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## Be like Google

### *Letters From the Home Front*

BY KRIS BERG

"A common problem is that it's easy to become spoiled by all the perks. Several offices have developed distinct cultures of entitlement ... It's embarrassing to be around people who've become like spoiled children...

"The engineers don't habitually carry pagers and are on-call relatively infrequently. The plus side is that they can focus on development, get adequate sleep, and be more productive. The downside is that they can easily lose touch with what's really going on in the data centers and sometimes even (with) their customers."

This writer was not talking about the work environment at Big Brokerage. He was talking about life at Google.

I stumbled [on this thread at Redditt](#) via a post on Mashable. The post asked Google employees to come clean about why they liked working there. And, as I read the comments, I began to wonder what we in real estate might learn from the Google model.

We have talked a lot about the dire straits of our industry and our image over the past couple of years as we have watched the Internet steal our car keys. We have relinquished that thing which once assured our job security -- the accounts receivable formerly known as the multiple listing service -- and had to face ourselves in the mirror as our performance and our performance reviews went public-facing.

So what's a broker to do? How do you reformulate a product for today's consumer and reposition a negative brand?

### **Give 'em stuff**

That's one approach. Give the agents stuff that makes them feel special. Establish a cultural cool factor that makes agents -- the best agents -- want to be associated with the brand.

Many Google employees pointed to the free meals prepared by celebrity chefs, the interoffice sports, massage chairs, lap pools and even "bring your dog to work" policies.

In a sense, the traditional brokers have been doing this for years. There, albeit less sexy, perks involved unlimited collateral materials, plush offices, furniture and fixtures, and the occasional free pizza at the office meeting courtesy of one of the valued affiliates.

Mostly, though, the broker's perks evolved over time into insanely generous commission splits that could no longer support the weight of the infrastructure in a new market and a brave new world of customer expectations.

The big distinction -- the problem, even -- is that Google has employees and the vast majority of real estate brokerages have independent contractors. Brokers have had to both respond to the demands of agents to be trained and the equally deafening demands from their agents that they be left alone.

It's like a teenager who wants to stay out all night but asks to drive your car. "You aren't the boss of me," they say, "but give me some gas money and pay the rent while I'm gone."

### **Entitlement**

Too many real estate agents have a feeling of entitlement now. That's what happens when the carrot at the end of the stick is free stuff. Even Google, apparently, is not immune. But the difference is this: Google provides these things so that their employees might be more focused and more productive.

They don't offer free dry-cleaning pickup and delivery because they are concerned about their workforce's hygiene; they do it because it removes one

more distraction to doing the work. Brokers do it only to recruit, and it often seems like the work is an afterthought.

Let's face it. If I waltzed into Google tomorrow wearing my hippest clothes and toting my most impressive resume, I would be kicked to the curb faster than you can say "free omelet bar." That is because I suck at programming.

I lack the educational foundation and I lack the experience. Heck, I even lack the basic skill sets, the unique mental wiring and passion for the work that would allow me to succeed in that environment, regardless of the depth of their training program.

Brokers, on the other hand, still refuse to adopt any meaningful hiring guidelines, and agent oversight is sorely lacking.

### **Everyone is super smart**

What I found most interesting as I waded my way through the comments was the real reason people seemed to love working at Google. It became clear that it isn't essentially or even mostly about the free stuff. It is the hiring standards and the resulting culture.

"Everyone is super smart," said one commenter, a theme that was repeated. How many agents can say that about their brokerage? "Google's culture is very collaborative," said another.

Yep -- that sounds just like the last brokerage I was affiliated with, the one where I was greeted each day by a competitive throng of "top producers" who wanted me dead so they might have a shot at relisting my clients.

The idea of intergroup cooperation and of being a part of an elite group of people, each more skilled and dedicated than the next, is ultimately the thing that mattered most. And that has been the critical element missing from the brokerage model.

Granted, there will always be the brokers whose models are entirely dependent on filling the bleachers, and there will always be the unchecked one-man broker who answers to no one but himself while he is taking pictures of himself in his client's bathroom mirror and calling it good enough. These things we can't change.

What we can change is what we control: our own organizations. There are a million tech companies, yet there is but one Google.

Making our own brokerage something that the agents are proud to be a part of, having agents feel that it is an honor to work with us rather than a divine right, and consequently demonstrating (not just paying lip service to) excellence by demanding it is the only way our brands will survive, let alone thrive.

It's not enough to repackage an unpopular product. The product needs to be improved. Rather than buying bodies, we should be attracting talent. People -- and agents, it is rumored, are people -- want to make a living.

But if you have ever been in an unfulfilling job (I have), you know that after the issue of solvency comes the rewards of pride, fulfillment and accomplishment. Without those things, there is no impetus to improve. It's just a job.

Said one Google employee, "People are talking about how to build cool things, not about how to beat competition." Yeah -- that's the kind of brokerage I want to have.

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