

Relationship Management: 4 Safety Essentials Every Agent Needs to Know

It's REALTOR® Safety Month and we are happy to be able to raise the safety awareness of our subscribers with this article, which originally appeared in the September 2012 REALTOR® Magazine Online.

Your customer relationships can put your safety at risk. Here are four things you can do to make safety a bigger priority.

By Melissa Dittmann Tracey & Image by Julia Freeman-Woolpert

In the real estate business, you want to seem friendly, outgoing, and approachable in welcoming new customers and attracting prospects. But doing so could also put your safety at risk.

The dangers that lurk within the real estate industry is a lesson some practitioners have had to learn the hard way. A study last year found a rise in violent attacks against real estate professionals, with 16 assaults and seven murders reported, according to a 2011 REALTORS® Safety Report. Real estate professionals who were meeting clients alone at showings were found to be the most vulnerable to robberies, assaults, or murders, according to the study.

Many real estate professionals can recall an incident when they've felt uneasy about their safety while touring homes with clients. (See 'Safety Lessons That Saved My Life...' or 'How I Stay Safe') In fact, about 42 percent of female real estate professionals and 18 percent of male agents say they've "occasionally" felt unsafe, according to an online survey of 450 real estate professionals conducted by Moby, a safety mobile app company.

So what's one of your greatest allies to staying safe in real estate? Trusting your gut.

"That gut feeling is a survival instinct in our bodies," says Adam Contos, vice president of RE/MAX who created a REALTOR® safety curriculum for the franchise's S.A.F.E.R. program. "If we feel something is wrong, there probably is something wrong. ...Don't ignore signs just to chase a commission. A commission isn't worth your life, nor is it worth your peace of mind in an industry where you can have great success. Don't take unneeded risks."

Contos, who worked in law enforcement as a former SWAT team commander and taught police officers security measures prior to his real estate career, recommends four essentials to improving your safety in real estate.

1. Be prepared. Find out as much as you can about new clients prior to taking them on home tours with you, says Contos. Too often agents don't take the time to properly screen their clients before taking them to showing appointments in vacant homes.

Jan Pringle, the education director with the Kansas City Regional Association of REALTORS® who also teaches agents about safety, says she advises agents to require all potential buyers to first visit the office to review paperwork prior to showings. She'll then tell her agents to ask clients for their pre-approval letters for a loan. If they don't have one, she'll tell agents to send clients for a loan approval next before agreeing to show them a single property.

"This easy step not only protects the agent, but also forms strong bonds with real buyers," Pringle says. "I don't think the bad guys will go so far as to be documented for a loan approval. Plus, unmotivated buyers are weeded out as well."

Also in preparing beforehand, look at the properties you plan to show. Know the exits. If it's a vacant, foreclosed home,

ensure squatters aren't present. If someone is inside the home, never enter, but contact the police immediately. Contos recommends agents do a thorough check of the property's exterior before entering, looking for such clues as window screens that have been pried off, front doors kicked in, or any evidence of someone living there by peering inside the windows. Even if you just feel something is off, Contos suggests contacting the police to have them check out the property beforehand.

2. Bring a flashlight to all of your showings. "It's probably one of the most effective defense tools," Contos says. A large, bright flashlight that fits in the palm of your hand (not the miniature keychain flashlights) can surprisingly serve as a deterrent to would-be predators. A flashlight "gives the people you are with a sign that you are prepared for something to happen," Contos says. You can use it to shine a light on objects that you want to point out in a home to potential buyers. But "it's also something in your hand that is construed by bad people as an item that a prepared professional carries with them," Contos says. "Police and security personnel carry them. It would cause those who want to do harm against you to think twice."

Some real estate agents say they carry a weapon with them to their showings for added comfort. In fact, an informal poll in 2010 of 320 REALTOR® Magazine online readers found that 26 percent say they carry a handgun, nearly 20 percent carry pepper spray, about 11 percent carry a knife, and 2 percent carry scissors. About 39 percent say they carry nothing.

If you choose to carry a weapon, Contos cautions agents to get regular professional training on how to use it correctly and make sure it's legal in their area. Mace, tasers, and firearms, for example, are illegal in certain states. "Make sure what you're doing is legal," Contos says. "You don't want to jeopardize your real estate license by carrying something that is not."

3. Use your cell phone for safety. Another great weapon to help keep yourself safe: Your cell phone.

“You don’t want to have to dig through your pockets or purse to find a phone and then enter a security code just to make a phone call if something goes wrong,” Contos says. Instead, he recommends wearing a bluetooth headset while showing properties. The discreet headsets usually allow you to touch a button twice to dial the last phone number you called. “So if you’re walking through a home with a buyer and something turns a little creepy, you can touch the button twice,” Contos says. “You don’t have to say anything to the other person on the line. Continue to show the house but [the person on the other line will] be able to hear you talking in the event that you feel your safety is in jeopardy.”

He also advises agents to have a “security partner” that they can call up to give a secret code word to when they feel in danger. In his classes, he recommends words like “red folder.” So when you call someone and mention, or they overhear in your conversation “red folder,” that person will know something is wrong and know to send help.

You also can use your cell phone to access mobile apps designed for safety. A growing number of mobile apps such as Agent Alarm, Moby, Real Alert, SafeTrec, and IcePics, among others, allow you to make instant calls to emergency responders. Some apps can even automatically access your GPS coordinates so you can quickly request help when you feel threatened. (Learn more: [How to Use Your Smartphone as a Weapon](#))

4. Slow down. Stop being in such a rush, Contos suggests. When considering REALTOR® safety, many professionals just associate it as prevention of being a victim to a crime such as robbery or an assault. But REALTOR® safety also means taking precautions so you don’t become a victim in other occupational hazards on the job, too, such as car crashes, trips and falls

in homes, or even being bit by a dog or other animal when touring homes.

“There are so many occupational hazards other than just being a victim of a crime,” Contos says. “When you get in a hurry, you ignore your surroundings and that can pose a huge safety hazard. It’s not about just getting robbed. It’s also about not getting hurt.”

For example, as you rush to client appointments or travel from listing to listing, many real estate agents are guilty of talking on their phone, texting, or even e-mailing while driving. But what happens if you’re distracted by texting and then hit a pedestrian—a child on a bike?

“A car crash can ruin your career and hurt someone else,” Contos says. “Don’t be distracted when driving; pay attention. We multi-task too much when we’re driving what’s a 5,000-pound weapon.”

Indeed, real estate is one of the top professions for the most car accidents and speeding tickets, according to a 2009 study by the Quality Planning Corp. Researchers analyzed statistics about car accidents and speeding based on profession and found that per year, every 1,000 real estate brokers average 102 car accidents and 39 speeding tickets. Real estate brokers were No. 4 on the list of top 10 most cash-prone professions (behind only doctors, lawyers, and architects).

Contos encourages real estate agents to stop rushing about their day, take the time to plan ahead, and take extra precautions. It’s what putting safety first is all about.

For more information on REALTOR® Safety, such as safety handouts, videos, and additional resources, visit www.REALTOR.org/safety.

Reprinted from REALTOR® Magazine Online, September 2012, with permission of the NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF REALTORS®. Copyright

2012. All rights reserved.