

Nine things you should ask your agent before hiring him or her

by Ilyce_Glink

Finding a great real estate agent is a lot less stressful than finding the right life partner. And that's the good news. The bad news is, if you end up with the wrong kind of agent, the time you spend together will be miserable. Working with an agent to buy a house is like being in a short-term marriage; you might speak to the agent several times a day, have coffee or a meal together several times a week, and email each other at all times of the day or night. Although it sounds melodramatic, you or your spouse or partner (or both of you) will come to believe that your long-term happiness depends entirely on the agent "coming through" for you by finding you the house of your dreams. If the agent relationship works well, you could find yourself with a new friend for life. If it goes bad, as it did for a reader who recently sent me a letter asking how she could force her local board of Realtors to provide information about past complaints against her agent, you could find yourself exploring legal options. One way to make sure you're hiring a top quality agent is to spend some time asking the agent a lot of questions, then listening carefully to the answers. If someone has an outgoing personality (as most agents do), they're "talkers." They like to talk and explain things, and if you're quiet, they'll tell you a lot of information about themselves, how they work with clients and how they handle transactions. If you interview two, three or four different agents, you'll begin to get a sense of who might be a good match based on intellect, temperament and interests. First, make a short list of possible agents. Start by talking to friends, family members and colleagues who live relatively close by (if you're selling) or where you intend to buy a home. Then start making calls. Here's a list of questions to ask each agent:

1. What neighborhoods do you work in? Ideally, you want an agent who's really plugged into your neighborhood: they know the gossip, they know the other agents who work there, and they've seen the housing stock turn over time and time again.
2. How many real estate transactions did you complete last year? How many on the buy side, and how many on the sell side? How many did you complete in each of the last 4 or 5 years? You're looking for someone with experience, and closed transactions are a good indicator of how active the agent is.
3. How old are your clients? Do they have children or grandchildren? Do they have special needs? While some agents can work with twentysomethings to seniors, other agents specialize. If you have special needs, or are looking for a house featuring universal design, it helps to have someone working on your behalf who understands what that is and where to find it.
4. What type of home do you most frequently help your clients buy or sell? If you're working with an agent who mostly sells single-family homes and you want to buy a co-op, the agent may not have much knowledge about the market in co-ops or understand the intricacies of how co-ops work. Likewise, if the agent mostly works in an urban area selling high-priced condos, he or she may not be the best choice to help you buy a single-family home in an outlying area of the city.
5. Do you use a lockbox or you conduct showings yourself? This question is for sellers to consider. In many areas, listing agents put a lockbox on the door to a house for sale and buyer's agents use a keycard or code to gain access. Buyer's agents then walk buyers through the house without the listing agent present to point out the best features of the home. My feeling is this is really lousy service. If an agent tells you he or she will use a lockbox, you have to ask yourself (and the agent) why you're paying a commission. If you're paying a commission simply to be listed in the local MLS, there are cheaper ways to do this.
6. How frequently will I hear from you? Do you use email? Do you have a Blackberry? How can I reach you? Do you work on the weekends? Do you work full-time or part-time? Are you planning any extended vacations? With whom will I be working if you're on vacation? While you don't want to stalk the agent, you do want to stay in touch and not feel abandoned. Try to find a middle ground that works for each of you.
7. Do you work with an assistant? Many top agents have full-time assistants who are licensed agents in their own right. But if you're going to be working with the assistant more than the agent you've hired, make sure you like the assistant.
8. Are you a smoker or non-smoker? If you're a non-smoker and, like me, who is allergic to smoke, even being in the car of a smoker makes my throat start to tickle. Make sure to ask the question if this issue is important to you.
9. Can I see your resume? Some agents don't like to share their resumes because they either don't have them or are afraid if you see that they spent the first 20 years of their career in, say, marketing, you won't hire them. My feeling is if agents don't share their work history, cross them off the list. You've got to know their strengths and weaknesses, and not sharing a resume is cause for concern. If they don't have a resume (and many agents won't), they should at least be willing to tell you their past experience in business in detail. When you're buying or selling a home, finding a partner you can

trust to help guide you is extremely important. If you find yourself wondering who an agent really is, the agent isn't for you. (Ilyce R. Glink's latest book is 100 Questions Every First-Time Home Buyer Should Ask, 3rd Ed. If you have questions, you can call her radio show toll-free (800-972-8255) any Sunday, from 11a-12p EST. You can also contact her through her website www.thinkglink.com) © 2007 REAL ESTATE MATTERS, TMS

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