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Real Estate

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Find a superstar real-estate agent

The woods are full of agents these days, and many are beginners. Here are the eight questions you can ask to separate the average agents from the experienced heavy hitters.

By Marilyn Lewis of MSN Real Estate

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Whether you're buying or selling, the difference between having an average real-estate agent or a superstar can mean thousands of dollars in your pocket. It can mean selling your home for top dollar (stellar) or losing the house of your dreams to a more organized buyer (decidedly not stellar).

Doug and Heather Cowan knew they'd found their dynamo agent in James Nellis II, an award-winning partner at [The Nellis Group, Washington, D.C.](#) After two years of shopping in the highly competitive McLean-Falls Church, Va., market, the Cowans found a home they loved, only to learn when they were touring it that another buyer already had made an offer. Nellis worked against the seller's one-hour deadline to help the Cowans pull together a competing offer that the seller accepted.

bing [What's the best way to find an agent?](#)

"I knew that I had to do everything in my power to get them that house," Nellis says. Here's how he pulled out all the stops for the Cowans:

He called the seller's agent to ensure a competing offer would be considered.

He phoned his business partner, who's also an appraiser, to confirm the property's value.

He tracked down the Cowans at a nearby Applebee's where they had stopped for dinner. As Heather and Doug fed their impatient baby and entertained their 4-year-old, Nellis used his tablet PC to upload a contract and the addendums covering a home inspection, radon inspection and lead-based-paint inspection.

He phoned the Cowans' lender at home to ask him to e-mail a note authorizing a loan on the property at \$21,000 above the asking price of \$829,000.

He crafted a letter for the Cowans to sign, telling the seller why they loved the house.

With just minutes to spare, he e-mailed the proposal with the Cowans' electronic signatures to the sellers and their agent.

You want a pro like this in your corner when you make what may be the biggest transaction of your life. So how do you spot one among the thousands of people selling real estate? Fortunately, a little legwork and the right questions go a long way.

Referrals: Good as gold

In the recent boom, nearly 600,000 newcomers joined the National Association of Realtors, roughly doubling its membership between 2000 and 2006.

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"That must mean that we have literally hundreds of thousands of agents that have never sold a house or have sold one to (perhaps) a family member or friend," says Stefan Swanepoel, an industry researcher and CEO of [RealtyU](#), a network of agent-education schools in 42 states.

The best way to find an agent, real-estate professionals say, is by getting a recommendation from someone you trust. Not only is your friend's experience the best predictor of your satisfaction, but, since an agent's personal network is his lifeblood, he is likely to work harder knowing that a friend or client will hear about his performance.

But even with a good referral, you owe it to yourself to find one or two other promising candidates to screen. You can locate agents in newspaper ads, by stopping in at open houses or by cruising the area where you want to live, noting agents' names on the for-sale signs. You also can sample some agents' styles at real-estate classes sponsored by local brokerages or community colleges. That's how many of Shannon Williams' clients found the [TriBella Realty](#) agent in Austin, Texas. Williams teaches free seminars on first-time home-buying, flipping houses and beginning retirement investment planning. The classes are "a good way (for clients) to meet different people and judge them," she says.

8 questions to ask real-estate agents

Interviewing candidates serves two purposes: You get an education about your local market while learning how the agent proposes to represent you. Ask detailed questions, urges Williams.

Here are the most-important areas to investigate:

May I see your resume?

Since you're searching for an above-average agent, look for evidence of advanced training and designations, professional recognition and membership in professional organizations, all signals of commitment to the profession.

What's your home worth?

There are about 2.6 million real-estate agents in the country. They're licensed by their states, and each state's licensing and education requirements are different. (Use the Association of Real Estate License Law Officials' [site](#) to check an agent's license. Click "consumer" to get started.) About half of the agents belong to the National Association of Realtors. Those members call themselves Realtors. NAR membership doesn't have to be a deal breaker, but it provides some assurance, since the industry group requires ethics training periodically and members must subscribe to its [code of ethics](#).

Many agents take their education further, earning designations in specialties in such areas as neighborhood zoning, staging properties, use of the Internet, property management, the 55-plus market, diversity, working with buyers or sellers or transactions involving land, farms, commercial investments, resorts, second homes, high-end properties or international properties.

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What's your commission?

Traditionally, a seller pays around 6% in commissions when using a real-estate agent -- 3% goes to the seller's agent and 3% to the buyer's agent. But commission amounts aren't cast in stone anywhere. [They can be negotiated — and often are.](#)

Negotiating works best when homes are selling quickly and easily. Today, with the real-estate market in a slump in most areas, listing (selling) agents have to work harder to sell properties in hard-hit areas, and the best agents may be unwilling to dicker. If you do find an agent willing to negotiate, consider it just one of the many factors to weigh before choosing a professional to sell your home.

What makes you special?

Don't settle for someone who just promises to show you homes or list, advertise and sell your place; every agent has to do those things, says Swanepoel, of RealtyU. What you want to know is, "What sets you apart? What will you do to go the extra mile for me?"

How often will I hear from you?

Your agent's communication style and availability should mesh well with yours. Prepare for your agent interviews by asking yourself whether, for example, you'd need a twice-weekly check-in, even if there are no homes to visit. Do you expect a report after someone tours your house for sale? Do you prefer to keep in touch through phone calls or e-mail? How promptly do you want a response? While you're inquiring about the agent's availability, remember to ask who will return your calls and show houses if your agent is out of town.

What's your plan for marketing my home?

No agent can guarantee she'll sell your home. But she can tell you what steps she'll take to bring it to the attention of buyers. Press for details like, "Are you going to post this on a Web site? Put an ad in free magazines in a shopping center? Will you have someone stage my home?"

Home affordability calculator

up to the agreement.

Once you've selected an agent, Swanepoel advises requesting a one-page list of actions, each with a target date. Incorporate the plan in your sales contract so you can track your agent's progress and have documentation if she fails to live

How many transactions did you complete last year?

Some agents keep score in dollars, saying, "I sold \$50 million in real estate last year." But property values vary from market to market and house to house, so what you really want to ask is, "How many deals did you complete?"

Super salespeople are a mixed blessing. The bonus is, they're knowledgeable experts. "The more listings he has, the more he dominates that market, the more probability he is a good guy in that area," says Williams.

Read: [What real-estate agents can't tell you](#)

But a superseller might be too busy for hand-holding. "If a solo agent is selling more than 70 homes a year, they're not going to have time for you," says Nellis.

What do you know about the neighborhoods where I want to live?

A super salesperson is no good to you if she isn't doing an active business in your target neighborhoods, so ask how many of the homes she sold last year were located where you want to buy and how many listings she has there now.

Really great professionals specialize in one — or maybe two — communities. Nellis says he declined a friend's request to help her find a home in a nearby city because he didn't know the place and could not help her unearth the particulars she needed — everything from planned airport flight paths to zoning-regulation changes to freeway expansions — that determine a property's true value.

Agents have a wealth of data at their disposal from local multiple listing services. Good ones will share it, educating you about the median income and educational level of a neighborhood's residents, for example, or telling you what proportion of residents work close to home or suffer long commutes. They can't discuss school performance or crime — that would violate fair-housing laws. But they should point you to Web sites where statistics on crime and school performance are listed, one of which is [Sperling's Best Places](#).

Are you a solo agent or part of a team?

There's no right answer to this question. Teams are growing in popularity. They're good for engaging several individuals' expertise at once and for allowing high-powered salespeople to concentrate on what they do best, offloading to associates tasks like filing and tracking documents, dogging details and showing houses. Being part of a team lets a salesperson handle more listings, says Nellis, who adds that he manages 60 sales a year by handing off detail work to teammates.

But a team is only as good as its players. "You can have a team with a crummy Web site and no designations, but you have a solo agent who just sparkles, and then that's your answer for you -- go with the solo agent," says Nellis.

When you get right down to it, it's that sparkle that distinguishes the superstar agents, and there's no way to find it without sitting down with a few of them and asking questions.

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Tim68

Oct 19, 2011 5:30AM



Here's my .02 cents. Finding a good real estate agent is the way to go. But you need to be careful and interview the right one. My friends neighbor hired an agent because he sold a house in the area in just 4 days! BUT...it turned out that the agent wasn't all that good...just got lucky with the quick sale and my neighbor had a realtor signed up that lacked both experience and skills.

He ended up not selling then went to a service called sundaybell. He interviewed agents that he knew online, the service helped him with all the questions to ask agents while interviewing and he also saved on commission too. Definitely worth a look imo.

So there's my real estate tip of the day!

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Dana Brown

Feb 5, 2011 8:57AM



When it comes to working with a skilled "Buyer Agent" check their credentials! A "new" agent will not have the extensive combination of numbers of homes sold plus additional in-depth classes! While there is no classroom better than "real life" you don't want to be part of an inexperienced agent's learning curve!

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SaleConwayHomes

Aug 21, 2010 7:15AM



Great article on finding a quality Realtor. {Shameless pitch} If you're looking for a top notch Realtor in Central Arkansas, I'd love to assist you.

Byron Jones, REALTOR
<http://www.SaleConwayHomes.com/>

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Realestate Builder

Aug 10, 2010 12:17AM



Yes, I completely agree with this article information. it is true that the best way of finding a best property agent is, by getting a recommendation from someone person trust. www.ncrdealer.com gives the information about many residential and commercial project details for the people who are looking for the property in India. People can call at 800-232-2343 or 0120-4338222 for any query or detail about the price payment plans or location etc.

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SearchTheJungle.com

Oct 27, 2009 4:53AM



Asking potential realtors good questions is a great start. Then ask their references the same questions and see how the the answers match up.

To see how active your realtor is, ask them for their 5 most recent clients and when they were represented (if you're a buyer, you want the most recent buyers they represented, and if you're a seller, you want their most recent sellers). This will give you recent references to contact, tell you how active the realtor is, and give you an idea of their level of experience and the volume of clients they represent.

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VibK

May 8, 2009 7:32AM



For the Los Angeles area, this broker really rocks. Check out <http://kapilare.blogspot.com> there's some great info on purchasing.

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