

# SUPER MARIO

Mario Lepage is an energetic family man who has an equal passion for brokering and travelling



**L**epage says his biggest passion in life is simple: to be happy. The Multi-Prets Hypotheques broker from Gatineau, Quebec, says there are three important components in one's life that need to be balanced in order to reach true happiness. "First of all is your family, second is business and third is your ego," he says.

In order to ensure the ego part of the equation is taken care of, Lepage wakes up every weekday at 4:00am so that he has time to workout – and continues to foster a healthy, youthful appearance – before arriving at the office at 5:30am.

Spending weekends with his wife, Francine, and his daughter, Maude, is the highlight of his life. They prefer to go on leisurely strolls together rather than vegging out in front of the TV.

Lepage and Francine recently reached a milestone: 20 years of marriage. In celebration, they rented a chalet for 50 of their closest family members and had a party. Each winter, they rent a chalet in Mont Tremblant or

Mont-Sainte-Anne, Quebec, and the whole family goes skiing.

From Monday through Thursday, Lepage works until 8:00 each evening. But, once Friday night rolls around, he is responsible for every meal. Another passion of his is cooking, and he has multiple recipes at his disposal to prove it.

This suits his wife well because, as a real estate agent, her weekends include long hours showing houses.

Lepage enjoys eight weeks of vacation each year with his family. In the brokering business since the summer of 2001, Lepage and his family have partaken in more than 40 trips around the world – from Greece to the Dominican Republic to China.

This year, his family's big trip is an Alaskan cruise. The bonus is, he never pays for his vacations – lenders do. Of course, he says with a laugh, "You have to finish first. Not second, but first."

## Alternative lending accolades

When he won the Alternative Lending Mortgage Broker of the Year at the CMP Canadian Mortgage Awards in February, Lepage insisted that his wife join him on stage and he asked attendees to wait patiently while he called his daughter to tell her he'd won.

He says that winning the award means he has a good reputation in the business. It also acts as confirmation that he is in the right business and must continue on his brokering path.

Lepage's alternative lending awards began in 2003, when he won first place with FirstLine for the lender's B program. Unfortunately, the company cancelled its program in Quebec shortly after.

Three consecutive years – 2004 through 2006 – Lepage took home top prize from Xceed.

"When I began brokering in 2001, I realized that the banks gave referral fees to real estate agents," he says. "I realized that it was impossible for me to beat them in this market."

As a result, Lepage decided to go out on his own and ensure he took care of his customers. He could beat the banks with this personal approach, because the banks lack the time and resources to take care of their customers at a higher level.

The competition between mortgage brokers and banks in

Quebec is a bit different. Since real estate agents receive referral fees from the banks, the banks have some leverage. If a real estate agent even passes a bank's turndowns to Lepage, the bank will cut the real estate agent off. "This is a very big battle, but I don't want to play this game," he says.

Lepage's positive attitude and love of brokering have helped him always take the high road. He is convinced that he's not out selling mortgages, because people need them anyway. Instead, his focus is on offering great service, and the constant flow of business is a product of the relationships he has forged.

### Forward thinking

In 2006 and 2007, Lepage spent between \$100,000 and \$150,000 a year on advertising – including radio, television and newspaper ads.

But the results of a recent consumer survey that Lepage undertook revealed that he had a good consumer presence in his region. As such, he realized he could trim back his advertising budget and free up funds to spend on his existing customers.

This year, he reduced his advertising budget to \$40,000 for newspaper and local TV ads, and his business is continuing to increase thanks to his past clients – an astounding 95% of his business comes from repeat business or direct referrals from his database.

Lepage is gearing up for a new contest venture this fall. From October 2008 to October 2009, every time he receives a referral, the referrer will be entered into a draw for a trip worth about \$3,000.

Each quarter, he will also give away smaller prizes – such as \$500 gift certificates – through a draw, as another means to reward his customers.

He's still working out the details, but he believes this is a great



Francine and Mario Lepage

incentive for his customer base – which currently consists of about 2,000 contacts – to send more referrals his way.

This devoted customer base even goes so far as to call him for referrals to other professional services such as plumbers and lawyers, and also often amiably refers to him as 'Uncle Mario'. "To my customers, I'm not a broker – I'm a part of their family," he proudly declares.

Lepage touches his customers at least three times a year: 1) He personally calls each customer on his or her birthday; 2) He rents a cinema each spring and invites his customers, with a turnout of about 300 people; and 3) He coordinates a customer appreciation barbecue each fall, with about 250-300 attendees.

Each time he closes a deal, he sends a thank you letter, as well as when he receives a referral. He also sends his past clients a small gift when they pass a referral his way.

### The road ahead

The fact that 100% financing and 40-year amortizations have come to fruition over the last two years – changes that Lepage could not have predicted when he started brokering – makes him optimistic that there will be equally significant changes over the next few years.

He's also hopeful that the sub-prime business will return in the near future. "I don't know when, but I'm sure the alternative lenders will come back," he says adding that the Canadian confidence crisis needs to be repaired.

"When you play hockey, you know where the puck is, but you don't know where the puck will go. This business is the same way," says Lepage.

He believes that electronic financing will be the way of the future. His only concern is a lack of personal contact between brokers and their customers.

But no matter what the future holds, Lepage will continue to put his heart into each deal that comes his way. **CMP**



An excited Mario Lepage calls his daughter from the podium at the CMP Canadian Mortgage Awards 2008