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Issues

To Remember When
Looking at Homes Online
Versus In Person

I often get contacted by homebuyers who have found their dream home online and want to see it immediately. They haven't communicated with a real estate professional yet, and they haven't looked at a home in person for many years, or ever. But somehow they know that the home they just found online is the right one. Usually, they have been looking online for awhile and the excitement has been building. This is very common, especially for first time home buyers. After personally showing homes for so many years, I'm constantly reminded that the perfect home for sale online rarely become the perfect house in person.

A good REALTOR® is your best resource to help avoid issues that might jeopardize your home purchase. They will walk you through each step below and make sure that nothing is overlooked.

Here are some things to consider. First of all, when someone hires a real estate professional to list their house for sale, the #1 one job of that agent is to get the most amount of showing activity possible. That is why they are referred to as the "listing" agent. Their top priority is to list the property to the best of their ability with all the tools available. Listing agents use photo, content and video to showcase the property's highest and best qualities. For this reason, real estate often tends to look better online, than in person. You'll find out the real details upon visiting the property.

1 Don't Trust Room Sizes by the Photos

Good photographers know how to make a space look larger than normal by using wide angle lens and imaging software. The lens will capture as much of the room as possible and display it in a wide image. This will cause a "fisheye" effect that distorts the image, so the photographer will use software to correct the distortion. I use Adobe Lightroom to adjust the image. It aligns the image back to a parallel shape, while still maintaining the depth of field. This usually makes the room look more spacious online.

Good photographers will also crouch, or lay down in the corner of the room to get a view that makes the ceilings look taller than they really are. It also causes the room depth to appear farther than normal. If there are too many pieces of furniture in a room, listings agents will advise sellers to put those pieces of furniture in storage to create more floor space. When an image is taken from a low spot in the farthest corner with a wide angle lens, the result look like the room is huge with extra tall ceilings. You can't trust images online to accurately show the dimensions of a room.

2 It's Not Always As Clean As It Looks Online

It's very hard to tell how clean a home is from the photos online. Experienced sellers have been preparing their home for months in advance by doing repairs, painting, rearranging furniture, etc. When it comes time to take the listing photos, they are exhausted. They will do a deep clean in all the main areas, but not necessarily throughout the whole house. When you visit the home, you may find that the closets, secondary bedrooms, bathrooms, and/or garage spaces are not very clean. Dusty blinds, baseboards, and decor can reveal a home that is not cleaned as often as the online pictures may appear. This can be a major turnoff for many homebuyers.

HDR image processing is also a tool that real estate agents and photographers use to make a house "sparkle" online. HDR (High Dynamic Range) processing is slightly deceiving and unfair to the viewer, in my opinion. With that said, REALTORS do use them. It's just too powerful of a tool to not to. An HDR capable camera is setup in the corner of a room (usually at a low angle), on a tripod with a wide angle lens. Using a remote trigger, the camera will snap of a series of images using different light exposure ranges. These images are then oversampled together into imaging software to use the best possible lighting for each pixel. This creates an effect of perfect lighting. Sometimes the software is overused as well. Have you ever seen an online listing photo that looked more like a computer graphic than an actual house photo? That's caused by overusing HDR processing. When used correctly though, HDR imaging will cause a home to shine in the perfect light and appear to look "heavenly". What it looks like in reality may be another story though.

3

What's That Smell

Picture this: You have been looking at homes for a couple of months and you haven't found the right home yet. Your agent sends you a listing that just came on the market and IT'S PERFECT! You stop everything and rush to view the property immediately. You get to the home and are eagerly waiting at the front door for your agent to open it. As soon as the front door opens, your nose is inundated with the smell of a thousand city zoos. Aromas of cats, mixed with a hint of monkey and lama all dominate the air space. You really want to look at the home, but all you can think about is the overwhelming smell of pets. This is a classic scenario that every REALTOR deals with. In my opinion, it's probably the hardest issue to overcome when I'm showing homes. When I'm in a home with strong pet odors, it's almost impossible to focus on anything other than, getting back outside.

Pet lovers don't understand this problem. They are immune to the smell. In my experience, I've noticed that cats are worse than dogs. Male cats are prone to "spray" to mark their territory, even if they are neutered in some cases. This smell is almost impossible to get rid of. Regardless of the type of animal, it takes a very clean home owner to remove the smell out of the home on a daily basis. Many pet owners are not able to do this well. They will try to fix the problem with candles and carpet deodorizers 30 minutes before a showing. That only works for a few minutes. After a short time in the house, the pet hair and ammonia smell will start to come through. This is a problem that online home shoppers cannot tell by looking at listing photos.

4

It May Not Be As Peaceful As It Looks

I highly advise hanging out in a neighborhood for a few hours if you are seriously considering purchasing a home in that area. Don't let the emotions of the online presentation persuade you that everything is peaceful. If the neighbors are outside, introduce yourself and try to get a feel for the social culture of that particular street. I was showing homes in a rural neighborhood a few months ago and my clients really liked the home. We ended up on the back porch discussing the possibilities of putting together an offer. Then we heard farm animal noises. This may not be right for everyone. But at least know what you're getting yourself into.

I've also been a showing appointments and heard gunshots. One time I was standing in the front yard of a home for sale talking with my clients. As we're talking, we hear the front door slam on a house across the street. A domestic dispute was occurring. they didn't even seem to notice us. We noticed that a couple of the homes on that street had burglar bars on them. My buyers didn't even want to look at the inside of the home we were at. They just wanted to go straight to the next property on our list. Once again, this is not something that would come up in an online listing.

Final Thoughts

Nothing can replace looking at the listing in person. Just like when you're at a rail road crossing, it's best to Stop. Look & Listen (& Smell). Use all your senses, and your gut instincts, to help you to determine what you are truly experiencing.

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