Seller's Guide to Real Estate

Everything you need to know about selling your home — from preparing to list through closing day.

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1. Why Work with a Real Estate Professional

Selling a home is one of the most significant financial transactions most people undertake. A licensed real estate agent brings expertise, market knowledge, and negotiating skill that can meaningfully affect both your net proceeds and your experience.

What your agent does for you

Your listing agent's role goes far beyond putting a sign in the yard:

- Pricing your home accurately based on current market data
- Preparing and marketing your listing to reach qualified buyers
- Coordinating showings and collecting buyer feedback
- Reviewing and negotiating offers on your behalf
- Managing the contract process from accepted offer through closing
- Coordinating with lenders, inspectors, title companies, and the buyer's agent

Questions to ask before signing a listing agreement

- How do you determine list price?
- What does your marketing plan include?
- How and how often will you communicate with me?
- What is your experience with homes like mine in this price range?
- What does your commission cover, and what might cost extra?

2. Preparing Your Home for Sale

The work you do before the sign goes up is often what determines your final sale price. Buyers form their first impression within seconds, and a well-prepared home commands stronger offers and sells faster.

Start at the curb

- Freshen landscaping — mow, trim, pull weeds, add a few plants or bark
- Power-wash the driveway, walkway, and exterior
- Repaint or touch up the front door and trim
- Make sure house numbers and the mailbox are clean and visible
- Clear away hoses, tools, and anything stored in the front yard

Inside the home

- Declutter every room — rent a storage unit if needed; buyers need to picture their own belongings there
- Deep clean everything: windows, baseboards, appliances, grout, and light fixtures
- Touch up paint in any room that shows scuffs, chips, or bold colors (neutral is almost always better)
- Replace burned-out bulbs — every light should work, and the home should feel bright
- Address deferred maintenance: leaky faucets, cracked tiles, sticking doors, broken screens
- Eliminate odors — pets, smoke, and cooking smells are among the top buyer turn-offs

Staging basics

- Remove excess furniture so rooms feel larger
- Arrange furniture to highlight traffic flow and natural light
- Set the dining table or add simple, neutral decor to help buyers visualize living there
- In the master bedroom and bathrooms, put away personal items and create a clean, hotel-like feel

Your agent can walk through your home before it goes on the market and give you a frank assessment of what is likely to help versus what buyers probably won't notice. Their recommendation will be based on your home's condition, your price point, and what buyers in your market currently expect.

3. Pricing Your Home Right

Pricing is the single most important decision you will make as a seller. A well-priced home attracts multiple buyers quickly and sells at or near full price. An overpriced home sits on the market, accumulates days on market, and often sells for less than it would have if priced correctly from the start.

How your agent determines list price

Your agent will prepare a Comparative Market Analysis (CMA) — an analysis of recently sold homes similar to yours in size, condition, location, and features. The CMA establishes a realistic price range and forms the basis for your list price strategy.

- Recent comparable sales ("comps") — typically the last 90–180 days
- Active listings that compete with yours for buyer attention
- Expired or withdrawn listings, which can signal overpricing
- Days on market, price reduction history, and list-to-sale price ratios
- Your home's condition and any upgrades compared to the comps

List price vs. appraised value

If a buyer is using financing, their lender will order an appraisal. The home must appraise at or above the purchase price for the loan to go through. Pricing too far above market value risks the deal falling apart at the appraisal stage.

The cost of overpricing

- Buyers search in price brackets; an overpriced home may not appear in the right searches
- Buyers who do see it will compare it to better-priced competitors and move on
- The longer a home sits, the more buyers wonder what is wrong with it
- Price reductions often result in a lower final sales price than correct pricing from day one

Your agent will give you a clear recommendation with the data behind it. Ultimately the list price is your decision, but pricing with the market — not above it — typically produces the best outcome.

4. Marketing Your Listing

Most buyers find their home online before they ever walk through the door. Your agent markets your home where buyers are actually looking and presents it in a way that makes them want to see more.

MLS listing

Your home is listed on the local MLS, which syndicates to Zillow, Realtor.com, Redfin, Homes.com, and hundreds of other sites. Every buyer's agent in the area has access to your listing from the moment it goes live.

Professional photography

Photos are what drive showings. Your agent coordinates professional photography for every listing. Buyers scroll quickly — sharp, well-lit photos in a logical order stop the scroll and generate showing requests.

Listing description

Your agent writes a compelling, accurate description that highlights the features that matter most to buyers in your local market — the character of the home, the neighborhood, and any standout amenities.

Yard signage

A yard sign with a direct contact number captures drive-by interest and neighborhood word-of-mouth, and remains one of the most effective tools for residential and land sales.

Social media and digital marketing

Your listing is shared across social media platforms to reach buyers who are actively exploring your area. This includes both organic posts and, where appropriate, targeted digital promotion.

Agent-to-agent network

Your agent actively promotes listings within the local agent community. A motivated buyer's agent is one of the fastest paths to an offer, and strong professional relationships matter.

Open houses

For listings where open houses make sense, your agent handles scheduling and promotion, and will advise you on whether an open house is likely to benefit your specific property.

5. Showings & Open Houses

Once your home is listed, showings begin. This section covers what to expect and how to make each showing count.

Scheduling showings

Buyers and their agents request showings through the MLS scheduling system. Your agent coordinates all showing requests and confirms times with you. Most showings are scheduled with 1–24 hours' notice, though serious buyers sometimes ask for same-day appointments — flexibility here can make a difference.

Preparing for each showing

Before buyers arrive:

- Clear countertops and put away personal items
- Open blinds and turn on lights in every room
- Remove or secure pets
- Leave the home if possible — buyers are more comfortable exploring when the seller isn't present
- Set a comfortable temperature

Feedback

Your agent follows up with showing agents after each visit to collect buyer feedback. You'll hear what buyers liked and any concerns they raised. Patterns in the feedback — if multiple buyers mention the same thing — can inform decisions about pricing or presentation.

Open houses

An open house invites multiple buyers through on a scheduled afternoon, typically on a weekend. They work best for homes in accessible locations with strong buyer traffic. Your agent will advise whether an open house makes sense for your property and, if so, will handle promotion, hosting, and follow-up with visitors.

Showing security

All buyer's agents are licensed and pre-screened through the MLS. It's wise to secure valuables, prescription medications, and small electronics before showings begin. If anything feels off after a showing, let your agent know immediately.

6. Reviewing Offers

When an offer comes in, your agent will present it to you promptly and walk you through every term. Here's what to look at.

Purchase price

The offer price is the most obvious term, but it's rarely the only one that matters. A higher price with weak financing or loose contingencies can be less valuable than a slightly lower offer with a strong pre-approval and clean terms.

Earnest money deposit

Earnest money is the buyer's good-faith deposit, held in escrow until closing. A larger deposit signals stronger commitment. If the buyer backs out for a reason not covered by a contingency, the deposit may be forfeited to you.

Financing type

Cash offers are generally the strongest — no lender, no appraisal requirement, faster close. Conventional loans are next. FHA and VA loans involve more appraisal scrutiny and specific repair requirements; your agent will flag these.

Contingencies

Contingencies give buyers the right to exit the contract under certain conditions:

- **Inspection contingency:** Buyer can request repairs or cancel based on inspection findings
- **Financing contingency:** Buyer can cancel if their loan falls through
- **Appraisal contingency:** Buyer can cancel or renegotiate if the home appraises below contract price
- **Sale contingency:** Buyer's purchase depends on selling their current home (adds risk for you)

Closing date and possession

The proposed closing date and when the buyer wants possession may matter to you depending on your timeline. A mismatch here can be negotiated.

Seller concessions

Buyers sometimes ask sellers to cover a portion of their closing costs. This is common and can be factored into your net calculation alongside the purchase price.

Once you've reviewed all terms, you have three options: accept, reject, or counter.

7. Negotiation & Contract

Negotiation doesn't end with the accepted offer. Here's how it works at each stage.

The counteroffer process

If the initial offer isn't acceptable, you issue a counteroffer with your preferred terms. The buyer can accept, reject, or counter again. This can go back and forth until both parties agree or someone walks away. Your agent will advise you on what's reasonable to push for and what might kill the deal.

What's negotiable

Almost everything in a real estate contract is negotiable:

- Purchase price
- Closing date and possession date
- Seller concessions toward buyer closing costs
- Included personal property (appliances, fixtures, furniture)
- Repairs or credits after inspection
- Earnest money amount

After offer acceptance

Once you and the buyer have signed the purchase contract, you are "under contract" — the home is effectively off the market while the buyer completes their due diligence. The contract sets the timeline for each step.

The inspection period

Most contracts include an inspection contingency. The buyer hires a licensed inspector to evaluate the home's condition. They may then:

- Accept the home as-is
- Request specific repairs
- Ask for a price reduction or credit in lieu of repairs
- Cancel the contract

You are not obligated to agree to every repair request. Your agent will help you evaluate what's reasonable, what to push back on, and when to hold firm. Responses to inspection requests are themselves a negotiation.

Key terms to understand

- **As-is clause:** You agree to make no repairs; the buyer accepts the home in current condition (they may still inspect and cancel)

- **Credits:** Money you agree to pay toward buyer's costs or repairs at closing, rather than completing the work yourself
- **Notice periods:** The contract specifies deadlines for inspections, financing approval, and other contingency removals; missing them has consequences for both parties

8. Under Contract: What Happens Next

Once both parties have signed the purchase contract, the transaction moves into the due diligence and closing preparation phase. Here's what's happening during this time.

Home inspection

The buyer typically orders a home inspection within the first few days of the contract period. The inspector will examine the structure, roof, electrical, plumbing, HVAC, and other systems. Expect the process to take 2–4 hours; you do not need to be present.

Appraisal

If the buyer is financing the purchase, their lender will order an appraisal. The appraiser visits the home and determines its market value. If the appraised value comes in below the contract price, the parties will need to negotiate — the buyer can make up the difference in cash, the seller can reduce the price, or the contract can be cancelled.

Buyer's loan process

The buyer's lender is processing their mortgage application, verifying employment, income, and assets, and ordering title work. This typically takes 30–45 days. Delays in the buyer's loan are the most common reason closings are pushed back.

Title search and title insurance

A title company or attorney searches public records to confirm you have clear ownership and the right to sell. Any liens, judgments, or title issues must be resolved before closing. Both buyers and sellers typically purchase title insurance as protection.

Your responsibilities during this period

- Keep the home in the same condition as when the buyer viewed it
- Do not remove fixtures or items included in the sale
- Complete any agreed-upon repairs in a workmanlike manner
- Respond promptly to document requests from the title company or your agent
- Begin making your own moving arrangements

HOA documents

If your home is part of a homeowners association, you will need to provide the buyer with the CC&Rs;, bylaws, financials, and meeting minutes. Your agent will help coordinate this with the HOA.

9. Closing Day

Closing is the final step — the day ownership officially transfers to the buyer and you receive your proceeds.

What happens at closing

Closing typically takes place at the title company or escrow office. The buyer (and usually their agent and lender representative) signs a large stack of loan and transfer documents. As the seller, your signing is usually lighter — primarily the deed and a handful of disclosures.

In many markets, sellers can sign their documents a day or two before closing (a "pre-signing"), and in some states the process is handled entirely through mail or remote notary.

What to bring

- Government-issued photo ID
- Any keys, garage openers, gate codes, or mailbox keys
- HOA fobs, parking passes, or amenity cards (if applicable)
- Any items of personal property included in the sale

Final walkthrough

The buyer typically does a final walkthrough of the home within 24 hours of closing to confirm the condition is the same as when they made the offer and that agreed-upon repairs were completed.

Proceeds and payment

Your proceeds are calculated at closing: the sale price minus your remaining mortgage payoff, agent commissions, closing costs, and any credits you agreed to give the buyer. The title company distributes funds, and your net proceeds are typically wired to your bank account the same day or the following business day.

Handing over the home

Once closing is complete and funds have disbursed, the home belongs to the buyer. The possession date is specified in the contract — usually the same day as closing, though it can be negotiated otherwise. Leave the home in broom-clean condition and as agreed.

10. Frequently Asked Questions

How long will it take to sell my home?

It depends on your local market, your price point, and how well the home is prepared and priced. In a strong seller's market, homes often receive offers within days. In a slower market, it may take weeks or months. Your agent will share local days-on-market data so you know what to expect.

Do I need to be home for showings?

No — and in most cases it's better if you're not. Buyers tend to be more relaxed exploring a home without the seller present, which leads to longer visits and more genuine interest.

What if I receive multiple offers?

If you receive more than one offer, your agent will present each one and walk you through a side-by-side comparison. You can accept the best offer outright, ask all buyers to submit their highest and best, or counter one offer while letting others expire. Your agent will advise on the strategy that fits your situation.

When do I get my money?

Proceeds are typically wired to your account on the day of closing or the following business day, once all documents are signed and the buyer's funds have been confirmed.

Do I have to disclose known defects?

Yes. Sellers are required by law in most states to disclose known material defects that would affect the property's value or desirability. Your agent will provide the required disclosure forms and walk you through what needs to be disclosed. Failing to disclose known issues can expose you to legal liability after the sale.

What are typical seller closing costs?

Seller closing costs vary by location and transaction, but commonly include real estate agent commissions (both sides), title insurance, transfer taxes or recording fees, prorated property taxes, and any agreed-upon credits to the buyer. Your agent and title company will provide a detailed estimate of your net proceeds before closing.

Can I stay in the home after closing?

Possession is negotiable. Most contracts transfer possession at closing or shortly after, but sellers who need more time to move can sometimes negotiate a post-close occupancy agreement with the buyer.