

Ten questions to ask your REALTOR® before buying a home

By Erin K. Witt

As a homebuyer, you are entrusting your REALTOR® with the single largest sale or purchase most people will ever make. You don't want to pay too much, you don't want to sell for too little, you don't want complications or problems, and you don't want the process to be any more stressful than it has to be. A good REALTOR® can take a lot of worry out of the equation.

Here are a few questions to ask your REALTOR® before you buy a home. They will allow you make the most informed decision, with the help of the REALTOR® most qualified to assist you in your home search.

Question #1: Are you a full-time, licensed REALTOR®? A REALTOR® is an individual who belongs to their local board of REALTORS®. They have completed voluntary, continuing education, and are committed to following the National Association of REALTORS® (NAR) Code of Ethics. Prior to joining their local board, they must have also passed a real estate licensing class and a state examination. This ensures that they are qualified to help you purchase a home.

Question #2: Do you have other certifications or areas of expertise that can help me?

Most REALTORS® choose to further their training by attending additional classes to receive designations like Certified Residential Salesperson (CRS), or Graduate REALTOR® Institute (GRI). Or maybe your agent has been selling homes in your prospective neighborhood for 20 years and knows the area inside out. Both will be assets to your home search.

Question #3: How do you communicate with your clients? If your REALTOR® prefers to communicate via e-mail, but you want to be called on the telephone, the two of you will need to work out an agreeable communication plan. Most agents today work through the Internet or e-mail to send contracts, information about properties, and other key information. But this is a convenience, not a requirement. Your REALTOR® will work with you to keep in touch.

Question #4: What resources can you offer to help me find a home? Many homebuyers enjoy the convenience of searching for homes at their leisure on the Internet or in the newspaper. But most agents have other tools that can help, too. The BLC™ listing service, PropertyLinx and REALTORS®' individual Web sites may' all be useful, additional options for new buyers.

Question #5: Will I be working with primarily with you, or other members of your staff? You may want to be clear about whom on the team will take part in your transaction, and what role each person will play. An in-person meeting with these staff members may make you even more comfortable. You have a right to know who to go to with questions and who to expect to show up to your closing.

Question #6: How will you help me understand the value of the homes we view?

Your REALTOR® should prepare a formal comparable market analysis for you. This is the best way to compare a seller's asking price with actual selling prices of similar homes recently sold in the same neighborhood.

Question #7: Can you tell me about the neighborhoods I am interested in? The best way to learn about a neighborhood is by your own experiences. Walk the neighborhood with your kids and talk to the families you meet along the way. A good REALTOR® can provide you with information on features of the area, school district rankings and crime rates, but will not “steer” you into one neighborhood over another. This is illegal.

Question #8: Can you help me find a home that will have a good resale value in the future? Factors such as the school system, appreciation rate of other homes in the neighborhood and location can all impact resale value. While REALTORS® can't predict the future, they can help you choose a home with the potential for good resale value based on those factors.

Question #9: Will you help me negotiate for a property I am really interested in? A hot property may have multiple offers and counteroffers made on it. A bidding war can drive up the cost of a home for buyers. An experienced REALTOR® will not only help you navigate this experience, but will help you determine how high is too high for your family budget.

Question #10: Can you help me if we decide to build instead? There are many decisions to be made that can impact the future value of the home, papers to sign, and conditions that must be adhered to. A REALTOR® can help advise buyers throughout the building process and act as an advocate for them with the builder.