



Find a Real Estate Agent You Love

Before you decide on a house, you need to decide on a person to help you find that dream home. Here's how to get someone who will really be your advocate.

Though the Internet has made it easier for novice couples to buy or sell property, it's still helpful to work with a licensed professional. A real-estate agent can help you navigate either process, and may ultimately find you the right deal. But is this person really your advocate? Here are four tips to ensure that your relationship with your agent is as fruitful and hassle-free as the one with your spouse!

1. Make Cold Calls.

If you haven't heard any referrals, do some online research on Realtor.com or Google and start calling companies that have offices near the location you're looking to buy or sell in. Ask to speak to the office's general manager and then schedule a meeting with him or her so that you can be assigned a salesperson. This way, the manager has more of an invested interest in you having a positive experience. Yes, this idea might be out of the norm, but the manager's openness and enthusiasm about it is key to how he or she (and the rest of the staff) will treat you throughout your buying or selling process.

2. Interview the Possibilities.

After the office manager meets with you to get a feel for your personality and what you're looking for, you'll be hooked up with an agent; then, you can start your inquisition. Not that you need to bring a spotlight and 200-watt bulb, but this is your chance to find someone who you trust and feel comfortable with. Whether you're buying or selling, here's what to ask:

How long have you been in the real estate business? Obviously, the more time, the better.

Are you a member of the National Association of Realtors? This organization requires certain standards from its members.

Are you a member of MLS? This is the Multiple Listing Service, which gives agents access to houses represented by all agencies -- not just their own. For sellers, this means your home will be posted on the list as well, letting more people see it.

Do you work on weekends? Since this is probably when most open houses are, the answer to this should be yes.

Can you outline how you would represent me? The answer should include your housing inspections, following through with your mortgage approval process, and being present at your closing.

Will you show me houses listed by other companies? Double-check that the agent isn't partial to his or her own realty group.

Are you familiar with my area? You'll want the agent to know the ins and outs of your community.

For Potential Buyers:

What would happen if I fell in love with one of your listings? In this situation, your agent might be too invested in the sale to barter for you to get a "deal." Unless you hear otherwise, your agent's loyalties probably lie with the seller, who, naturally, wants to get the highest price.

Do you recommend aggressive or conservative bidding? The agent's answer should either match your own feelings, or provide you with a strong argument otherwise.

Will you sign a Buyer's Contract? See #3, "Buyers: Find an Advocate," below.

For Sellers:

What percent of your company's listings have sold in the past 12 months? You're looking for an answer over 75 percent. Call at least three companies and compare the difference.

On average, how long did it take to sell these listings? Since you're likely to be in a time crunch, an average span of over four months signals a problem. However, if you find that most agencies have a similar span, the problem might be with the housing market, and not the real estate group.

What is the average sale price of your sold listings? Get an idea of the price range they typically sell. If it's significantly higher or lower than your home's value, they might not have the clientele you need -- or be experienced enough to know your home's strengths.

What's the list/sale price ratio? This is a good way to see if they're overpricing their homes. The closer that ratio is to 100 percent, the better.

Do you have a relationship with a relocation company? They have access to buyers that others wouldn't have.

[Nest Note] Sellers, you may also want to see your agent in action while hosting an open house for another listing in your area. Before signing with someone to sell your pad, see how that person interacts with potential buyers. Does the agent come off as too aggressive? Does the agent know the area? Is this someone you would want representing you?

3. Buyers: Find an Advocate.

As a home buyer, it's important to know that no matter what agent you use, he or she is *really* working for the seller of the house (even if your agent hasn't met that person yet), since that's where the agent makes commission. The idea of this is scary, since you want to get the best deal possible -- and it seems you're playing for different teams. But there are ways to test agents' loyalty: See if they'll sign a Buyers Contract. In a nutshell, this is a form that would guarantee your agent will reveal all pros and cons of each house -- leak in the pipes, termite damage in the walls, asbestos found. If your agent knows about it, you will too. To find out more, check out the **National Association of Exclusive Buyer Agents**.

If this contract isn't available in your area, your agent's loyalty (or lack thereof) will be clear from the houses he or she shows you. Do the houses meet the description you wanted? Does the agent point out the houses' flaws?

4. Buyers: Hit the Road.

Once you've found an agent you like and feel comfortable with, it's time to see some houses. But, remember, nothing is set in stone: You can still change your mind about this broker. Here are some things to look for when shopping: Does the agent know the neighborhood? The agent should be pointing out nearby parks, schools, shops, public transportation stops -- and shouldn't get lost. The more your agent knows about the area, the more excited you can get about it.

Does the agent point out the negatives? If there's a stain on the rug or the bathroom needs to be refinished, your agent should be the first one to bring this to your attention, and then tell you how the price should be adjusted accordingly.

What can the agent find out? Some things you'll want to know are the seller's motivation, and the prices of similar sales in the neighborhood. Can your agent explain why some houses sold higher or lower than others?

Did the agent listen to your needs? On your first outing, did you feel like your agent "got" what you were looking for?

Obviously, you might not have found your dream house at your dream price, but was it close?

Is the agent enthusiastic? There's nothing worse than an agent who seems bored or frustrated by you. Don't be rushed into making an offer or feel like you have to apologize for wasting his or her time. This is a huge decision, for you and your mate to make together. Your agent should only be guiding you with information and keeping you upbeat throughout the process (which can take months).

It's not often we marrieds commit to someone *else* during our postwedding days. So it's no wonder you're having trepidations about settling down with one real estate agent. Just remember, this isn't marriage, you can always back out of your realty relationship. That's one reason we suggest you and your mate meet with the manager of the agency first -- there's extra incentive that the agent will keep you satisfied, but if you aren't, the manager will ultimately be responsible. Good luck and happy hunting!

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