

Tax credit deadlines make finding the right agent crucial – Chicago Tribune

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January 29, 2010

The [Super Bowl](#) is a little more than a week away and in real estate circles, it's not just about the big game but the kick-off to the spring home buying season.

It's a coin toss whether this year's housing market will be appreciably different than last year; 2009's sales were relatively flat compared to 2008. It's also unclear whether the market will come earlier than it has in the past, as home sellers and buyers try to benefit from the extended and expanded home buyer tax credits before they expire.

Those deadlines mean it's crucial — whether you're a buyer or seller — to get the right real estate agent working for you. All agents are eager for business. If you're in the market to hire an agent, you need more than a reference from a well-meaning friend or the business card of an agent who happened to be staffing a Sunday open house. You need to hire the person much in the way you'd hire anyone else — with an interview. The best working relationship will come if the agent has the business know-how and personality that make you comfortable.

"Working with a Realtor is like dating," said Mike Long of Long Realty in Westmont. "You just have to have a good feeling and go with your gut and you can break up with them. You're not always going to get along with everybody."

Long once had a potential client pull out four pages of questions for him to answer. You may not need to go that far but there are certain key questions you should ask an agent before you've shown them every nook and cranny of your home or gone on many showings.

What follows are some of the basics, gleaned from asking agents what they'd ask if they were hiring an agent themselves. Ask the questions during a face-to-face meeting, not over the phone or via e-mail. If they're busy checking their Blackberry, rather than thinking about their answers, you've already got your answers, don't you?

-What's their background? How long have they been a real estate agent and how long have they been working in the area? Have they had other listings in the neighborhood?

The information isn't meant to toss newcomers to real estate out of the pool; new agents can be eager to work hard and develop their reputation. Since real estate is so local, what's perhaps most important is their knowledge of the local market. It doesn't matter how long an agent has been in the business if they've just moved from, say, Iowa, to Lincoln Park. You don't want the agent learning the local market along with you.

-How many buyers do they take at a time? How many listings do they take at a time? You need to know the agent has time for you.

-What percent of their listings sold last year? Given the moribund housing market, it's not practical to ask how many sales they had last year without a little context. Other good questions along the same lines: what was the average number of days on the market of those listings, what percent of list price did the property sell for and how does that compare to the community's average?

-How do they like to communicate with their clients? How accessible are they and how flexible is their schedule? An agent who prefers e-mail isn't a good fit for someone who's e-mail-averse. Likewise, an agent who doesn't promptly return messages may leave you feeling frustrated and in the dark about the progress of your home's sale or purchase. And you need someone who can adapt their schedule around yours.

-For listing agents: what are their fees and what does that include? To make sure you're getting an apples-to-apples comparison among agents, ask what they're doing to earn the commission. Some agents offer a

tiered-commission system tied to varying levels of service. Will your listing go on their blog? Will there be professional photography or a four-color brochure of the property? Are there administration fees?

-What are their references? Go ahead and ask and get them, but it's up to you to decide whether to call them. Like any job candidate, they've put down the names of their most-satisfied customers.