



Executive of the Month: Berko, president of Berko & Associates: Bringing an investment-banking approach to commercial real estate; growing firm includes city's top mortgage bankers, investment sales professionals and advisors

September 08, 2014 - Front Section

As an Israeli youngster visiting relatives in the United States, (Yossi) Berko knew he would be a real New Yorker someday. Today, the 42-year-old founder and president of Berko & Associates could not be more pleased that life here turned out far greater than he could ever have imagined.

Joe Berko, as he is known in the real estate industry, runs the multi-disciplinary brokerage firm that specializes in investment sales, structured finance and syndication advisory. He started his career in 1995 in commercial real estate investment banking and financing and quickly emerged as a top producer, arranging competitive debt yields for his clients. Over nearly 20 years, Berko has structured, raised, syndicated, sold and financed over a billion dollars in commercial real estate deals. Today he oversees a group of over 20 sales and finance associates, analysts and support staff.

In 2005 he founded his firm, based on his strong belief that commercial real estate professionals must offer a balanced service that "merges debt and equity with asset advisory," to achieve successful investments for their clients. "We were the first company that took on a multi-disciplinary approach," said Berko, whose growing firm includes some of the city's top mortgage bankers, investment sales professionals, advisors and analysts.

"Our associates are experts at debt placement and investment sales," he said. "Most companies provide one aspect or the other, and the service is fragmented to different departments, but no other company trains its agents to offer both aspects of the business."

Berko is known for bringing a distinctive investment banking approach to complex commercial real estate transactions. "We leverage our strong relationships forged over the years with both domestic and international investors and lenders," said Berko, who describes the current financing market as "dynamic." "That changed because the condo market picked up."

Today Berko has noticed a growing appetite among REIT's, CMBS lenders and private equity - much of it from abroad. "Interest rates are still very attractive and banks are competing to get money out the door, yet have maintained disciplined underwriting," Berko said. "To put it simply, it's a great time to be in the commercial real estate advisory business."

Berko's transactions in New York and beyond range from mixed-use buildings, hotels, shopping centers and industrial parks to portfolio sales, joint ventures of office towers and equity and mezzanine debt raise for new development projects. The firm also handles dispositions of distressed and performing notes for national and regional portfolio lenders.

2014 is progressing well for Berko & Associates, with nearly \$250 million in sales and finance

contracts signed or closed demonstrating the firm's exponential growth in the caliber of deals and steady increase in market share.

A few notable recent transactions closed by Berko & Associates include: the \$30.5 million finance of a block of retail stores on Bleecker St. in Greenwich Village; the \$27 million mortgage loan for the newly opened Paper Factory Hotel in Long Island City; the \$24 million sale of the Blatt Billiards' 24,000 s/f cast-iron loft building at 809 Broadway in Greenwich Village; an acquisition advisory of a \$15 million non-performing note secured by a 78,000 s/f loft building in Gowanus, Brooklyn, 174,000 s/f commercial loft building sale for \$34 million in Bushwick, Brooklyn and a \$24 million commercial building on Columbus Ave. on the Upper West Side of Manhattan to name a few.

Berko's talents and reputation in the industry have not gone unnoticed. He was appointed an advisor to the state of New York by two successive governors who positioned him in the state's Real Estate Board, an honor bestowed upon a select group of only five real estate professionals. Gov. Paterson first nominated Berko as a board advisor in 2009, followed by Gov. Cuomo in 2011.

Berko moved to New York in his early 20's, and enrolled in the degree program in real estate at Baruch College. "As one of the first graduates of the school's prestigious Science of Real Estate and Metropolitan Development program, I wanted to give back," said Berko, who heads the Baruch College Real Estate Alumni Club (BCREAC), which he started in 2010. The club raises thousands in scholarships for students in need.

But Berko, who lives in Tribeca with his wife Liat and his sons Maxwell,7, and Eytan,5, isn't just about real estate. When he's not busy making deals, Berko also plays bass in a rock band, "Air Rights" comprised of seven businessmen which play once a week in their exclusive music studio in midtown over looking Eighth Ave.

Air Rights performs in closed concerts featuring classic rock covers by legends like Led Zeppelin and David Bowie for close friends and family. "We jam for fun and to let off steam from our high pressure jobs," Berko said. "My wife is a music producer and we both see many rock concerts. I guess you can say that we are a musical family. It works like a charm."

Berko, who just returned from a family trip to Israel, donates his time and support to several philanthropic organizations that include American Israel Public Affairs Committee (APIAC), American Friends of Rabin Medical Center (AFRMC), Youth in Distress in Israel (ELEM) and Israeli America Council (IAC).