



Executives of the Month: Wacht, president, and Herskowitz, chief operating officer, of Lee & Associates NYC; A culture of collaboration and cooperation, while maintaining the spirit of independent thinking

November 25, 2013 - Spotlights

Elizabeth Haukaas, managing director corporate communications of Lee & Associates NYC recently sat down with two of the founding principals of Lee & Associates NYC: James Wacht, president, and Joel Herskowitz, chief operating officer, for a question and answer session.

Q: Haukaas: By now, most of us know the story of how you two met, started dating, got married, and gave birth to Lee & Associates NYC. But in case anyone doesn't, Lee NYC is the Manhattan office of Lee & Associates, a national commercial real estate firm, with 51 offices. I know the first year was a honeymoonâ€”full disclosure here: I am the managing director of corporate communications for Lee NYC and joined in its first year. What has the second year been like?

A: Wacht: Switching metaphors, the first year we spent selecting all the pieces of the puzzle. The second year we spent fitting all the pieces together. The third year we expect to be a gangbuster.

A: Herskowitz: You just switched metaphors again. We spent last year building synergies between our services: acquisitions, brokerage, property and project management. And developing an infrastructure to support them: marketing and communications, research, financial analysis, in-house counsel.

A: Wacht: And Joel was instrumental in successfully recruiting 40 brokers.

A: Herskowitz: We've hired brokers from every firm on the street, including Newmark Grubb Knight Frank, Jones Lang LaSalle, Colliers, Cassidy Turley, George Comfort, Cushman & Wakefield, and CBRE.

Q: Haukaas: What do you think attracted them to Lee?

A: Wacht: It's a great company, for starters. I hesitate to say we're "family" but we are a community. And we have an unusual business model. Senior brokers have an opportunity to become a principal when they join by investing in Lee NYC. All Lee & Associates offices are broker-owned. Brokers also can invest in properties we acquire for our own account.

A: Haukaas: Sounds very entrepreneurial.

A: Wacht: That's exactly what attracted me to Lee in the first place. I didn't want to work for or run a bureaucratic shop mired in layers of decision makers. We've created a culture of collaboration and cooperation, while we maintain the spirit of independent thinking.

A: Herskowitz: Let's not forget, though, that we have a solid national platform backing us up. There is a Lee office in every major market in the US. We receive referrals from the Lee offices across the country and we refer clients to our other offices and local experts in their markets.

Q: Haukaas: Everyone always says, "it's our people," and, of course, it is a defining difference between real estate firms. But - and I say this as one who knows, having been on the inside of other

commercial real estate firms before coming to Lee and having had them as clients when I ran my own agency - it's the culture of a place that is the real defining difference. How would you describe the Lee culture?

A: Herskowitz: Every broker in our office is an ally, not a competitor, of every other broker in our office.

A: Wacht: We let our brokers be brokers. We don't handcuff them. We get out of their way and let them succeed.

A: Herskowitz: Another metaphor, Jim. To extend Jim's last metaphor, we look for brokers who want to break free of bureaucratic bonds and pursue their business. We are selective in who we hire. It takes a level of experience and savvy to be here.

A: Wacht: I believe that does make us different. It certainly makes us smarter.

A: Herskowitz: I like to say, "we're the most senior young company around."

Q: Haukaas: What does that mean?

A: Herskowitz: It means we initially targeted senior brokers when we were building Lee NYC. We wanted our foundation to be a seasoned and successful team. Then we added junior brokers and assigned them to the senior broker teams. Now we are building our mid-level ranks and actively looking for mid-level professionals.

Q: Haukaas: I know the answers, but they are worth repeating. What do you specialize in?

A: Wacht: We are full service and cover all the disciplines: office, retail, industrial...

A: Herskowitz: And our retail contingent will be at ICSC in December at Booth number 563...

A: Wacht: Stop by and meet some of our retail brokers at Booth number 563 at the ICSC on December ninth and tenth...

A: Haukaas: Great. You got the plug in.

A: Wacht: We also offer property management and construction management services through our affiliate company, Sierra Real Estate.

A: Haukaas: Ah, back to the story of how you two met and gave birth to Lee NYC.

A: Herskowitz: I knew Sierra and Jim, and that's why I presented the concept of spinning off the brokerage arm of Sierra into Lee NYC.

A: Wacht: And I knew Joel's history and liked the opportunity for growth and felt the market was ready for some new energy and a new vision.

A: Haukaas: Thanks, gentlemen. It's been a pleasure, as it is every day.