



Retail Real Estate Star

Reza Etedali wins through cooperation in a competitive business.

By Sheryll Alexander

The commercial real estate business has always been cutthroat. In most firms, co-workers compete against each other, creating an underlying fear factor. High security surrounds exclusive listings and all-important contact lists. But Reza Etedali, one of Orange County's rising retail real estate stars, has transformed the modern brokerage into a feel-good business with his win-win attitude - even when it comes to his competition.

After only 1 year in business, Etedali already is well established in the West Coast's retail real estate game, called "the king of Southern California shopping center sales" by California Centers Magazine. REZA Investment Group had a sales volume of more than \$600 million in 2003. From the company's Irvine headquarters, Etedali and his team expect to handle about \$1 billion in shopping center sale transactions in 2004.

Not many entrepreneurs can ever expect to hit \$1 billion in sales volume, even after a lifetime in business, but it helps when your average deal is 8 figures. REZA Investment Group's biggest deal was the 2003 sale of Burbank's Media City Center for \$111 million. The company also brokered the sales of the Baldwin Hills Crenshaw Plaza Mall (\$68 million), Glendale Marketplace (\$46.5 million) and Del Norte Plaza Shopping Center in San Diego County (\$33 million).

With those impressive numbers in one of the most aggressive industries ever, you'd half expect Reza Etedali to be a wheeler-dealer type, talking nonstop about his accomplishments and latest material acquisitions. Not so.

Walking into his offices in Irvine's white marble 3 Park Plaza building, you realize immediately that there's no fanfare to his success. Industry magazines and newspapers lie about the casual reception area, and the only decorations are large photographs of recently sold properties. Etedali's demeanor is soft spoken, yet warm and inviting. Once deep into conversation, you notice that he's more interested in the person talking to him than in himself.

In fact, it's Etedali's approach to business - the marriage of work and his values to create a balanced lifestyle - that excites him far more than any business deal.

The Power of Persistence

Unstoppable persistence is ranked first on the list of REZA Investment's Group's 10 core values. The company's definition reads: "Persistence pays big dividends. It's not that important if you fail as long as you quickly get back on your feet and reach for your desired outcome again."

Success, says Etedali, is not quick. Amazingly, this belief was formed in his challenging teenage years. Born and raised in Iran, Etedali's parents sent him to a private Catholic school in Maryland to complete his high school education. "I was in the 10th grade, and I couldn't understand a word of English," he says. "When you are thrown into a situation, your best self shows up." He returned home during the Iranian revolution, the U.S. Embassy hostage crisis and the impending war with Iraq. Frightened for his future, Etedali's parents managed to get him on a flight to Germany only a week before war erupted. When the U.S. Embassy there cancelled visas for all Iranians, he fled to Sweden. A Swedish attorney informed him that the best he could hope for was eventual deportation.

Etedali, however, decided to take fate into his own hands. During the 9 months of a cold Scandinavian winter, he trudged to the U.S. Embassy and tried to talk his way in. He was rejected again and again. But through his persistence and polite manner, Etedali managed to impress the embassy staff. Finally allowed to enter, his plea for a visa was once again rejected.

Still undaunted, Etedali continued to return week after week. Because of his unfailing determination and positive attitude, the U.S. consulate made an exception to all the rules and granted him a visa. Etedali was only 17 years old.

Doing what you love

"Your best lessons are learned in tough times," says Etedali. He used the things learned from his teenage years through high school and on to a construction engineering degree at San Diego State. "But I was the ugly ducking in engineering," he says. "I never truly enjoyed it."

He worked for Fluor Corp. as a project manager on large construction projects and then started a business in the Washington, D.C., area doing residential development. "We did pretty well until the market crashed," he says.

He finally realized that his passion was for something that he had learned as a child from his father, a retail real estate investor. He returned to California and enrolled in USC's business school, specializing in real estate.

After receiving his MBA, Etedali joined Sperry Van Ness in 1995 as a retail investment sales broker. It didn't take him long to become one of the company's top brokers, breaking numerous records for highest sales volume.

His love for selling shopping centers is palpable. "I like the energy of shopping and trading," he says. Perhaps he learned it from his father who would take him to different retail sites, discuss the deal with him and then allow him to sit at the negotiation table. To carry on the tradition, Etedali enjoys taking his 2 young sons on weekend trips to visit potential properties.

Grabbing the gold

So, he's got the background, the determination and the degree, but how does Etedali really turn his real estate business into gold? He believes that goal-setting is the key. "The biggest illusion in life is that you don't have enough time," he says. "You have time for everything if you figure out what is most important to you."

Through years of study and daily practice of techniques taught by such goal gurus as Anthony Robbins and Stephen R. Covey, Etedali says that he tracks his business and personal goals daily. He also talks weekly with a personal coach and "re-engineers" his life every 2 years at a week-long retreat called "Day with Destiny."

"Covey says that the way you change things is to change your mind," he explains. "If you believe in fear and limitation, that's what you will get. The same is true if you believe in opportunity and abundance."

This drive toward all things positive has given Etedali the ability to create real change in the retail brokerage industry. "My dad told me that, in business, it's important to spread your table with as many people as you can," he says. "It was his belief that when you work with many people and treat them well, you cannot help but succeed."

That's why REZA Investment Group cooperates with outside brokers, an uncommon practice in real estate. In 2003, about 65% of his company's transactions were completed with outside brokers. Etedali does this by making brokers feel like friends rather than fierce competitors.

"Competition is not like a war but more like the Olympics," explains Etedali. He believes that the more often you compete with your professional peers, the more you grow. The company's core values even encourage team members to "wish them luck" because a true competitor pushes you to excel.

While most brokerage firms guard their listings like Fort Knox, REZA's 9-member team shares

access to a database of more than 100,000 retail estate investors and 50,000 investment brokers. When a property comes on the market, they contact the entire database. "We get as many as 500 responses of interest within hours of our initial e-mail blast," says Etedali.

When it comes to technology, Etedali has a military viewpoint. "In today's world, a small army of highly specialized tech-savvy elite units can be much more effective than a much larger, disorganized army," he explains. "The same is even more true in the brokerage business."

His new Retail Intelligence Room is another of Etedali's industry-changing visions. In an ultra-modern conference room with giant flat screen television and Internet hookup, team members and clients sit down and get up-to-the-minute, strategic information about real estate investments.

Balancing act

As much as Etedali lives and breathes his business, he believes that balance is more important. "It's a myth that you have to separate your work and your personal life," he says. "The history of humanity shows us that families and communities pulled together to support each other and grow."

He believes that it makes a positive impression on your children to integrate business and family. "I took care of a multi-million dollar deal while standing in line for a ride at Legoland," he says. "Don't get stuck on the same story. If you don't feel that your life is balanced, rewrite your life."

From persistent immigrant to unhappy engineering student to real estate star to happy family man, Etedali has written an amazing life story that he gratefully shares with his employees, peers, clients and family. **OCM**

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