

How I flunked out as a sales agent

After taking a simulated real estate test, reporter JANE GADD was advised to stick to writing

By JANE GADD

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Buying or selling a home really brings out the jerk in people.

That's something the 400 newly minted real estate agents who stream from licensing courses in Ontario each month are bound to learn as they pursue the holy grail of huge commissions and flexible hours offered by the burgeoning profession.

With a hot market spawning an ever-swelling torrent of hopeful new agents, Globe Real Estate decided to do a virtual-reality check on what the job is like and why it has one of the highest turnover rates of any profession.

This reporter took the Real Estate Simulator test used by 350 real estate companies in North America, including most major Canadian brokerages, for recruiting new agents and training those they already have.

Afterwards, Kim Ades, president of the Toronto company Upward Motion that developed the simulator, advised me to "stick to writing."

The simulator provides a one-hour, on-line interactive session in which the test-taker meets actors playing difficult clients.

The challenge is to come up with the best responses to push through a sale.

Among the make-believe but uncannily real clients are a young space-cadet male who can't make up his mind about anything and keeps giving conflicting directions.

Then there's a hostile homeowner who barks at an agent who rings his doorbell to beg for a listing, and a couple who engage in a free-for-all marital spat in front of the agent.

All of these clients resemble the real people agents deal with every day, Ms. Ades says. The simulations have been test-driven by thousands of experienced agents who confirm their closeness to real-life situations.

When you take the test, you soon want to strangle all of them. But believe it or not, there are effective ways to handle these irritating people and to close a deal.

During the simulation, the "clients" speak and the test subject must choose from four possible responses to each statement. Those responses are measured against how top-selling agents answered.

Scores are then generated for the test-taker's level in four key selling skills -- building rapport, managing the sales process, listening with comprehension, and closing the deal. These are later combined with IQ and personality tests to generate an overall report.

"The top performers have two common traits," Ms. Ades says. "They are able to read verbal and non-verbal cues better than others can. And they know when to push and when to relent."

Take the case of the space cadet, for instance. His mismatched blond hair and black beard, and his cocky, loquacious manner are warning signs right from the start. He seems more interested in talking about his love of French food than in stating his exact requirements for a condominium.

After some pushing, he lists his priorities -- the condo must have two bedrooms and underground parking and cost less than \$150,000. But after viewing a number of places, he throws those parameters out the window and fixates on a more expensive penthouse with one bedroom, no parking and a view.

He begs the agent for advice, then disregards it. He backs off, then again pleads for a push in the right direction.

Maybe a "top performer" would have managed to steer him into a purchase, or at least have cut her losses earlier and wasted less time. This reporter, however, "experiences difficulty with managing the sales process" and "exhibits a weakness in the area of closing a sale."

I had more luck with the next client -- the angry man at the door. After a few minutes of humiliating verbal sparring on the front doorstep of the suburban home, where the owner holds the door ready to slam in my face, I succeed in landing the listing.

That scenario segues into the third challenge -- the bickering couple. I meet the husband first, at the open house for the angry man's home. The husband tells me his price range, and that his main requirements are a workshop in the basement and a double garage. I show him houses like that.

Then the wife arrives and throws a tantrum. "I can't believe you would think I'd like that awful house," she tells her husband. "You have wasted all our time. Without me, you are completely lost."

She wants a much fancier house and refuses to believe it will cost her more. The husband sticks stubbornly to the budget. They get more and more frustrated with each other and the "agent." (I jot "bitch" in my notepad.)

The situation degenerates into hopeless bickering, and I can't seem to break the impasse. No sale.

"What you're getting is a realistic job preview," says Ms. Ades, a marketing and sales specialist who designed the simulator with industrial psychologist Igor Kotlyar and other colleagues at Upward Motion three years ago.

Since the product was launched in 2002, many major real estate agencies -- including Re/Max, Royal LePage and Prudential -- have put the tool on their websites to help them recruit new agents and to assess people who express an interest in a real estate career.

The virtual client interactions are followed by intelligence and personality tests, which used to be the only tools available besides in-person interviews to assess candidates.

While it's only common sense that being smart, sociable and assertive are good qualities for a salesperson, the simulator provides information on skills that is "two to three times more accurate than a personality assessment" and can be administered on-line to thousands of people at once, Ms. Ades says.

Alluding to the high turnover in what is a Darwinian field, Mr. Kotlyar says: "There is a big gap between those who make a lot of money and those who make virtually nothing." He adds: "It's important to do what you are good at."

Even though I flunked the sales-skills test, I'm pleased that my high scores in the areas of intelligence, dependability, and listening and comprehension pulled my rating up to a "low satisfactory."

I'll just have to stick to writing.

Selling tips

Suggestions on how to be a successful real estate agent from the makers of the Real Estate Simulator:

To build rapport with clients, match and mirror their gestures and tone of voice. Their brains will receive unconscious signals that say "Hey, you're like me." People trust those who are most like themselves, so try to stand, walk and talk like them.

Devote most of your effort to asking questions and listening to the answers, and don't get sidetracked into long-winded conversations about personal lives and interests, particularly your own.

Move quickly to assess if the client has the money to buy and is genuinely motivated to do so. Don't waste time on those who can't afford it or are just looking.

Never argue with clients, even when they're wrong. If you win the argument, they will drop you. Instead, just confirm that you understand their point of view.

Learn some closing techniques and practice them until you can say them naturally. For example, to test whether the client is ready to close, ask questions such as: "Is this house big enough for your furniture?"

Deal with last-minute "cold feet" from clients by reminding them of the elements that excited them when they saw the property. "People buy on emotion and justify with reason."