

| ALL THINGS CONSIDERED

# YOU ARE YOUR BRAND

By John Salustri

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How well do you brand yourself? Of course your firm probably has some sort of marketing program to keep its name in front of the leasing/investing/development public. But every commercial real estate firm builds on the expertise of its people, and selling them sells the companies they work for.

A case in point is Lee & Associates' R. Craig Coppola, one of eight founding principals of the Arizona office. Coppola is not shy about marketing himself, in the belief that it benefits the greater good--and he has the street cred to prove it. With more than 3,500 deals under his belt, he's an all-time top producer in the company's 36-year history and a six-time NAIOP Office Broker of the Year.

That NAIOP designation is important. It signifies an engaged and committed broker. He also holds his SIOR and CCIM designations, and in fact it is rare when a recognizable industry leader will not be affiliated with and active in one or more industry associations. And while the networking and panel participation and speeches are an important part of the marketing effort, Coppola also classifies such outreach efforts as "traditional."

"You'll see deal announcements and articles that brokers write," he says, "and we do that too. But we've also been very non-traditional."

Indeed. Coppola sends out two weekly email narratives, as he calls them, and both with different branding. The narrative focused on real estate is branded not as Lee, but rather as Coppola-Cheney (for partner Andrew Cheney, who, by the way, does his own occasional narrative) and treats such issues as in-migration, jobs, and the Arizona housing market.

The other weekly narrative is truly non-traditional and again, branded as other-than-Lee. Titled LIFEies, (Fantastic Ideas for a Fantastic Life), the narrative is more philosophic and shares articles and blogs on attaining a quality of life. For instance, a recent LIFEies edition, just before the holidays, quoted a New York Times article entitled "Abundance Without Attachment." And every edition also features rules from Coppola's book, *The Fantastic Life*.

That's right. His book, actually one of four. It's another tool to cement the Coppola-Cheney brand, and it's interesting to note that while two are focused hard-core on real estate, the above title along with his latest book, *Chasing Excellence*, are more inspirational in nature.

Issues such as branding, especially in our digital age, are becoming highly standardized by corporations wishing to send a consistent message. So you might be wondering at this point what Lee corporate management thinks of Coppola's name above the title, so to speak. What we didn't tell you is that management so likes the idea that company founder Bill Lee co-authored *Chasing Excellence*.

But then, this was a company founded on the idea that all brokers would have a path to becoming a principal. "The reason Bill started Lee was to allow individual brokers and teams to do what they think is best for their clients," Coppola says. "We're way



outside the cookie-cutter, highly formatted box. And we're encouraged to be a unique presence in the marketplace." He adds that as a private concern, no one has to answer to shareholders.

Coppola is frank in saying that he hasn't tracked how much his volume of business was spurred by his various promotional efforts, but he does explain that he reaches some 30,000 potential clients weekly around the nation with his two narratives.

But don't be fooled. Even without metrics, the aim is clear. "All of our marketing initiatives allow us presence in the marketplace," he says, "and each one leads to a branding opportunity. Across the country we have several national accounts, so we do business in other marketplaces and

we're positioning ourselves as the source for inbound Arizona business."

But aggressive marketing comes with risk, and Coppola is careful not to become exploitative. "I don't wear a green jacket and a bowtie. That's not me. We're chasing corporate business and that demands a certain professional demeanor in all of our efforts. Each book and narrative has a reason behind it, and certainly we use it to market who we are, and we want people to know we're professionals."

He also caps the weekly narratives at two, in part to avoid client email-fatigue and professional overexposure. He also caps speaking engagements. "I'm a broker," he explains. "I spend 60 hours a week at my job."

So how does he get any of it done? "Once we find the article to promote in the narratives and write the comments, we have a team of about four people that does all the other execution, including formatting and editing. It's a lot of work."

But the end product, he says, are books and narratives with a twist. "My narrative is completely unique to the industry," he says. "I do not believe anybody sends that kind of thing."

But whether it's inspirational or impactful industry content, it all comes down to lead generation. "We're just trying to do what we do really well," he says. "We're real estate guys to the core, but we try to look at different angles than our competitors."

Not everyone has the inclination to launch such a broad-based, intensive branding program as Craig Coppola has built in the five years he's been doing the narratives. "You have to find your voice," he recommends. But at the end of the day, a company succeeds or fails based on the strength, expertise and market presence of its brokers. So the question comes up: How well are you branding yourself? ▼

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