

A Sense of Community

An Interview with Kent M. Swig,
President, Swig Equities, LLC

EDITORS' NOTE In addition to his ownership of and responsibilities at Swig Equities and HelmsleySpear, Kent Swig is Owner and Co-chairman of Terra Holdings, LLC, a company that owns and operates several real estate service firms, including Brown Harris Stevens, one of the oldest and largest residential real estate service providers in New York, the Hamptons, and Palm Beach; Halstead Property Company, a residential brokerage and management company; and Vanderbilt Holdings, a service firm with expertise in appraisal and consulting, advertising and marketing, insurance, and residential mortgage brokerage. In addition, Swig is a principal in, and serves on the Board of Directors of The Swig Company, a family-owned real estate and hotel company based in San Francisco and New York, which owns approximately nine million square feet of commercial properties across the United States. After earning a degree in Chinese history from Brown University, Swig attended UC Hastings College of the Law (San Francisco), where he was selected for the law review.



Kent M. Swig

COMPANY BRIEF Based in New York, with offices in San Francisco, Swig Equities (www.swigequities.com), is a real estate development, investment, and management firm that purchases and develops prime residential and commercial buildings, operating companies, and securities. Notable recent acquisitions include 110 William Street and Sheffield57 in New York.

How critical is community engagement and focus, both for you personally and from a company point of view?

The word community is usually associated with corporate giving and people being charitable. But it goes beyond just giving; it means a sense of humanism. Especially in today's world, where we are in one of the most difficult periods for our economy that we have experienced in many decades, the idea of community is critical. And that means applying the sense of community and humanism in your business life, your office life, your home life, and your civic and charitable life, which is more than just giving money. When the economy was good, the idea of giving community time within

our money-oriented society was really overlooked, but now it is needed more than ever. Right now, people are doing things that are not easy. There are ugly things being done: people are laying off people, people are fighting people, people are suing people – all of this goes on in very difficult periods of time. People can do bad or ugly things in the most gracious of ways, or they can do them in nasty ways. The economy is going to turn, and it's going to get better. We go through cycles, and things do get better, and

people ultimately are judged on how they behave and what kind of work they do and the manner in which they do it. That sense of community extends to the way we do everything; the way we conduct our lives. So that's a critical component, and it's more important now than ever to individuals, to companies, and to society in general.

You're operating in very close-knit communities. Does it take on more meaning when you see how critical that community is to your brand and your specific business?

Yes. For example, the Realty Foundation of New York is a foundation that was set up specifically to help those in need during economic hardships. We're in an environment now where economic hardships are a true reality. Here, you've got the most demand ever, so it is more critical now than ever to do whatever you can. One gives money, which is desperately needed, but it's also about giving positions for people to work, giving office space for somebody, giving somebody a home in which to live, or giving whatever it is that you've got available – it goes beyond just cash. Whatever one can do to promote community and help others, is much needed in today's world.

There are so many needs out there, and you can't be everything to everyone. How challenging is it to pick what you need to focus on, and are there certain areas you need to limit yourself to, to make sure you have the most impact?

It is difficult to do everything and, absolutely, you have to be selective. Prior to the current economy, if any friend's name was attached to a charity, you would lend your name and give money. Now, you've got to be more selective because you want to make an impact

and money is harder to obtain. So you tend to consolidate into the areas that are the most important to you, whatever they may be. You have to be able to focus and make things as efficient as possible.

In your role leading a number of companies, do you feel there is a sense of commitment leaders should have for their employees in making sure they get engaged, or is it an individual decision?

I don't expect, and I would not even ask my staff to give money to my charities; that's my job, that's what I do. They should choose to do what they do. However, during their work day, when I'm paying them, I can choose to deploy my resources on a human level in ways that can benefit others. So, for example, I can take my project development staff and my construction staff and lend them to charitable institutions. Does my staff have to do it? No, but they're willing to do it. They're giving their time and efforts, and they're gaining a good feeling by helping. It's a win-win situation during a time when companies are not operating at full capacity. There are opportunities to do a lot of things that don't necessarily involve just writing a check, and that brings a sense of community and giving.

You've been focused on community for a long time. Was this instilled in you early on? Where did the importance of being involved in these areas come from?

I grew up in a family led by my grandfather, Ben Swig, and my father, Mel Swig, for whom the difference between business and charity was indistinguishable. In fact, for my grandfather, in the latter 10 or 15 years of his life, his business was to give money away to a number of charities. He was a charitable machine. His entire way of doing business was to underwrite educational groups, Jewish causes, non-Jewish causes – everything. So I grew up in an environment that did not distinguish between business and charity – they were one and the same. It was part of the fabric; it was who we as a family were and still are today, and it has helped shape who I am as a person. For example, my charitable functions are often scheduled during the business day; it's not that business stops at 6 PM, and then I can focus on charity. It's interwoven and interlaced, and helps define who I am as a person; I can't distinguish between the two. ●

Kent Swig receiving the New York Police Hero award

