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For Some Buyers, Good Real Estate Agents Hard to Find

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RISMEDIA, March 20 — (KRT) — It took Jennifer Zuech and her husband nearly a dozen tries to find a real estate agent they felt comfortable with as they hunted for their first home.

Some were inexperienced, pushy or didn't seem to listen, showing the couple places they couldn't afford. Others just seemed "conniving," not pointing out the much needed and costly improvements certain houses needed, Zuech said.

"We got more educated as we went along at what to look for and what to ask for," she said.

In a Gallup poll conducted last November, a randomly selected sample of 1,002 adults rated the honesty and ethical standards of 21 types of professionals.

Real estate agents ranked No. 11 with 20 percent of those surveyed giving them a very high or high rating. That's compared to 82 percent for nurses, who ranked No. 1, 65 percent for doctors and 44 percent for funeral directors.

Some people might not have as positive an impression of real estate agents because it's an easy field to get into, said John Boatright, a business ethics professor at Loyola University Chicago.

It doesn't take years of education to get a license, and it's relatively inexpensive, Boatright said.

"Almost anyone can become a real estate agent," he said.

Many people also question whether the fees they charge are justified, he said. They're less aware of the financial incentives in other fields like medicine, Boatright said.

The recent heated market has probably helped compound the issue, said Bakersfield Association of Realtors president Don Cohen.

Hundreds of new agents have leaped into the business, and some are out to make a quick buck.

"When one person does wrong, it takes a tremendous amount of effort to counter that," Cohen said.

The association has monthly education classes for its members.

"We've been growing in leaps and bounds. It's hard to keep up with them," Cohen said. "We're just doing the best we can to educate them and make them as professional as possible." But with so much money changing hands, there are more opportunities for issues to arise, he said.

Everyone has been in such a hurry to close deals that "you're going to see flagrant violations," said local broker Chuck Dawson. "People get so sloppy because they want to do as much volume of business as they can." Homebuyers or sellers can help avoid problematic agents by being vigilant and asking some important questions.

They have a responsibility to ask about an agent's experience, Dawson said.

Agents' professional standards are almost directly proportional to their education and the amount of knowledge they've gained, he said. A successful agent is one who is constantly taking courses, learning about new technology and ways of doing business, he said.

Agents who join the association also have a code of ethics they're expected to follow. The association has grievance and ethics committees to deal with those who don't.

It receives 40 to 60 phone calls a month from frustrated people. Of those, between five and 10 will become complaints that go before a committee, Dawson said.

Statewide, the Department of Real Estate receives somewhere between 7,000 and 10,000 complaints a year. The department's Web site, www.dre.ca.gov, allows consumers to search for potential violations using an agent's license number.

Potential buyers should also talk to friends and family, Cohen said, and find out who an agent's done business with in the past six months.

"Don't just take it for granted because they give you three names and three phone numbers," Cohen said. "Check the references out." And if you have any doubts, keep looking, he said.

Jennifer Zuech and her husband eventually found their agent, Leslie Walters, through a work friend.

Some agents had given the couple false impressions that they could afford particular houses. Walters was honest with them, she said.

"She's awesome," Zuech said. "She really paid attention to what we could or couldn't afford."

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