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Sellers, buyers should make sure they're comfortable with the agent

By Sarah Jio

Special to The Seattle Times

Many people have heard a horror story about a bad real-estate agent: a young agent who butchers a deal because of poor negotiating skills; an agent who lies to prospective buyers about a home's leaky roof; or one who pressures clients into buying a home they can't afford.

Bad agents may be few and far between, but prospective buyers and sellers should take steps to ensure that they get one of the good agents and one they feel comfortable working with.

Membership in the National Association of Realtors has jumped 44 percent since 2003, from 876,195 to 1.26 million, the Washington, D.C.-based group said.

That means there are a lot of fairly new agents — and even more reason to be picky, said D'Ann Jackson, president of the Seattle-King County Association of Realtors.

Need an agent?

Here's a little advice from Bob Boog, a California real-estate agent and author of "Finding Killer Real Estate Deals: Proven Insider Secrets for Investors, Real Estate Agents, and Bargain Hunters Like You!" (THS International), who boils the qualities of a great agent down to "three C's":

Competent

A first-class real-estate agent knows the area and the housing inventory; knows how to get financing, negotiate contracts and deal with contingency sales; and doesn't waste your time showing you properties you can't afford or that don't meet your criteria.

Caring

An outstanding agent makes you feel like you're his or her No. 1 priority — is willing to show the house to your elderly Aunt Martha who just happened to drop in from Virginia; is a good listener; and sympathizes with

Jackson, the managing broker of John L. Scott's Mercer Island office, said there are several important qualities to look for when choosing an agent.

First, she said, an agent should know the market well. For example, which houses have sold in a given neighborhood and for what price? How long were they on the market?

Such market knowledge, Jackson said, "doesn't always mean someone who's been in this business for a long time." Instead, she said, make sure the agent — whether a newcomer or veteran — has a good handle on market trends.

"When you're buying or selling, you need to know that the home is properly priced," Jackson said.

If your property search widens to an area where your agent has little experience or knowledge, he or she should refer you to someone who knows that market, Jackson said.

"Agents should always put the client before their own monetary needs," she said.

Another must-have quality, Jackson said, is patience. In a high-priced, competitive market, searching for the right house can take months. While an impatient agent may drop a client after showing them 50

teenagers having to move away from their skateboard buddies.

Committed

A great real-estate agent is dedicated to getting the job done — goes the extra mile to drive the buyer's loan documents to the lender so the sale can close on time, polishes up a bathroom before guests arrive for an open house, answers silly questions, and doesn't question your judgment should you decide that this house "just doesn't feel right."

homes, ethical agents who are working with reasonable people should stand by their clients, she said, even if their commission is far off on the horizon.

"I've had clients looking for homes for 12 months or longer, and I hung in there with them," Jackson said.

Whether you're buying or selling, you need an agent with good references and strong negotiating skills, Jackson said. But not *too* strong. Although you want someone who can confidently navigate a transaction in your best interest, sharklike behavior is unwelcome in the industry.

"Ruthlessness isn't always the best tactic to take," Jackson said. "It turns the other party off."

Watch out for red flags

Wondering if the agent you're working with is ethical, honest and working in your best interest? There are a few warning signs that he or she may not be.

Beware of pushy agents who try to hurry you into a purchase when you're not ready or those who keep showing you homes that are out of your price range.

When someone agrees to be your agent, they should be in regular communication with you, Jackson said. If you haven't heard from your agent for weeks, and his or her phone conversations with you are brief, it's a good sign that the agent has too many clients and not enough time for you.

Although sometimes an accepted practice for some real-estate agencies, many agents say dual representation or "dual agency" — when an agent represents the buyer and seller in the same transaction — isn't the best practice.

"It's perfectly legal," said Don Kenney, an associate broker for Windermere Real Estate's Ballard office. "But in my experience, it's way too risky, and neither party ends up happy with the representation."

For that reason, Kenney and many other agents refuse to represent both buyer and seller in a transaction.

Be wary of agents who try to steal others' clients. Steer clear of those who try to build their client list at open houses by saying things like "If you buy through me, I'll cut you a special deal."

To avoid such sticky situations, Jackson recommends working with an agent who is a member of a reputable organization, such as the National Association of Realtors. In their first year of business and again every fourth year, members must complete a training class on the association's Code of Ethics, an eight-page document filled with everything from conduct guidelines to ethical standards.

If you're unhappy with your agent, there's no reason to carry on a business relationship with that person, Jackson said.

"If it's not working, and it's not a good match, fire the agent," she said. "You want to work with someone you feel good about."

Going above and beyond

If you're looking for bells and whistles, there are plenty of agents who will roll out the red carpet for clients,

offering gifts or free services.

Seattle-area Re/Max agents Amy Anderson and Chuck Cady both offer such bonuses to clients.

Anderson hosts an annual client-appreciation party, complete with hot-air balloon rides. Cady offers a moving van free of charge to his clients. He also hosts an annual "Community Spring Cleaning" day, where eight trash bins are provided to clients so they can get rid of virtually anything.

Windermere agent Mel Vannice, a trained interior decorator and certified stager (staging is a technique used to update and beautify a home to make it more attractive to potential buyers) sets herself apart by offering complimentary staging services for every home she lists.

A service that generally starts around \$500 and usually costs thousands of dollars, Vannice sometimes brings in her own furniture and has even sewn curtains for clients' homes.

Seattle-area John L. Scott agent Ben Kakimoto, who volunteers at the Seattle Animal Shelter at Interbay, donates a portion of his commission to the Seattle Animal Shelter or to a charity of his clients' choice.

A change in the industry?

In the past few years, the Internet has given buyers and sellers more power.

While property information was once available only to licensed agents or people savvy enough to navigate public records, sites like Zillow and Redfin give the average Joe as much potential market knowledge as a top broker can have.

Because many buyers can find homes as quickly as or before an agent, some wonder if the standard 6 percent commission — usually split between buyers' and sellers' agents and brokers — is necessary.

Real-estate agent-turned-entrepreneur Jeremy Stamper founded Progressive Home Sellers (www.progressivehomesellers.com) last year in response to such concerns.

His Seattle-based company connects sellers with agents at brokerages like Windermere, Re/Max, John L. Scott and other agencies who have agreed to list and sell properties for a flat fee ranging from \$2,500 to \$3,900.

"The amount of money real-estate agents are making has always been kind of ridiculous," he said, explaining why he started the company.

Progressive Home Sellers, which works only with agents who have been in business for five years or more and are in the top 5 percent of sales nationwide, promises a full-service approach for a fraction of the price.

While the company's participating agents won't hold open houses or "bake cookies," Stamper said, clients benefit from having a name-brand sign outside their home.

"It's like the airline industry," he said. "You may have paid \$3,000 for your seat, but the person next to you might have only paid \$300."

Stamper said his company, which has plans for a statewide expansion, is for anyone who wants to save money, especially those who "don't need someone to baby-sit them through the process of selling a home."

Even in the face of new options for buyers and sellers, Jackson said the traditional real-estate business model is solid.

"Finding a home is just a portion of what happens," she said.

From negotiating the sale price to navigating the inspection process, a full-service agent gives clients the "Nordstrom experience," Jackson said. Even in the face of the Internet, newfangled real-estate companies, and low-cost business models, Jackson is confident that clients will continue to recognize the value of a good agent.

"I don't think our days are numbered," she said.

Sarah Jio is a Seattle freelance writer. Reach her at sarah@sarahjio.com.

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