harris, who

now owns an 8,000-square-foot \$3.75 million townhouse in Harlem, and legendary '90s rapper The Notorious B.I.G.'s, who grew up in Brooklyn's Bed-Stuy neighborhood.

In another move, Lecole joined Northeast firm William Raveis Real Estate, Mortgage and Insurance in the summer of 2014. There now, Lecole is building a team of agents around her to share the load (and the profits) under her name. Despite a constant stream of repeat buyers and sellers, Lecole never says no to new clients and more business. In New York real estate, the only way to succeed is to always grow and always go.

“My kids say I breathe real estate,” she laughs.

She works fast, 18-hour days, waking no later than 7 a.m. every morning with a glass of juice and the *New York Times*, to immerse herself in business right away. Depending on the day, she reviews additional publications: the *am* on Wednesdays, the *New York Post* on Thursdays. She gets *The Real Deal* emails every night, before it releases to everyone else the following morning; she pulls out her phone to show off the latest buildings.

Then she heads to the office, hair and makeup on point, in her usual pumps and leather. At William Raveis, she checks emails, calls brokers, sellers and buyers. As midday approaches, she leaves to show listings, on average four to six apartments per day, including Saturdays and Sundays.

Lecole has “big, positive energy,” especially when she's out showing apartments. She greets clients with kisses on each cheek. She regales them with each building's amenities — a rooftop pool, sprawling views of the city, the luxurious museum or park location.

On a recent showing, Lecole took a returning client to several \$1 million investment properties at One Museum Mile. “Beautiful finish,” she said of the wood floors in a cramped, junior one-bedroom. It's expensive and small, but her passion is contagious.

“You have to believe in the house if you want someone to believe in the house,” she says.



146 East End Avenue, New York, New York

Located in the Upper East Side, this 4BR, 3BA townhouse is listed for \$7.49 million. Homes like this one, and in this area, are Lecole's speciality.



146 East End Avenue, New York, New York

This home clocks in at 3,000 square feet. This view pictures the second floor from the staircase



*146 East End Avenue, New York, New York
Second floor landing and glass-enclosed stairwell.*



*146 East End Avenue, New York, New York
One of the bedrooms, looking out to the attached garden.*

As a broker, Lecole is responsible for representing sellers, that is, people selling particular spaces on the market, such as the loft in Union Square. But she also helps buyers looking for homes in the city, and prospective renters. Networking, working referrals from her clients and reconnecting with old contacts is key. Many brokers even send birthday cards to clients.

“When you hire your broker, this is a person that you’re going to be in day-to-day contact with discussing some of the most intimate details of your life,” says broker Mickey Conlon. His partner (both in life and in work) Tom Postilio is a broker, too. Selling luxury homes at real estate firm CORE, the two star on HGTV's *Selling New York* and have worked with Lecole in the past.

Conlon and Postilio throw a yearly party around the holidays for their clients. Both originally in show business, last year's party was held at grand and upscale club The Players in Gramercy Park. It included a cocktail reception, a three-course meal and a show by a renowned jazz guitarist John Pizzarelli. In the past, Postilio and Conlon have hired Grammy Award-winning singer Michael Feinstein.

In a city where a 300-square-foot studio can go for \$300,000 and 15,400-square-foot penthouse for \$118 million, Lecole has sold everything from a \$350,000 apartment in Chelsea to a \$20 million townhouse in the West Village. Some of Lecole's clients are investors looking to buy a two bedroom, two bath condominium in NoHo and rent it out; others are families seeking large homes in Brooklyn Heights.

No matter where they fall on the totem pole, brokers make between 5-6% commission from a sale, split halfway between the seller's broker and the buyer's broker. Success depends on getting those expensive properties. And they fight for that 6%, says Lecole.

Her specialties are her own area in Harlem and former neighborhood, the Upper East Side. In Harlem she sold 10 homes in 2014. She was named Carnegie Hill Salesperson of the Year for 2009 and 2012.

“Her acumen, particularly about the Harlem area, was quite striking,” says Eugenie Jacobson, a client who bought a home through Lecole in 2013.

Lecole took Eugenie and husband Derek to see about 10 homes. They ultimately found their 119th Street townhouse a month and a half into the process. (Finding a home can take anywhere from one day to 12 months or more, depending on the client.) The spacious, four-floored home was built around 1903. It features sprawling wood floors, nine fireplaces, brick walls, a dumbwaiter and gryphons chiseled into the staircase's original wood. They bought it for \$2.82 million and, after a year of renovations, will be moving in 2016.

Lecole's own home, built circa 1900, features original wood doors and floors, 14-foot ceilings, a nook on the staircase where servants would sit (“I don't have any servants,” she says) and colorful photos and paintings by friends and artists Victor Matthews and Joelle Deroy.

Aside from parties, “most brokers will hand people a bottle of champagne at closing,” says Conlon.

When touring her beloved Harlem, Lecole talks excitedly about the gospel singing you can hear from the street. She loves the international community (“I've never spoke as much French as since we moved to Harlem,” she says), the culture. Around the corner from her tree-lined row of brownstones, she points out French and Italian restaurants on Frederick Douglas Boulevard. The area reminds her of Paris.

Afternoons, after showings, it is back to the office, where Lecole sends more emails, makes more phone calls and catches up with paperwork. She might do a bit of marketing.

Then home for dinner with her teenage sons, who she speaks of often. Her youngest shares a passion for art; they visit galleries and museums together monthly.

They eat (though Lecole doesn't cook), and before bed she reads French literature or selections from her sons' high school curricula and books about architecture.

Lastly, she checks new listings and goes to sleep.

Despite Lecole's success, the ups and downs of real estate are daily battles. Deals fall through regularly — the seller decides he ultimately doesn't want to sell; the bank transfers don't come through; the whole buy is a hoax; the buyer reaches the final steps of purchasing and decides she doesn't want the house after all. It is a people business and therefore filled with fickleness.

Lecole's toughest day on the job was when a couple who'd planned to buy a \$20 million townhouse in Carnegie Hill decided not to buy, despite having already put a \$2 million deposit.

Many can't handle the stress, the unpredictability and the lack of benefits.

Every single time I lose a deal, it's the worst day of my career.

Like most brokers, former agent Francesca Hoffman worked on the other end of the spectrum, renting to students and young couples looking in Crown Heights and Bed-Stuy. She was lured into the job with promises of a career like Lecole's, but soon put a stop to it.

It was an "emotional rollercoaster," she says. "You close a deal and you're euphoric, and then you don't close anything for two or three weeks ... You don't know where your rent is gonna come from."

"Every single time I lose a deal, it's the worst day of my career," says Serhant, explaining the difficulties even at the level of clients he works with. And everyone starts at the bottom. The first 12 months of working, he made only \$8,000.

But, "you cannot worry about the bad ones," says Lecole. "You worry for 10 seconds and move on."

Besides wanting more money and putting in more hours, resilience is the key to New York real estate — getting up and doing more the following day, checking more listings before sleep and first thing upon waking. Always more.

But here, Lecole is different. She's always willing to do more, and does. For her, the real problem is inventory, having enough places to sell. There just never seem to be enough.