

Does your real estate agent measure up? 7 questions to ask before you commit



Whether you're buying a home, selling, or both, picking a real estate agent is a big decision. Experts advise that you interview at least a few agents and ask questions about their background, experience and strategies. (Gary Waters / Getty Images)

By **Nicholas Padiak**
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So you're looking for a real estate agent. You're buying a home, selling a home or perhaps both. And you know the real estate agent you choose could make or break things for you — including your bank account and your sanity.

This is a big decision. You'll want to choose wisely. Where do you start?

"I've found that word of mouth is the best," said Debbie Tyree, an insurance broker who lives in Glen Haven, Colo. Tyree said she has bought 32 homes in her life and sold 25 of them, working with eight realty agents in three states. She is closing on her latest home purchase, in the Chicago suburb of Cary, this month.

Northside Community Development Corp., a housing agency in Chicago's Rogers Park neighborhood that offers education and training to homebuyers. Talk to agents "just to get an idea of their background, credentials, referrals," she said. "Comparing what they can do for you."

When you're ready to start interviewing agents, real estate experts suggest that you start with these questions.

1. How long have you been in business?

"When it comes to picking a Realtor ... experience matters," said Greg Nagel, managing broker of Ask Nagel Realty in Chicago's West Town community area. "I wouldn't go with the younger Realtor unless they were part of a team and they are getting supported."

Inexperienced agents, Nagel said, may not know the best way to prep a home for sale. They might miss details such as condo association regulations. And they may not know the nuances of certain building materials and how they hold up over time.

Tyree agreed. "You want somebody that's seasoned," she said. "You don't want a newbie. It's not in your best interest." When she is looking for agents, she said she only looks at those who have been in business for at least five years.

2. What's your recent track record in the area?

"I think probably the most critical (question) is, 'What is your knowledge and experience in this area?'" said Ed Pluchar, a broker for Real People Realty out of the Chicago suburb Mokena. "You'd want to know how many transactions have they done in the area."

And you want to get specific, said Derick Anderson, director of the housing resource center at Northside Community Resources, the parent organization of Northside Community Development Corp. Buyers or sellers should ask about an agent's experience not just in the desired market, Anderson said, but also in the submarket, "be it their neighborhood, their town, their village, whatever."

Nagel advised that you ask an agent who will be selling your home, "How many homes in this neighborhood have you sold in the last 12 months?" You should also ask for the contact information of the agent's last three clients so you can reach out to them and ask what their experiences were like, Nagel said. "If you go by the last three," he said, "they can't just cherry-pick the best people."

Make sure the realty agent has experience not just in your area, but in your type of property too, Nagel said. "If they're doing condos, tell me the last three condos that you've closed," he said. "If it's houses, it should be

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ar, who advises you to ask agents, "When you

list, what's your average sale price as a percentage of the original listing price?" And both Manzano, the director of the Rogers Park housing agency, and seasoned homebuyer Tyree advise that you ask how long an agent's homes are typically on the market before they're sold.

3. What are your contract requirements?

Before you sign an agreement to work with a realty agent, you should fully understand what that agreement entails, Manzano advised.

"There are some Realtors that are very good at explaining, 'This is what I do and this is what it means to sign a contract and you have to be prepared for whatever happens,'" Manzano said. "And then we have Realtors that are just like, 'All right, let's sign a contract, let's get going.' And our clients are not fully aware of what is going to happen between signing the contract and after that, whether you can get out of it or not."

Make sure you know what costs you're responsible for, said Anderson, including the agent's commission rate. "I think it's pretty standard," he said — about 3 to 5 percent for a selling agent. "But it's still a good question to ask."

4. How will we communicate, and how often?

"I think most Realtors now email," Manzano said. "I think many now text."

However you prefer to be in touch with your real estate agent, your communication expectations should be set at the beginning.

"How much are we going to be in contact?" Pluchar advised to ask. "Are you going to talk to me once a week, or do I list with you and then you disappear?"

You can always check with previous clients to make sure their experiences match what the agent has promised you, Pluchar said.

5. Are you willing to tell it like it is?

If you're selling your home, said Tyree, "You need somebody ... who's not afraid to work with you and talk to you and tell you, 'You've got to fix this in your house. You've got to bring your price down.'"

And buyers should ask, "Are you willing to tell me things that are hard for me to hear?" Pluchar said. "Are you willing to advocate for me and not let me make an emotional mistake when I'm buying this house?"

6. How do you monitor the market?

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ou're looking to buy a house, said Tyree.

So, said, Pluchar, it helps to ask how an agent does that. "How would they characterize the way they stay abreast of the market in that area?" he said. "Are they looking at the hot sheets? Are they staying on top of home sales? Things like that."

7. What's your marketing strategy?

When you're selling a home, you want to make sure your agent will get the word out, said Tyree. "What do you do to sell my house?" Tyree advised asking. "What type of advertisement?"

Get detailed, Anderson added. "Are they (working) primarily online? Are they primarily in person doing open houses? Is it a mix?" he said. "Do they have fancy 3-D virtual tours" or just conventional ads on real estate websites?

And you want your agent to make your home look great, Tyree said. "People do judge books by covers, so you want to make sure you have good quality photos or you're going to turn people off."

To that end, staging a home can make a huge difference, said Nagel. "If they don't believe in staging and they don't work with stagers, they're probably not superstrong brokers in my estimation," he said, adding that he believes good staging can increase a home's resale value by \$10,000 or more.

Perhaps the most important question you can ask before you commit, though, is of yourself: Do you feel comfortable with this real estate agent?

"Try to go for a feeling," Anderson said. "Sometimes it's about what vibes with you."

Nicholas Padiak is a freelance writer.

ctc-realestate@chicagotribune.com

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