

# A Service and Information Business

An Interview with Hall F. Willkie, President, Brown Harris Stevens

**EDITORS' NOTE** Hall Willkie oversees Brown Harris Stevens Residential Sales, LLC, managing more than 400 sales agents in New York City with sales in excess of \$4.2 billion. He works closely with his colleagues who manage Brown Harris Stevens sales offices in The Hamptons, Palm Beach, and Miami.



Hall F. Willkie

**COMPANY BRIEF** Established in 1873, privately-held New York-based Brown Harris Stevens ([brownharrisstevens.com](http://brownharrisstevens.com)) is a premier provider of real estate services. One of the oldest and largest real estate firms in the country, the company operates offices in New York City, the Hamptons, Palm Beach, and Miami. Its operating divisions include residential sales, residential management, new development marketing and sales, relocation, appraisal and consulting, commercial sales, leasing and management, healthcare real estate, and insurance services. This summer, the firm opened an exceptional new downtown flagship and expanded to Miami.

**Where is Brown Harris Stevens' growth coming from and, looking ahead, will entering new markets be a key focus for the company?**

We have always been focused on quality, not quantity, and we have grown tremendously over my career with this company. But we grow only when the right opportunities are available and it makes sense – it's not a goal to be bigger; it's a goal to be the best. Where that goal and an opportunity to expand come together, we do it.

In the last year, we grew by 50-some new agents in the firm in New York City. What's so exciting is that many of them are some of the top agents in the city that have joined us from competing firms.

At our main Park Avenue office, we added an entire floor and joined it by a dramatic staircase, and we have improved the quality of the environment tremendously.

**How important is it that the talent fits in with the Brown Harris Stevens culture?**

Our culture is well-known throughout the industry and it's the major draw for brokers to come here. Most people join the firm because they want to be a part of that culture and, therefore, it's not a struggle to fit them in.

Part of our culture is having a very hands-on sales management team with an open-door policy to address broker's needs all week long.

**What is the key role the firm plays in supporting agents? Is it the training, or the research?**

The number-one focus is brand because a quality broker needs a strong brand. Brown Harris Stevens is a highly respected name. We also exclusively represent Christie's, so in addition to the broker as an individual brand, there is the company brand and the Christie's brand, and that opens every door. After that, it's the quality of the agent and the service he or she provides that actually gets the business.

We're an information and a service business, so Brown Harris Stevens has great technology and provides brokers with access to current and accurate information on every device they have.

We have a large marketing department to support their needs, as well as sales management. Every sales manager at Brown Harris Stevens was a broker and knows the business, and every one of them is accessible and eager to assist, because in our business, most questions have an urgency to them.

**The digital side of this space has impacted the need for a storefront, but does that need for constant contact mean the office will always play a key role?**

Yes. Offices and the human touch have never been more important. I can share information electronically but I share more information that leads to deals when I see people.

With the expansion of offices, we've found the need to construct environments where people can share information outside of standing at someone's desk or electronically. We have created a living room, common kitchens, and terraces with common tables. Personal communication has never been more important because so much is lost in electronic communication – nuance, tone, depth of conversation.

**How did the Miami business come about?**

We grow outside of the City in markets that are related to New York because we are such a strong brand here. We are in the Hamptons, in Palm Beach, and in Miami. With the acquisition of Zilbert, we had an opportunity to buy a fantastic very high-end small firm that has a major impact on the market.

**How important has it been for Brown Harris Stevens to solidify business in the outer boroughs?**

Our Brooklyn offices are so important to us. The city is a lot more than Manhattan and we have great and productive offices in Park Slope and in Brooklyn Heights, in addition to our six offices in Manhattan.

**Are you concerned that we're losing some of the diversity that affordable housing and other price points can bring to the city?**

It does concern me but the effort is still there to maintain the diversity of New York. I think it will continue to be there based on the nature of the housing stock in New York alone, over 65 percent of which are rentals, and there are many laws that help protect them. Approximately 35 percent of the city is owned units. That helps keep the city diverse.

**Is it hard to convey the message that this firm can handle lower-end opportunities and not just those at the highest price points?**

We dominate the high-end of the market but we are absolutely a full-service firm. Last year, roughly one-third of our sales were under \$1 million; one-third were between \$1 and \$3 million; and one-third were over \$3 million.

What we're famous for is those over \$3-million properties but especially over \$10-, \$15-, and \$20-million markets – we dominate those.

We do the same percentage of properties under \$1 million as we do at the high end of the market.

**How have you been able to differentiate and perform so strongly in that upper-end market?**

It's by attracting and retaining the agents that deal in that end of the market, and by keeping a very strong brand. It's aided by our culture of doing everything in the interest of our clients above all others – there is a great deal of discretion at the high end of the market and a need for professionalism; this is what we have always focused on.

Also, Brown Harris Stevens has a sister company that manages many of the more high-end co-ops and condos in New York, and that has helped.

**How do you balance all that is going on?**

It's a dynamic business and every day is different. I focus on designing how the company operates, which allows me and the other sales executives to make sales and unmatched customer service a priority.

We put ourselves in a position every day to sell real estate. ●