

How to Pick a REALTOR®

Many of the same questions, hesitations and strategies connected with seeking out professional assistance in any field — whether you're looking for a doctor, dentist, lawyer or accountant — come into play when you're selecting a real estate agent. Some people find an agent through a family member or friend. This is often a reliable approach. But you might not always find the most compatible assistance this way. And in a transaction as important and intensive as buying and selling a home, that can be critical.

A referral from a family member or friend doesn't guarantee a perfect match. Just think of something as simple as a movie or restaurant recommendation. Your close friends rave about a new Chinese food place downtown — so you check it out. Could this possibly be the same restaurant they were describing? Mediocre service. No chopsticks. Bland flavors. It's the same restaurant. Same cook. Same waiters. Just different perceptions.

Regardless of how you get an agent's name, it might be worth interviewing at least a couple before you make a final decision — or at least arming yourself with some criteria to go over with any agent who has been recommended to you.

A few things to look for:

- If you're looking for an agent to list your home, be wary of anyone who suggests they can get an unreasonably high sales price. An agent might use a high listing price to secure a contract, only to seek a lower price later, after little traffic is generated at the initial price level. Meanwhile, you've lost what can be the most critical time period in selling a home — the first weeks immediately after it's listed.
- Check on experience, education and productivity. As with most professions, experience pays in real estate. Experienced agents know the market and the marketing process. They'll have the best chance of quickly and smoothly helping you to buy or sell your home.

Designations — such as the Graduate Realtor Institute (GRI); Certified Residential Specialist (CRS); Certified Relocation Professional (CRP); Leadership Training Graduate (LTG); and, in Canada, the Registered Relocation Specialist (RRS) — suggest an expertise and commitment that goes beyond just earning and maintaining a real estate license.

The number of transactions an agent is handling monthly or yearly is going to give you an indication of how committed the agent is to the profession. Is the agent a part-timer who's just dabbling in real estate sales — or is the agent a full-time professional whose livelihood depends entirely on an ability to successfully and repeatedly close real estate transactions?

- If you're a buyer — does the agent offer buyer agency? More and more buyers are deciding they want full contractual representation on the same level as the seller. Be sure to discuss buyer agency with any agent you're thinking about working with.
- Does the agent know the market? Is the agent active in soliciting business in your neighborhood? Do you see the agent's yard signs around the neighborhood?
- Is the agent part of a national network? This can be especially important if you're selling in one city in preparation of moving to another. Your selling agent can refer you to a professional, compatible agent in your destination city — and keep in close contact with that agent so both your selling and buying efforts are closely coordinated.
- And a final point: Does the agent seem primarily interested in sharing expertise and market knowledge in an honest and straightforward manner? Or does the agent seem more interested in telling you what you want to hear — or spend a lot of effort trying to market additional products and services? The worst time to secure the services of a "yes-man" or an agent who seems to have a bit too many irons in the fire is when you're entering a transaction involving something as expensive as your home. You need straightforward, reliable information — even if it's not necessarily flattering regarding the home you're selling — or very encouraging regarding a home you think you might want to buy.