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Hey, Hey. Ho, Ho. Fabulous has got to go!

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—Words mean as much in selling real estate as they do in selling a Presidential candidate. Every campaign -- whether in politics or property -- spins its words to feature its candidate's assets and redecorate the liabilities.

Often, the best tactic for selling anything is to tell the customer: Don't look at this; look at that. "Sure, this pickup truck only gets eight miles to the gallon, but you won't find a redder paint job this side of Beijing, and those cupholders...they're the best in our weight class!"

As I read the real-estate classifieds on Sunday, I was struck by the number of properties that were awesome, beautiful, breath-taking, charming, elegant, exciting, extraordinary, fabulous, gracious, great, ideal, incredible, lovely, luxurious, magazine-incredible, magnificent, must-see-to-believe, one-of-a-kind, picturesque, pristine, private, spectacular, stunning, superb and terrific.

"Some Pig!" E.B. White would say, even though there's not a "Humble" in the crowd.

Such adjectives, one hopes, are scrupulously honest.

Sellers use superlatives to pluck a buyer's heartstring, the one that runs between his happy-ever-after dreams and his wallet.

Each of us carries around a box of emotional crayons that instantly and on their own color in the line drawings these words create. A word like "charming" evokes positive feelings faster than a computer calls up its files.

Words also convey complex messages in shorthand. "Luxurious," for instance, always means upscale, although how high on the scale of extravagance depends on what we've each seen and saved to our hard drives.

The point of using these highly charged words is to get a buyer to visit, then buy quick.

Sellers have to walk a tightrope, however. The seller wants a buyer to fall on the side of love at first sight.

On the other side, a buyer falls into the bottomless crevasse of disappointment. When a buyer visits and finds something less than the advertised "fabulous," the seller's credibility is tainted. Nits will be picked.

Hopes die. The seller's exaggerations have done him in.

I'm at the point where I pay little attention to adjectives that flap around like plastic pennants at a used-car lot.

What would catch my eye is an ad like this:

100 confirmed acres. Wooded. Nice spot. Access road needs work. Priced above tax value, but below market. Perc doubtful. Decent neighbors. Have honest appraisal and timber cruise. Can document tax basis. Reasonable. Will help right buyer on financing, etc. Golden-Rule applies. Not crook or idiot; looking for same.

In about 300 ads, I found every property to be like every Lake Wobegonian child—above average. Where have all the stinkers gone?

I found a small handful of ads that offered seller-financing, allowing a buyer to get into a property on decent terms for a few years until the credit market settles down.

I found not a single phrase that indicated a seller was willing to “work with” a buyer, or even be “reasonable.”

I also found some constructions that must have been inspired by our former President who once boasted of the many definitions of “is” he knew, legally speaking.

Woods that were clearcut were “maturing woodland.” To the extent that all trees grow, it can be said that all woodland -- even the first spouts on a field of fresh stumps -- is “maturing.”

Ads trumpeted “standing timber,” which I much prefer to trees that sit or recline.

A house that had recently burned to the ground was said to have a “foundation in place.”

A 20-acre lot on a hill top had “50-mile views,” which you could see from the middle of the property, from between the steel struts of a massive powerline tower.

An impenetrable swamp of three acres was “invaluable wetlands habitat.”

And then there was a cattle farm with a “stocked tank.” Trout or bass? I wondered.

I found a half-dozen “absolute steals.” A modest steal doesn’t sell, apparently.

One seller begged the public to “steal my lakefront land” with his promise, “No gimmicks!”

A long-time friend recently shared with me the real-estate ad acronym of the year: SEWES. Unfamiliar? It stands for Secondary Emergency Waste Sanitary Elimination System. Still confused? Try outhouse.

I once looked at 500 acres of over-priced woodland that could only be accessed by fording a “bold stream,” which flooded every spring. The 20-something who showed me around, kept asking: “Isn’t that an awesome price?” (It was three times what it was worth.) “Isn’t this an awesome road?” (It would have been had I four hoofs, two horns and answered to, “Billy.”) “Isn’t that awesome timber?” (The trees were among the most stunted I had ever seen.) Finally, I asked if he knew an adjective other than “awesome.” He thought for a moment. “How about really awesome.”

In a market with unwanted softness running through it like streakers at a church social, I tell sellers this: Don’t disappoint a buyer who comes for a look.

It’s better to exceed expectations than to fall short.

Sellers should be pitching themselves as the buyer’s little helper. Buyers should look for sellers who they can both trust and work with.

Sellers may be advertising the wrong images with the wrong words.

Speak truth to buyers—and see what happens.

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