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The Higgins Group

Marketing Connecticut Real Estate at the Highest Level

Rick Higgins
*Founder and Broker/Owner
Higgins Group
RREIN Member*

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By Maria Patterson



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Is Connecticut, a state consistently ranked highest in per-capita income and noted for its exquisite countryside, elite communities, venerated heritage and celebrated citizenry, truly in need of the Higgins Group's ability to market real estate at its highest level?

To Rick Higgins, the founder and broker/owner of Higgins Group—with offices strategically sprinkled throughout Fairfield County, Connecticut—the answer is a resounding “yes”...but a qualified one.

“Fairfield County doesn't require as much high-level marketing as many places in America, but instead, is the most suitable market for world-class marketing,” explains Higgins.

To meet Higgins, one does not immediately grasp his legendary marketing ability, as he, without exception, steadfastly refuses to promote or market his own exceptional accomplishments and vaulted position within the real estate industry.

Instead, at every opportunity, all questions about his success are deflected in order to leverage his boundless enthusiasm for Fairfield County or his prodigious passion for and support of his 350 Fairfield County-based, high-caliber sales and marketing professionals, and management team.

It becomes readily apparent that his quest to “market Connecticut real estate at its highest level” is never sidetracked by the need that many real estate companies seem to have to “preen in public.” With Higgins, there is no personal or corporate vanity in evidence as the focus is always on clients, consumers and their communities, and his associates, their families and their needs.

By all rights, Higgins—a college football player, Ivy League graduate (Columbia), former attorney in a real estate law firm, developer/builder of 200 homes in the tri-state area, and now, owner and leader of one of the country's most respected real estate brokerages—should at least occasionally crow about his considerable credentials, but instead, references others. An example would be his relative, Barbara Corcoran, the iconic New York City real estate celebrity.

“Barbara is the lightning rod for any public attention that our family gets and deserves every ounce of her amazing fame,” says Higgins.

Higgins believes his firm's culture, which is geared toward deep human respect of all others along with achieving the ultimate in creative marketing, is congruent with Connecticut's values as well.

“The Fairfield County marketplace epitomizes how individual and company success can only follow serving others first,” Higgins explains. “Nowhere in the world would you find harder working individuals willing to make sacrifices in their careers, and who understand the significance of creating value-added results for consumers and their clients. These individuals, residents and their families both recognize and appreciate doing business and being served by a real estate organization whose work ethic and dedication to the highest level of professionalism, and in our case marketing and results, matches their own core values.

This is why many people refer to us as ‘Connecticut's Luxury Real Estate Company.’ This connection by professionals whose expectation of excellence is on par with ours, has catapulted our company to where it is today.”

We are the fastest-growing brokerage in Connecticut. The Higgins Group was founded shortly after my family and I moved to Connecticut in the late 1990s and within 10 years, we grew from one agent (me) and one office to 350 agents and 14 offices. Since Higgins continually evolved his company's mantra—“Marketing Connecticut Real Estate at the Highest Level”—it was time for me to press him for some specifics:

Maria Patterson: Rick, you certainly do celebrate how the Higgins Group, a Christie's affiliate in the Westport/Fairfield region, markets real estate at the highest level. I would think all real estate companies do, though, out of necessity?

Rick Higgins: Regrettably for consumers, and specifically home sellers, this is not the case. Many real estate companies have created a listing-versus-marketing culture within the organization.

MP: What is the difference?

RH: When an organization's greatest communication with their associates is comprised of the following messages, it undermines the importance of marketing: “Let's make listing presentations;” “Listings are the name of the game;” “If you don't list, you don't last;” also, referring to the person representing the home as the “listing agent.”

MP: Some would say these are merely unimportant semantic points.

RH: Those who cannot appreciate the significance of this dreadful nomenclature will never market real estate at the highest level. Would you or a home seller want your agent to consider themselves as your listing agent or your marketing agent? Anyone can list a home, but marketing it at a higher level in a customized fashion is what Fairfield County home sellers are looking for and totally deserve.

Our clients who commute into Manhattan to market a variety of concepts, products and services are cognizant that high-level marketing embodies the time-tested “Four P's of Marketing” methodology: price, product, promotion and placement. A listing mentality never goes in this direction.

MP: How do the 4 P's help the Higgins Group market at the highest level?

RH: While evoking the 4 P's of marketing does not automatically entitle anyone to respect for innova-

tion, as these principles have been a staple of high-level marketing for decades, real estate associates need to pay more attention to all four P's and not just the P that stands for price.

MP: How so?

RH: When a real estate associate convinces him- or herself that price essentially determines whether or not homes sell, they unwittingly succumb to a self-fulfilling and fatalistic approach that discourages them from considering how product, placement, interest and promotion profoundly influence results as well.

MP: Customized and creative marketing seem to be the core competencies of your company, along with your culture.

RH: A real estate company and its associates cannot possibly market real estate and its communities without customization, creativity



Rick Higgins and his wife, Adele, who serves as vice chairman of the Higgins Group.

and a deep appreciation for distinctiveness. As a former attorney, I must confess, at times, I wonder if some in our industry might be guilty of "marketing malpractice" or if they are guilty of essentially marketing conscientious objectives, considering that they actually have their careers guided by how

to make listing presentations.

MP: I would think your approach is especially appreciated in Connecticut.

RH: It is. Connecticut, more than any other market in the country, is known for its preference or predilection for customized homes versus the cookie-cutter McMansions that can be found in developments throughout the rest of the country.

Here in Fairfield County, Connecticut, there is too great an appreciation for the countryside, our woodlands, and our Dickens-like villages to raze major parcels of land for development. Very few Fairfield County homeowners live in a house just like all their neighbors. Therefore, customization is in Connecticut's DNA. It must also extend to how our properties are marketed. In fact, for years, our philosophy or slogan was, "custom residential brokerage." Sadly, we have many in our industry who focus on how they are different, rather than focusing on how our properties are different...which is exactly what must be reflected in our marketing.

MP: Rick, you have many of Fairfield County's most skillful, educated and successful REALTOR® associates. What is your formula for success?

RH: Well, first of all, it's not a secret formula...and it's a simple one. Here are the ingredients, which include three major rules:

1. The personal and family lives of our people will always be of paramount importance because I find family-oriented agents make the most caring agents.

When I first formed the company after I moved here from New Jersey, I really didn't know anyone in Connecticut, which presented a big challenge. I really believe in the importance of family and I knew that there were a lot of people who had successful careers or could have but

instead they chose to stay local to care for their families. I offered an atmosphere that recognized the importance of their children. I did it because I believed in the concept. However, my company took off with some incredibly talented and creative people who joined us because of my philosophy, which offered the opportunity to combine the raising of their family with a successful career. Kids are always welcome in our office.

2. We will only select real estate professionals who understand that we have a robust, collegial, cooperative and mutually respectful network of offices throughout the county that work together for the benefit of our sellers, buyers and investors. In fact, I refuse to have any sales contests that pit one associate against another. Therefore, you will not see any boards on our walls heralding our top producers at the expense and embarrassment of other agents, some of whom might have been tending to a sick parent in the hospital that month. I have always believed in avoiding these hackneyed and tiresome, manipulative, competitive ploys, common within the industry. Plus, I am not interested in encouraging someone to make a quick sale or get a listing in order to be ranked higher on the board. That's why our company's mantra isn't "personal bragging or promotion at the highest level." I guess it goes back to my days at the law firm. I don't remember any law practice where the firm's leading litigator that month was posted on the wall based on quantity of business.

3. The third rule is the Golden Rule, which doesn't require explanation.

MP: Rick, we talked about customizing creative marketing for your homes. I learned from your associate, Julie Vanderblue, the president of the Higgins Group, that she joined your firm not only because of your ethics

and humanity but also because you encourage creativity throughout the company.

RH: Julie is a great example, along with her exceptional Vanderblue team. The reason she is admired not only locally but throughout the industry is because of her exquisite creativity. Before joining us, Julie was already number one in her market and one of the leading producers in all of Connecticut for another Fairfield company. She joined us because I confirmed that I would support her desire to build a highly specialized team and always invite her ideas. Her team is one of the key factors in our growth and success. Her friendship is one of the most valuable aspects of my life.

Another valuable member of the Higgins Group family and close friend is Carol McMorris, one of the top agents in the state who fits into our family-first atmosphere because not only is she spectacularly successful, she has eight children!

MP: Rick, you are a valued member of RISMedia's Real Estate Information Network® (RREIN), a prestigious network of leading real estate companies providing leading real estate information. Why did you join?

RH: I am most proud that we are a RREIN Member representing Fairfield, Connecticut. I believe that, in this information age, especially, real estate companies have to be a trusted source of off- and online information, not only driving the transaction period when consumers are buying or selling, but also during the years they are in need of real estate-relevant content and advice. Real estate companies cannot provide this on their own. RISMedia is the leader in real estate information systems and thankfully, John Featherston and Darryl MacPherson have accepted our company as a RREIN Member.

MP: Speaking of affiliations, how does Christie's International Real Estate

help you market at a higher level?

RH: I once read that over 90% of consumer decisions are brand based. Having the Christie's brand provides immense marketing and networking value on behalf of our clients. I'm convinced that it is by far the most prestigious brand name in the world of real estate.

MP: Rick, even though we are meeting at your Westport office, we are sitting in a very comfortable and elegant conference room versus a personal office. Why so?

RH: In all my years, I've never had an office. Just as I do not seek to perpetuate a hierarchy or pecking order by not publishing our associates in an office ranking, which virtually all other real estate companies do, until and unless 350 Higgins associates all have private offices, then I will never take one for myself. We don't even assign desks because they are all fully equipped work stations where anyone can sit.

We encourage agents to use any of the offices and broaden their markets. They are always welcome and treated accordingly in any Higgins Group office.

I know it may sound too syrupy but it's true. I have a deep love and respect for all of our associates—especially my wife, Adele, who is vice chairman of the Higgins Group and my sister-in-law, Kim Higgins, out of our New Canaan office. I would never sell the company because, outside of my family, they are all my best friends. I couldn't imagine not seeing them everyday.

MP: How does your creativity extend to your website?

RH: I think it is important for a site to be multi-dimensional and entertaining with videos, music, etc.

MP: I understand that your website even includes a feature that links your astrological sign to your possible real estate preferences—is that true?

RH: We have something for every-

one, including astrology. Just for fun!

MP: Your slogan and philosophy and culture isn't just marketing real estate, but Connecticut real estate. How does that include marketing the Connecticut communities you serve as well?

RH: We are extremely dedicated to promoting, marketing and educating the world to the finer points and myriad of nuances embodied in the Connecticut experience. You cannot market real estate in Connecticut at the highest level without compelling contextualization. We not only educate buyers regarding the limitless amenities, great schools, recreation and opportunities to be found in Connecticut, but also for some, we market the wonders of New York as well.

Think about it. If we took a \$3 million home here in Westport, Fairfield, Norwalk, New Canaan, Darien or Greenwich, and airlifted it to Nebraska or anywhere else in the country, it might sell for \$1 million, if that. Nebraska is a beautiful state, but it doesn't have access to Manhattan. We convey to all our relocating families and corporate transferees the advantages of living so close to New York City, and explain that they're going to be paying extra for that advantage, so they owe it to themselves to enjoy it. Their reaction is always one of excitement about such possibilities. This is one more way to market and now, more than ever, Fairfield County could use it.

MP: I never thought that the more you effectively express the value of the town, the county and even Manhattan, the more you establish value for the homes you market.

RH: It's all part of how the Higgins Group markets at the highest level. **RE**

For more information, please visit www.higginsgroup.com.