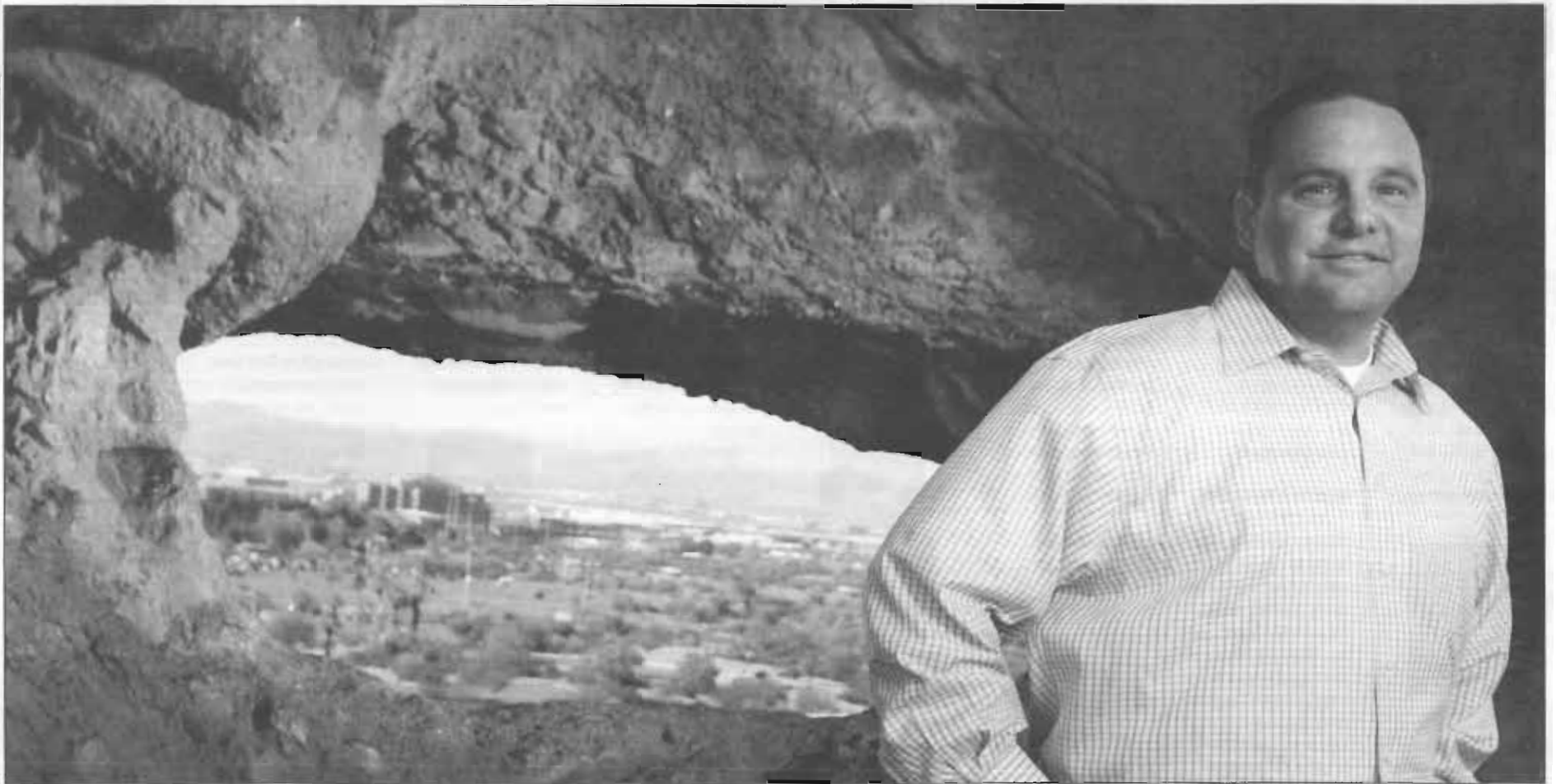


MATT WIDDOWS

# Self-taught pro prospers combining real estate, tech



BY KRISTENA HANSEN

Phoenix Business Journal

**M**att Widdows has never been the academic overachiever, and he has defied anyone who tried to force him to learn at any pace but his own.

The 41-year-old Phoenix native describes himself as the kind of guy who likes to flip on the Discovery Channel and learn what he wants, when he wants — a rebellious path from his upbringing where book smarts and scholastic achievement were expected.

He is the product of a father who worked in pharmaceuticals and a mother who was a college professor. His younger sister (and only sibling) has worked in the biomedical industry her entire adult life.

"She's the scholarly one," Widdows said. "I'm the one that wanted to learn on my own time."

He channeled his tenacious energy into work, and did so from a very early age. His first "dream job" was to be a firefighter, which spawned from his childhood obsession with the 1970s TV show "Emergency!," a medical drama that followed the

adventures of Los Angeles County Fire Department paramedics.

Still too young to be saving lives and dousing fires, Widdows fed his hunger to work in the meantime with his first job as a paperboy at age 11.

"I've always worked from a young age," he said. "My dad made me financially responsible as far as borrowing money and spending money. I feel like I always had a spreadsheet when I was a kid."

In his early college years at Mesa Community College and in need of income, Widdows got a job at a medical software and hardware technology company. Around the same time, he obtained his real-estate license and worked part time selling homes — a career he was exposed to in high school by some of his friends' parents who were successful in land acquisition and entitlements.

After about 18 months, Widdows realized he liked the tech world so much he launched his own distribution business for the same company for which he'd worked.

While continuing to develop his career, Widdows transferred to Arizona State University in pursuit of a business degree in real

estate. But his off-campus work got so heavy that he dropped out of ASU after more than two years, and never looked back.

Eventually, he sold his tech firm and became a full-time real estate agent, selling new homes in 1995. He joined Realty Executives International two years later, but his entrepreneurial itch became so overwhelming again that he left after eight months to form his own company called New Home Finders.

Even at that point, Widdows wasn't satisfied. Using his technology and real estate expertise, he spent the next three years brainstorming a business concept that he eventually turned into HomeSmart International in early 2000.

The basis for HomeSmart was Widdows' proprietary software he designed to save on costs associated with Web hosting, lead generation and back-office systems. The software, free to franchise owners, allows its agents to keep 100 percent of their commissions.

The system has catapulted HomeSmart from its humble beginnings with three agents into a massive national franchise with roughly 7,400 agents today.

This success earned Widdows a widespread reputation for being a workaholic. While he doesn't deny it, he says what most people don't see is that he still makes enough time for himself and his family.

"I'm like a switch — 100 miles an hour or dead stop. Not a whole lot of in-between," Widdows said.

**'My dad made me financially responsible as far as borrowing money and spending money. I feel like I always had a spreadsheet when I was a kid.'**

**Matt Widdows**

## Close Up

**TITLE:** CEO

**COMPANY:** HomeSmart International

**FAMILY:** wife, Colleen; son, Colby, 10; daughter, Jenny, 6

**DEFINITION OF SUCCESS:** Ability to innovate and serve your customers while giving back to the community that got you where you are.

**EFFECTIVE BUSINESS LEADERSHIP:** Passion and compassion. Passion and drive to succeed while having compassion for your employees and customers.

**BEST PART OF JOB:** I get to play with new tools and technology while innovating for my industry.

**WORST PART OF JOB:** Employee drama.

**BEST ADVICE RECEIVED:** Stick to one thing and make it the best you can.

**LIVING A DOUBLE LIFE:** I would be a fireman.

**YOUR BEST FRIEND'S DESCRIPTION OF YOU:**

Driven workaholic.

**YOUR DESCRIPTION OF YOURSELF:** Driven but able to step away for the more important things in life.

**ONE THING NEVER TO DO AGAIN:** Take a chair lift at Snowbowl during the summer. Longest hour of my life stuck in a chair.

**FAVORITE SPORTS:** Football and Ultimate Fighting Championships

**FAVORITE WAY TO RELAX:** In front of a fire at our house in Flagstaff

**SOMETHING YOU'LL NEVER FORGET AGAIN:**

How small the world really is. Everyone seems to be connected somehow, and even more so in the age of social media.