



Real Estate: Call Your Agent

July 16, 2007 issue - House shopping? It's good to have help, especially in a buyer's market like this. If you're just driving yourself from one open house to another, you're missing homes buried in the multiple-listing services that only agents have access to. And an agent who specializes in helping buyers may be able to negotiate a better deal than you could.

But not all buyer agents are created equal. Most home shoppers use agents who work for companies that also list properties, and they're likely to steer you to company listings first, says Stephen Brobeck of the Consumer Federation of America. "It's an irreconcilable conflict of interest," he says.

To get around that, you can find a buyers-only agent at the National Association of Exclusive Buyer Agents (naeba.org). If there isn't one in your neighborhood, you can use a selling agent as a buyer agent, but do some screening. Ask about their track record of saving clients money, their training in negotiations and property evaluation, and their loyalty to you. When they suggest homes to visit, ask if they are listed by their own company. That doesn't necessarily make them bad choices, but it does mean the agent has a bigger incentive for you to buy it.

What about the fear that listing agents won't want to work with you if they know they have to split a commission with your buyer agent? (That's the way most buyer agents are paid.) Listing agents are required to show your offers to the owners, even if they'd rather not. And in this slow market, it's not such a big worry. The bidding wars are long gone; now selling agents are happy to get their hands on a contract from anyone.

—Linda Stern

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