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Getting the best from your estate agent



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Choosing the right agent is the key to selling. We tell you how, with tips from winners of the Estate Agency of the Year Awards

Heard the one about the homeowner who liked their estate agent? No, thought not. Or how about the estate agent who sold a house last week? Again, no. It figures.

Joking aside, the past 18 months has witnessed a slump in the property market that has seen prices fall in double digits, with more than 30,000 estate agents losing their jobs since the start of the credit crisis.

Nevertheless, if the British high street is anything to go by, a potential seller has a huge choice. While the stock of available property has fallen, demand from buyers is growing, so in theory it should be easy to find a good estate agent. Yet, as rising complaints to the Property Ombudsman over the past 12 months prove, theory doesn't always work in practice. This is especially true when it comes to selling one's home.

So how do you choose which agent should take on the job for you? How can you "manage" them once they are marketing your property — and what should you do when you encounter problems, or if it all goes wrong? We've spoken to a number of winners from the 2009 Estate Agency of the Year Awards, sponsored by The Sunday Times, and come up with some fail-safe tips. Which means, hopefully, that in your case the jokes above need not apply.

CHOOSING YOUR ESTATE AGENT Start by opening your eyes. Who has boards up — not just "For sale" signs, but, more important, "Sold"? If your neighbours have successfully moved, which agency did they use? If your house is similar to theirs, how much did it sell for? Would they recommend them? Phone only those agents you think are the most likely

candidates, and judge how they respond — it's not a good sign if they don't answer promptly and efficiently, or fail to get back to you.

Make sure you sign up only with agencies that specialise in selling homes similar to yours — there's no use picking an agent that focuses on letting student flats if you've got a family house to sell. Look to the internet, too. More than 75% of people start their search online, so make sure your potential estate agents are well represented on the many portals that list hundreds of thousands of available properties. You should also look at the company's own website. Is it easy to navigate and regularly updated?

David Newnes, managing director of Your Move, which won the Best UK Large Estate Agency of the Year award, says trying to book a viewing via a company's website is a good way to see just how effectively monitored their online service is. The response should be immediate. The start of your search is a good time to see how properties are presented online. Are the photographs of high quality? Are floor plans included? What other search options are provided for potential buyers?

Once you have a short list, bring at least three agents to your home, to meet them face to face and get a valuation. Grill them on how they came up with the figure, and remember, you shouldn't necessarily pick the agent who arrives at the highest asking price. "Some agents will price to flatter, but they should have done the relevant research — have found out what similar properties are for sale for or have sold for," Newnes says. "A well-prepared agent should give some comparables."

This also applies when employing a letting agent. "Try to gauge whether the advice you are being given is realistic," says Neil Young, chief executive of Young London, winner of the Best Small Estate Agency Lettings award. "Make sure the rent suggested is attainable, as avoiding arrears is key." He also advises prospective landlords to read the small print and establish exactly what costs are charged for what service, and how often you may have to pay renewal fees.

Prospective landlords should also ask for a sample inventory and inspection report to see the level of detail, which will tell you a bit about the quality of property management. Cover topics such as terms and conditions, as well as agency opening hours: you'll get a lot more prospective tenants — or buyers — if the agent works on a Saturday.

Finally, whether selling or letting, make sure you like your chosen agent. "You need to work out whether you feel comfortable with the individual — because you're going to be spending a number of weeks, or even months, working with that person," says Paul Gillespie, managing director of Gibbs Gillespie, which was the overall winner for UK Estate Agency of the Year (see below). Walk away from anyone you feel bullied or patronised by, and remember to widen the field if you don't think a sole agent is enough.

MANAGING YOUR ESTATE AGENT The boards are up, the property has a prominent position on the internet and perhaps there have even been a few viewings, but you still haven't snared a buyer. To keep on top of your sale, you will need to keep on top of your agent. There are a number of things you can do to make their job a little easier — and you more informed.

Keep your agent sweet by ensuring your property looks its best. You can't expect the agent to tidy it up for you, but most will provide suggestions if you ask, whether it's decluttering or giving your front door a lick of paint. Prospective landlords take note, too. "Tenants

usually expect a lot," says Dan Channer, associate director of Finders Keepers, a lettings specialist and winner of Best UK Estate Agency Lettings. "The better condition your property is in, the better return you will get."

As for viewings, opinion is often divided on who should show people around: the owner or the agent. Lucy Pendleton, managing director of James Pendleton, which won the Estate Agency Marketing award, is adamant it should be the agent. "They are the trained professional salesperson," she says. "There is no uncomfortable emotional environment to deal with, and the vendor gets a far quicker, more conclusive result this way."

As for the agent, a good one should be calling you regularly with feedback from viewings. Of course, it helps if you act on their advice — if that purple sitting-room wall is drawing disparaging comments, repaint it.

"We deliver a detailed marketing review to our vendors every 30 days," says Jonathan Handford, managing director of Newmans, which won Best Estate Agency Customer Service award. "We examine each individual piece of feedback we get and revise our strategy accordingly, updating photos and descriptions."

Handford also says that agencies must regularly check website statistics — the agency's own and those on national property portals. They will provide figures for how many people are clicking on a property, then how many more are exploring further to read the details. "Communication is the key," he says.

WHAT TO DO IF THINGS GO WRONG Once bad feeling starts to surface between agent and client, the relationship is often soured for the long term. You can avoid this outcome from the start, says Stephen Shipperley, chairman of the Connells Group, which was awarded the Best Estate Agency Financial Services gong. "Reputation is key," he says, "and it's important to choose an agency that isn't about to go bust — but sometimes you need to consider what to do if things go wrong. The agency should have an internal complaints procedure and belong to a property ombudsman."

Peter Bolton King, chief executive of the National Association of Estate Agents, says it is vital to approach the agent with your complaint, outline it in writing and request a response. "Complaints are often service-related, but if you have suffered any loss, which can include stress — or if there has been a serious breach of rules, such as misusing clients' money or failing to promote the client's interests — you could end up with a financial reward."

If your agent isn't calling regularly, hasn't shown anybody round your home for weeks, or failed to lock your house up properly after conducting a viewing, have some strong words.

"You need to make sure they're following through on what they said they'd do at the initial meeting," advises John Wetherell, regional operations director for Reeds Rains, which won the award for Best Estate Agency Innovation. "If you've got an agent saying that they'll have your Hip ready in 24 hours and the property on the internet in 48 hours, then they need to be doing that."

A common bugbear for many vendors is failing to achieve the sales price they want or the length of time it takes to sell. In such cases, be realistic — recent research from the website property.datingagency.com shows that in the past 18 months, the average length of time

needed to sell a home was seven months. About 16% of sellers took more than a year to find a buyer, and only 22.4% managed to agree a deal within a month.

If you have reached the unfortunate point when you want to sack your agent, make sure you read the small print — the terms and conditions you have agreed to — carefully. Most agents will tie a seller in to a minimum 12-week contract, and unless you're still within the stated "cooling off" period (which is usually about seven days), you're just going to have to sit it out until the agreement expires. You will also usually have to give 14 days' cancellation notice, so make sure you act swiftly.

Check the payment arrangements carefully, too — some agents offer a no-sale, no-fee deal, but others will require payment for advertisements and brochures, so bear in mind that you may be paying twice if you choose to switch agent. Follow all the tips above, however, and you should be on your way to a successful transaction.

How to get the most from your estate agent

In recent years, the internet has increasingly become the place to start your property search. Type in price, location, number of bedrooms and other "must-haves", and sites such as Globrix (part owned by News International, parent company of The Sunday Times), Rightmove and Prime Location can offer a dizzying number of possibilities.

This is all fine as long as you are just window-shopping. Once you're ready to buy, though, it is time to leave the virtual world for the real one — which means registering with an agent, as potential buyers have done since long before the days of the world wide web.

It might seem a hassle, but the reality is that most areas have only about a dozen estate agents, so it's worth registering with them all, just in case one gets your dream property on its books. "The main reason for registering is that the market is still moving," says David Newnes, managing director of Your Move. "The best stuff that comes to the market sells almost before going onto the internet."

What next? First, make clear you are serious about buying. If you walk into an estate agency with a good deposit and a mortgage agreed in principle, you'll be in a strong position; although agents act on behalf of sellers, they will try to sort the committed buyers from the timewasters.

Be as detailed as possible in terms of what you are looking for. You don't have to say down to the last penny how much you can afford, but an "up to" figure will help the agent to narrow the search and avoid wasting their — and your — time. Also sign up to receive email or text alerts if they offer them.

Finally, keep in touch with the agents. This makes it more likely that they will call you first when they have something that might suit you.