

THE REAL DEAL

REBNY advises agents on open houses

“It’s completely unknown waters for everybody,” says COO Sandhya Espitia

TRD NEW YORK / By E.B. Solomont



REBNY president James Whelan (Credit: Anuja Shakya, iStock)

Amid calls to shut down open houses, the Real Estate Board of New York has weighed in on the question dividing New York resi agents: to show or not to show?

In a memo to members, the trade group outlined a series of “best practices” to keep agents and clients “safe and healthy, while supporting business continuity.” The guidelines were compiled with input from the city’s residential firms, which participated in a conference call Monday, REBNY said.

“Safety is the No. 1 concern for everybody,” said Brown Harris Stevens CEO Bess Freedman, who was on the call. But she said some agents live paycheck to paycheck; likewise, some clients need to sell or rent. “Commerce doesn’t stop just because you’d like it to.”

As such, the guidelines urge agents to consider conducting meetings by phone or videoconference, but they stop short of telling agents to cancel in-person showings or closings to maintain “social distancing.” The best practices also instruct agents to follow building policies for visitors; discuss precautions with sellers; and explore options like conducting showings by appointment only or individually.

“Ask clients not to schedule an open house if ill or exposed to someone who is ill,” the document [said](#). “When possible, provide alcohol-based hand sanitizer and/or disinfecting wipes to all visitors upon arrival.”

REBNY also encouraged agents to limit in-person closings, and to limit the number of attendees at closings. “Avoid shaking hands during in-person interactions.”

But on Tuesday afternoon it appeared the rules may change soon, after Mayor Bill de Blasio said New Yorkers should [prepare to shelter in place](#) within 48 hours.

Sandhya Espitia, REBNY’s newly-appointed COO, said the best practices represent an attempt to provide a unified message to anxious agents who want to practice “social distancing” but need to feed their families. The average agent in New York City makes under \$60,000 a year, she said. “It’s completely unknown waters for everybody. We know it’s a fluid situation. It will continue to change.”

Over the weekend, the New York Residential Agent Continuum called for a suspension of in-person showings, which the group said was in everyone's "best interest" to slow the spread of coronavirus.

The suggestion became a flashpoint among agents and brokers, after Compass' Leonard Steinberg, who is on NYRAC's executive board, said a two-week moratorium on in-person showings was a "moral obligation."

His suggestion raised the ire of some brokers, including Warburg Realty's Frederick Peters, who penned his opposition in an article published Monday in Forbes.

Freedman described the call to ban showings a "[misstep](#)."

"His intentions were good but this whole virtue signaling is crap and it doesn't help us in an environment where we need to be united," she said.

Steinberg's post also appeared to touch a nerve within Compass, which has launched a [virtual open house](#) tool but is also encouraging agents to decide for themselves.

"While Leonard's opinion does not reflect official Compass policy, our primary focus is the safety and wellbeing of every agent and employee," a Compass spokesperson said in an email.

In a March 16 email to agents, CEO Robert Reffkin outlined the training and tools Compass planned to make available to agents.

"I received a lot of questions over the weekend from people about how to move forward right now," he wrote. "If you are able to work, I'd like to encourage you to use these next few weeks to invest in your professional growth and be a calming voice for your clients in this time of need."