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So You Want to Be a Real Estate Agent

Advice and musings about this encore career

posted by [John Stark](#), March 9, 2015 [More by this author](#)



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I didn't become a real estate agent in my mid-60s because it was something I had always dreamed of being. I've never been very good at Monopoly.

For more than 40 years, I had been a writer and editor at national publications. I'd still be doing that, had it not been for the Internet, which decimated the print media (but also led me to work at [Next Avenue](#) for awhile). My original career, essentially, had been sent back to "Go."

There aren't a lot of careers that boomers can transition into without prior experience.

A few years ago, I reached out to an old friend, a photographer who I used to hire for magazine assignments. When he was in his mid-50s, he reinvented himself by becoming a [real estate agent](#). He's done very well, and by now could retire comfortably. He encouraged me to follow in his footsteps.

(MORE: [How to Get Your Second Act Started in 2015](#))

What did I have to lose?

So I got my real estate license and applied for work at [Unlimited Sotheby's in Jamaica Plain, Mass.](#), outside of Boston.

The broker who hired me didn't seem put off by my age. He encouraged me to come aboard. Huh, I thought, this is crazy. I'm not young. I'm not pushy. I hate math.

Learning to Sell My Strengths

I came to realize over time, though, that real estate is not just a young person's game. I have something that even the most ambitious, eager young agent doesn't possess, at least not yet: I have [life skills](#), which have proved to be my best tools.

The other day, an agent commented on the way I talk to clients. "You're so even-keeled with them, you don't get riled," he said. I nearly fell over, remembering how when I was young I was always challenging opinions.

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But I understand that buying a home may well be the most important purchase a person or couple makes. It's my job to make that process go smoothly for them. Age has mellowed me.

I have to glean information quickly when meeting potential clients and even if my hearing isn't as sharp as it once was, I'm a better listener. What are their likes? Dislikes?

Being a journalist has helped in that area, too. I spent much of my career interviewing

celebrities, whose time is precious. Buyers are often working, parenting, running from one thing to the next and short on time when looking for a new home. Everyone's time is precious. You'll lose buyers if you show them properties that don't match their tastes or needs.

A lifetime of experience has paid off, too.

(MORE: [Second Career? They're on Their Third and Fourth](#))

Unlike younger agents, I have bought and sold several houses of my own. While I may not be able to calculate mortgage payments in my head, I can give a buyer first-hand knowledge of what it's like to be indebted to a bank for 30 years. I can talk about how I've benefited from my equity and tax deductions. I currently live in a three-unit Boston condominium and have given more than one nervous buyer advice on how to peacefully co-exist with other members of a small condo association.

They don't teach you those skills in real estate school.

Keeping Appraisals to Myself

When showing houses, I try to keep my mouth shut. Age has taught me that I can't make other people's decisions for them. But I can try to lead buyers to making the right choices. Only they can say, "I love this place."

Not foisting my personal tastes on clients can, however, be a challenge. I can't react negatively or judgmentally when someone tells me they're going to paint over the mahogany-stained wood in a Victorian or rip out the built-in bookcases.

But because I have my own horror stories of making costly design mistakes, I can pass on my wisdom: Live in a house for a while before [renovating](#). Listen to its needs. They're usually simple.

I recently helped a couple buy a 1930s, mission-era house. The husband told me he planned to tear out the arts and craft-style fireplace and mantle. I said nothing as my body went into shock. Later that day, I e-mailed him an article from The New York Times that talked about how much added financial value a fireplace brings. The fireplace remains.

Giving Myself Credit

My biggest fear in becoming a Realtor was my lack of experience. What did I know about real estate? Turns out, I knew plenty.

Over the years, I've come to know the true value of my home. I'm not talking about appreciation. I'm talking about my couch, my bed, my kitchen, my books, my pets, my dinner parties . . . Given the choice, I'd rather be making mortgage payments than eating at fancy restaurants or taking exotic trips.

You can buy a house. But you can't buy a *home*. Age has taught me that.

I know that the goal of my job is to make money, and that I'm doing. But when I can help people find the right place to live, I share their joy.

Do I miss seeing my byline on newspaper and magazine articles? I did at first. But now I don't mind, especially when it's on a "Sold" sign.

10 Disclosures for Would-Be Agents

If you're thinking of becoming a real estate agent for your second career, you might find my following 10 disclosures helpful:

1. If you're nosy, like me, it's fun to go through people's houses when they're not home. You can even open their closet doors. And, you can't get arrested for it.

2. Being a Realtor keeps you in touch with people of all ages and ethnicities. When I was young, I would never dream of attending an after-work zoning hearing. Now I attend them; if I want to buy and sell houses, I need to be informed about my community.

3. It can take a while to start getting commission checks. You have to build up a client base. Since going from "Purchase and Sale" to "Closing" usually takes six weeks, I also do rentals to keep the paychecks coming. Those deals are quick.

4. There is a lot to learn, which keeps your brain nimble. My memory and math skills have definitely improved since I began selling real estate.

5. Like any job, it takes time to gain confidence. If you're negotiating a deal with another agent who thinks you're a newbie, that pro might walk right over you. So, partner with experienced agents in the beginning. And when doing deals, be wary of women agents over 50 who drive black Mercedes.

6. Weekends can be hectic, since that's when most open houses are. Plan on taking time off during the week.

7. If you're doing your job, real estate will keep you in shape. One Sunday last summer I hosted four back-to-back open houses. I had to jump in and out of my car putting up "Open House" signs all over town. Bonus: People are always saying I look great for my age and I don't have to pay health club dues!

8. You may get addicted to the House & Garden cable TV network as I have. *House Hunters, Love It or List It, Property Brothers, Rehab Addict*, you name it. I watch it. And now I live it.

9. When doing open houses, be prepared to greet many visitors. It's like hosting dinner parties, only you don't have to cook. If you like people, you'll love this aspect of the job. I used to be shy. I got over it.

10. Starting over can be humbling. I've spent years teaching college writing courses. I know I'll never be teaching real estate classes because there's so much to learn. But who knows. Age has taught me to never say never!

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