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The Poet of Property

By Eric Konigsberg

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Valerie Haboush, a freelance copywriter specializing in real estate, at work in her home office in Westfield, Photo by Tim Knox for The New York Times

THE language of real estate advertising copy in New York is beyond parody: how can you make fun of something that already reads like a satire of itself? Are there really thousands of buildings that can fairly call themselves “one of the most desired co-ops on the Upper East Side”?

Has almost every broker in town really produced “nearly \$1 billion in sales throughout his illustrious career working at one of Manhattan’s premier residential brokerage firms and specializing in the sales of some of Manhattan’s most prestigious and highly coveted addresses”?

Still, who among us can resist a good real-estate ad? And who hasn't had a laugh reading a clumsy attempt to make the uninhabitable sound irresistible? The very plasticity of the form may be why the writers of so many listings fail.

It's as if the less adroit in the business had reasoned that all hyperbole sounds the same, so why not just take a nap and let your computer write the thing?

There exists, however, a significant portion of New York real estate professionals who hold that while it is easy to write in shelter-speak, it is difficult to do it well. They can't say exactly what makes a successful ad, but they know it when they see it. And for a lot of those people, Valerie Haboush is the hired gun they depend on to write theirs.

Ms. Haboush, 46, calls herself a "freelance marketing communications writer" - O.K., so the poetry gods were out of magic dust the day she had to think up her job description - and for somebody who works in a competitive field built on exclusives, she is a believer in the "love all, serve all" school of business.

Over two decades, she has established herself as a sort of cottage industry within New York real estate, writing property descriptions and "her specialty" online biographies of brokers. Ms. Haboush has written thousands of them: for the Corcoran Group and Prudential Douglas Elliman in highest volume, though she also continues to write for Sotheby's International Realty, Warburg Realty, Brown Harris Stevens and Halstead Property.



FAITH MAKRIPLIS "...She dabbled in merchandising before realizing her true calling, residential sales." ~Written by Valerie Haboush, Photo by Tim Knox for The New York Times

"With bios, I can write one an hour, so as many as 50 in a week," Ms. Haboush said, explaining that she charges \$150 to \$250 per job, more for larger assignments. "When Corcoran opened their Hamptons office in 2003, I did one interview every half hour for two full days."

There are others plying the same trade, brokers say, but few who are so thoroughly immersed in real estate. Whether you are aware of it or not, you have probably seen Ms. Haboush's work - perhaps landing on a broker's Web page by accident, lingering on his corporate head shot and entertaining a fleeting curiosity about what his old teammates on the nationally ranked cheerleading squad at a state university in the South would

think if they could see him now, “representing a refined portfolio of high-end developments like the new Rem Koolhaas-designed building at 23 East 22nd Street.”

“It’s important to get personal information in there as a conversation piece,” Ms. Haboush said. “I had a woman who had been an Olympic swimmer, so we used that to position her tenacity, dedication, discipline and competitiveness as far as just wanting to get out there and get the best for her client.”



MICKEY ROTH "...built his career from the ground-floor up, ultimately earning the kind of success that most agents only dream about." ~Written by Valerie Haboush, Photo by Librado Romero/The New York Times

Ms. Haboush graduated with a journalism degree from New York University and, in 1990, was working for a promotions company writing invitations for the Young Presidents’ Organization when she got a call from Barbara Corcoran, the founder of the Corcoran Group and at the time an officer in the Y.P.O.

“She had put together a fabulous marketing piece, so clear and simple,” with the invitations, Ms. Corcoran said. “So I asked her to come work for us to do our broker profiles. We’d tried in-house. We’d tried advertising firms. She was the first person who was able to get that piece that felt credible, and what’s less credible to most people than something written for a real estate broker?”

Ms. Haboush’s tone, perhaps a bit heavy on corporate-marketing jargon, but also disarmingly confessional is what Ms. Corcoran was drawn to. “It was like someone was just speaking to you,” she said. “What do you call that in writing - the voice?”

Ms. Haboush does most of her work without ever meeting her clients face to face, or even seeing their properties. She works in the dimly lighted study of her Arts and Crafts house in Westfield, N.J. Her standard procedure involves a phone interview, and a two-page questionnaire that asks agents to define their real estate philosophy and to list their strengths.

Unfortunately, the answers tend not to vary. “Oh, they’re all ‘people person,’ ‘really listens,’ ‘always there for their customer,’” she said. “You try to say it differently each time. Sometimes they just say to me, ‘Make up something and make me sound good.’”

Over time, Ms. Haboush came up with a few guiding principles. “My motto is, ‘No one’s new in New York real estate,’ ” she said. “No one will use you. So if they’re really new, we talk about their former career and just don’t put dates.”

Other rules: never mention politics or religion. A view of the Synagogue for the Arts afforded by a loft in TriBeCa became a vista onto “a famous iconic building” once Ms. Haboush had finished the listing.

And, when singing a song of suburbia, never tout a house’s “walk to school” or “walk to train” potential.

“Because what about disabled people who can’t walk?” Ms. Haboush said. “Big no-no. You have to say ‘close.’”

The other day, when Ms. Haboush was on the phone with Faith Makriplis, an agent at Sotheby’s, you could tell from hearing just her end of the conversation that it involved a lot more pulling than pushing.

“So, you came to the city and you kind of fell in love with it, right?” Ms. Haboush said, then listened. “Mmmm hmmm... So it’s pretty much been a lifelong career? ... Mmmm hmmm. ... You love getting to know the neighborhoods, right? ... So your passion is downtown, but you’ll also go anywhere, right?”

In the end, the profile she wrote reflected all these questions, framed as assertions. It also mentioned that “first-time buyers, burgeoning families, investors and public figures alike” have benefited from the agent’s “attentive, discreet service and patient yet persistent approach.”

The gentle soft-sell aspect of that profile was markedly different from, say, the twin gung-ho write-ups she did for Lenny Sporn and Mickey Roth, two sales-achiever agents who head their own 12-person team at Elliman.

About Mr. Sporn, she wrote: “He will simply not rest until the transaction is complete, and the experience exceeds all expectations. Whether helping a seller market a property aggressively to get the most exposure and highest price, or working closely with buyers to expedite the search for the home of their dreams, Lenny makes deals happen.”

And about Mr. Roth: “He built his career from the ground floor up, ultimately earning the kind of success that most agents only dream about. ... He delivers nothing less than white-glove treatment, first-class service, top-notch marketing, and profit-driven deals.”

Mr. Roth said that Ms. Haboush had written several descriptions of him in the last seven years, and that initially they had had a low-key tenor, which was appropriate at the time.

“As my career soared, her bios came to reflect it,” he said. “My Web bio is not just for clients, it’s useful for me in terms of thinking about myself and introducing myself. I tell

people to look at it to understand who I am. My career is a huge part of my personality. Maybe that's why I'm so successful."



LAURENCE CARTY

...With him working for you, "that needle in the haystack is not as elusive as one may think."

Written by Valerie Haboush

Photo by Hiroko Masuike for The New York Times

Laurence Carty of the Corcoran Group, for whom Ms. Haboush recently wrote a profile and several property listings, said that "besides being able to give a nice description," she had a good ear for marketing.

"She's familiar with what words are in and what words are out, sales-wise, and what words get you to come up on Google," he said.

Brett Miles, an agent for Brown Harris Stevens, said, "A lot of brokers write their own copy, but it takes forever and it's a lot of brain damage."

He and Reid Price, his partner agent on most deals, and that former cheerleader on a nationally ranked team who, since going into real estate, has racked up nearly \$1 billion in sales have been using Ms. Haboush to write their listings for two years.

Mr. Miles said that while it usually takes Ms. Haboush two drafts, "she always ends up getting whatever it is we can't articulate."

Ms. Haboush considers her relationship to agents akin to that of a trusted bartender. "They want me to know certain things, even if they are things they don't want in the profile," she said. "Sometimes, brokers tell me they don't live in Manhattan. If they live in an outer borough, they definitely don't want people to know that."

Her popularity has led to some unusual assignments. One real estate agent was so flattered by her bio that she hired Ms. Haboush to write her profile for Match.com; another had her write a letter to the I.R.S. to dispute a "mistake."

"They hire me to write their business proposals for side projects," Ms. Haboush said. "And letters to co-op boards of buildings they live in."

Ms. Haboush said she once wrote a letter for a broker who wanted to ensure that his reply to a neighbor's noise complaint retained a certain "civility."

Another time, a broker and her spouse hired Ms. Haboush to ghostwrite the parent essay required with their son's application to the Dalton School. She has since written a number of college-application essays for agents' children and one for a broker who was applying to the Wharton School.

"Sometimes they'll come to me with an outline, or else I'll interview them first," Ms. Haboush said. "My feeling is, it's a very competitive world, and everything you're writing about yourself, you have to sell yourself, you have to position yourself in the best possible light. If that child can't write an essay well, that's not my business. Let's at least get that kid into the school."

Ms. Haboush has no idea what her track record is with school applications. "I always tell them to let me know if their kid gets in, and I never hear from them again," she said.

She draws the line at résumés. "That's a different skill set," she said.