

REAL ESTATE DONE RIGHT

Berghof Realty is disrupting the way real estate is sold

By Jim Brumm



Ernest Berghof, owner of Berghof Realty in Santa Rosa, is a person who sees what others don't. He then takes what he sees and changes things for the better. In the tech industry, where Ernest worked for many years, people like him are known as "disrupters." They walk into an industry, turn everything upside-down, and in the process improve it greatly.

At his brokerage firm, Berghof Realty, Ernest is busy each day disrupting the way real estate is done, and improving the lives of his customers and employees in the process.

Ernest grew up in Orlando, Florida, and attended the University of Central Florida where he quickly discovered an interest in marketing. "Marketing was fascinating to me; it's the people end of a business."

He earned a BA in marketing, then promptly headed for California with some friends. There, he started a band called Rabbit Choir ("Sort of a hippie band") that garnered a large following. His band

toured up and down the west coast for several years. He met his wife, Jennifer, at one of their street shows. "I sold her a cassette tape in Berkeley," says Ernest, grinning. "That won her over." They have been married 19 years and have two daughters.

In 1995 Ernest put his bass guitar down and landed what he describes as his "first real job" in marketing at Equilibrium, an up-and-coming graphics software firm. He was the 10th employee and watched it grow to 200 employees. After the firm was sold, he slid over to another tech company, Autodesk. There, with his marketing acumen, he managed over five-hundred million dollars in sales. He then moved to Yahoo, running their "customer experience" marketing research. Yahoo had a real estate section which Ernest began studying closely.

"We did an online survey to learn about people's best and worst experiences in real estate," says Ernest. "Their worst-case scenario was being ripped off." He laughs and adds, "And their *best*-case scenario was not being ripped off. So I asked myself, why does this industry have such a low bar? I started to realize that in real estate, everyone is an independent contractor, so nobody can control the quality of service. Agents set their own hours and their own levels of commitment and service. A lot of agents don't have enough knowledge and are not good at managing themselves, and this leaves a lot of customers dissatisfied."

He also realized that in real estate, every other agent is a competitor so agents don't often share their experiences or tips with others. "Everything is played close to the vest, nothing is shared, and the industry never gets any better."

Ernest began mapping out ideas for opening his own real estate brokerage, and the disrupter in him awoke.

"This was my crazy scheme," he says. "First, I decided to do what nearly every other business on the planet does: I would hire agents as *employees*. I would have no commissioned sales people; instead, they would get a living salary, plus bonuses based on company goals. That way we could control things and deliver a consistently high level of service."

The other trick, he explains, is to break typical agent activities into parts. For example, one agent works only with buyers, another only manages the transaction paperwork. Another only handles



his team operate, and you'll wonder how you could ever choose another real estate brokerage.

"I love building cool things, and I'm building a cool company," he says. "I want everyone who works here to feel it's the best company ever. I'm passionate about this." He pauses and adds, "I understand that to the customer, every real estate transaction is a big deal, whether it's a first-time homebuyer, or a twelve-million dollar vineyard estate. That's why our team makes sure we give the same level of service to everyone."

Because of his marketing experience in the tech and dot-com world, Ernest also understands how to leverage the internet to reach buyers quickly. He laughs when asked about this, and answers "We're *ridiculously* better than everyone else at marketing listings."

Many realtors will post a listing on their company's website with a couple snapshots and call it good. Berghof Realty posts listings on 23 individual websites each targeting different niche buyers. All include professional photos (which are changed daily), and interior and exterior videos, including aerial drone videos.

The Berghof Realty team stays in close, continuous contact with their clients. Every time a property is shown to a potential customer, that customer is sent a survey to learn what they did and didn't like. The survey information is immediately sent to the seller, and the marketing plan is adjusted accordingly.

A high-quality printed marketing package is produced for each listing as well, which includes professional photos, price comparisons, neighborhood demographics, and information about schools, shopping, and restaurants near the property.

The results of all this speak for themselves. The Berghof Realty team is able to consistently sell properties in a shorter time span, and on better terms than most other realtors. Their Yelp reviews reflect how happy their customers are with what Ernest has created.

In a sea of real estate brokers, Berghof Realty stands out like a beacon of forward-thinking professionalism and transparency. The team Ernest has created is disrupting the very foundation of how real estate is done, and their clients are the winners. In a word, The Berghof Realty team gets results that other, traditional brokerages cannot match.

the listings. Instead of one agent trying to be all things, Berghof Realty offers a finely honed team of specialists, each an expert at their particular task.

"We share our knowledge," says Ernest, "so that it becomes institutional knowledge, and we work as a team. It works fantastically for us, and for our clients."

Here is another way Berghof Realty is disrupting the real estate industry: Typically,

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Ernest Berghof

when a client lists their home for sale with a real estate agent, they sign an agreement that can lock them into working with that agent for six months or more. Even if the agent does nothing to sell the property, or the client is completely dissatisfied with that agent, there's nothing that can be done. The client is trapped, and the agent will still earn a commission if the house sells during the contract period, even if they did nothing to make the sale.

Berghof Realty's agreement is one day at a time. That's right, *one* day. If you aren't completely happy, you can fire them, any time, for any reason, and no commission will be due. Berghof Realty is literally the *only* real estate brokerage offering this.

Ernest Berghof is upbeat and positive, quick with a joke or a story. Best of all, he is a great listener. He is obviously a man who loves what he is doing and is very good at it. His enthusiasm is infectious. Spend an hour with Ernest learning about how he and



"For me," says Ernest, "it's about helping others. I love it when I can say that we helped a client do something that I know most agents wouldn't have been able to pull off. We go well beyond the point where most agents would have given up. We have come up with a completely different way of selling real estate, and it's raising the quality of service for our clients, and the quality of life for our agents." He smiles and adds, "Everybody wins, every time."

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