

By David Coolidge

You read a lot these days about how to choose a real estate agent to sell your home. However, there's little written about how to choose an agent to represent you when you're the buyer. Though not bound together by a contract like a seller and a Realtor who enter into a listing agreement, the relationship between a buyer and a Realtor is just as critical.

Often, buyers work with the first agent they meet. They may stop by a house being held open, or call a real estate company about a house advertised and then wind up working with the agent who is hosting the open house or who is "on floor" answering the phone the day they call.

If, for example, the floor agent shows the buyer the house advertised plus one or two others and the buyer likes one of them, the agent can then make an offer on the buyer's behalf. Down the line, after negotiating the purchase, that agent will handle the escrow, finalize the transaction and be paid a commission for his time and skill.

If, on the other hand, the escrow doesn't close—through no fault of the agent's—he will have invested a great deal of time and effort for nothing. Of course, it's possible that the agent and the buyer will have developed a sound relationship and that the buyer will enlist the agent's help to find another home.

But all too often when deals fall through, buyers fade away into the night. They stop at another open house—a listing perhaps mentioned by the agent they've been working with—and, instantly smitten, have the agent holding the house open make an offer for them. The process begins anew. Only this time the deal closes.

Agent Number Two earns a healthy commission. Agent Number One, who conducted all of the preliminary groundwork for the buyer, earns nothing. And yet, had the buyer asked, Agent Number One could have written up the offer on that last house just as well as the agent who happened to be holding it open. Loyalty just doesn't enter into

the picture when buyers happen on agents by chance.

Buyers who actively choose an agent to help them find a home, though, generally do feel a great deal of loyalty to that agent. This motivates the agent to work even harder for those buyers. The true real estate professional will work long and hard to find a buyer the perfect home, as long as he can count on the buyer purchasing it through him.

It's important to remember that once you choose an agent, your hands aren't tied. You're still free to stop in on your own at open houses and call on ads for houses that sound like the type you want. Simply tell the open house host or the floor agent that you're already working with an agent. They'll understand and will be grateful for knowing that at the start.

When you do set out to find an agent to help you buy a home, approach the task as though you were choosing a doctor or an accountant. Ask your friends who they would recommend and why. Call a real

estate company with a good reputation, and ask the manager to give you the names of at least three agents who work the area where you buy.

Interview each one. Try to ascertain whether they are good communicators; they are familiar with the inventory of houses available in your price range; they are effective problem solvers; they would protect your interests at all times; they can help arrange financing.

If an agent ranks high in all these categories, but you don't feel comfortable with him or her, move on and select another. For most people, buying a home is the investment of a lifetime, and it's absolutely essential that you choose an agent you trust implicitly and feel at ease with. Be loyal to the agent you select, and he or she will go the ends of the earth to find the right home for you.

David Coolidge, one of Merrill Lynch Realty's leading agents since he joined the company in 1979, is a licensed real estate broker. He is a

member of the Santa Rosa Council of the Board of Realtors and is vice president of the local chapter of the Realtors Land Institute. He and his wife, Adrienne Coolidge, who is also a broker, were one of Sonoma County's first husband and wife real estate teams.

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