

Steps to a successful and fulfilling real estate experience

By J. Lennox Scott

Whether you're a first time homebuyer or a homeowner looking to move up into a new home, there are several steps you can follow to ensure that your home buying experience is smooth and efficient.

The most important place to start when buying a home is selecting a Realtor. A trustworthy, informed Realtor can make all the difference between a positive and negative home buying experience. It's best to select an agent who is very familiar with the area(s) in which you are looking to buy a home. Any agent has access to the Multiple Listing Service (MLS), but only a well-informed Realtor can bring the insight and perspective needed to make a decision as important as buying a home. If you need help locating a Realtor, chances are someone in your sphere of friends or family can refer one to you.

Next step is getting pre-qualified for a home loan. Whether you're a first time buyer or a move-up buyer, it's vital to the home buying process that you and your agent know what you can afford. Being pre-qualified also gives you more bargaining power in a competitive real estate market. Getting pre-qualified is relatively simple and it can be your biggest bargaining tool when the time comes to make an offer on a home.

To gain pre-qualification, visit a lender or mortgage broker and complete a loan application. If you don't have a lender, ask your Realtor to refer you to one. You will need to provide verifications of your employment and the source of your down payment and closing costs. You'll also need to have your credit checked—credit reports can be the determining factor in your loan approval. Factors such as credit card debt, student loans, and automobile loans can heavily impact your chances of being approved because they affect your debt-to-income ratio. The more items that are drawing from your income, the larger your debt-to-income ratio and the less likely you are to be approved. However, if you are relatively debt free and are steadily employed, your chances are greatly improved. Upon pre-approval, you will be given a letter that states that you are likely to be approved for a loan of a specified amount if the financial data you've disclosed to the lender is satisfactorily verified.

Once you're pre-approved you can officially start the home search process because you know exactly what you can afford. One of the first places to start is the Internet. Every major real estate company has a website where you can preview all properties for sale in the area. Once you're online you can view photos, hear audio descriptions, take virtual home tours—and even get driving directions and calculate the mortgage. It's helpful to make notes ahead of time to determine the type of home you're looking for, such as the style, number of bedrooms/bathrooms, desired square footage, and what neighborhoods you prefer. This will help narrow down your search process. If you don't have access to the Internet, the Multiple Listing Service has photos on file of every home for sale which your agent can attain for you in lieu of the Internet.

Many homebuyers find it helpful to drive around—a driving tour allows you to investigate neighborhoods and homes to gather more information about amenities such as schools, activities, entertainment, and transportation. It also enables you to become more familiarized with the real estate market in those neighborhoods.

The key to a successful home buying experience is to use your energy and time in the most efficient manner. Buyers who take their time to properly prepare before they ever step inside a

home are more informed once they decide to buy and have a more fulfilling real estate experience overall.

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