

Diversity and the Real Estate Professional

Being able to successfully work with a diverse assortment of cultures and ethnicities is essential in the real estate profession. Doing so requires that you:

- Respect each individual client, regardless of their unique makeup.
- Provide each client with an equal opportunity and an equal level of service.
- Develop a clear and conscious knowledge and understanding of the various cultures of a specific ethnic group.
- Develop strategies in order to further your sales in this market.

As you already know, you must be fully aware of the ideology behind diversity. Think about this:

- Each culture is different from one another.
- Each individual in every culture is unique and different as well.

Diversity exercise

Bias card game

Race

Race refers to a group of people who share common characteristics. A racial group is typically socially constructed by physical characteristics, such as skin color. The group is often treated the same socially due to the association with their race.

Color

Different skin colors exist, even within racial groups, and some people may believe they have been treated unfairly because of their skin color. For example, people have filed charges on the basis that they were discriminated against as a result of being lighter skinned or darker skinned.

Familial Status

Familial status refers to the presence of children under the age of 18 who are members of the household, because of their birth or adoption, or because they have been legally placed in the household.

Discrimination in this protected class includes placing limitations on the number or age of the children in the family.

Disabilities

Under the American Disabilities Act of 1990, a person with a disability is:

"Any person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities; has a record of such impairment; or is regarded as having such an impairment."

Religion

Showing a preference for or against a religious group, or showing intolerance for that group's observation of its religious practices or dietary habits is religious discrimination.

National Origin

National origin is defined as a person's country of birth or from where their ancestors come. The US Department of Justice has taken action against municipal governments that have tried to limit the number of ethnic minority families who have tried to settle in a specific community. Housing providers cannot deny a housing application or charge more rent to home seekers on the basis of their national origin or ancestry. Lenders have also been sued for offering stricter or less favorable loan terms to minority borrowers.

Sex

Homebuyers cannot be discriminated or sexually harassed on the basis of their sex. In many of the discrimination cases, women encounter sexual harassment from landlords who want sexual favors in exchange for housing. Unfortunately, women, many who may be of low income, and therefore, have limited affordable housing options, are forced to tolerate these situations because they fear that they and their families will be evicted from their homes. The US Department of Justice also notes that women—particularly minority women—have also experienced pricing discrimination from mortgage lenders.

Self Awareness

Being aware of our own culture--people, places, beliefs, traditions, behaviors, and values that are important to us--make up our self-awareness and affect how we interact with other cultures. Are you a fast or slow thinker? Is being on time important to you? Would you rather give hugs or handshakes? Where does your personal space begin? Are you an introvert or extrovert? Being aware of these preferences for yourself as well as for your clients will help make you a better real estate professional and sales person. Researchers tell us that, in years to come, the number of immigrants and minorities purchasing homes will greatly increase. Therefore, it is in your best interest to become more aware of your own personality and behaviors, as well as how you interact with others.

CASE STUDY: John is a real estate professional who values promptness. He is very organized and never late to an appointment. He has a 2:30 PM appointment to show a house to the Griffin family. The Griffins arrive at 2:50 PM. John has two choices: he can assume the Griffins are late because they clearly do not respect him or value his time. Or John can understand that his perception of time may be different than that of the Griffins who have a more relaxed view of time.

Strategies for Working with Diverse Clients

Working with diverse clients takes planning and research. Consider the following when selling to diverse clients:

- Do not be afraid of offending clients by asking questions about their needs. Your clients want you to know what they want.
- Research prominent cultures in your geographic area so that you may understand their cultural traditions and etiquette. For example, do not give a gift prior to the close of the sale because it might be considered a bribe in some cultures.
- Obtain additional professional credentials, such as Certified International Property Specialist (CIPS).
- Join associations committed to various cultural and ethnic groups.
- Have necessary pamphlets and other materials printed in a specific language when needed.
- Invite an interpreter to join your meetings or showings.
- Invite some of your clients into sales meetings to teach other real estate professionals about their culture. You can even serve food from their nationality to help these clients feel more welcome.
- Be aware that you may need to modify your business practices to meet the needs of your clients.

Racial Groups

These strategies will help you demonstrate courteousness and respect:

- Address your client in the proper manner. Show respect by asking your client how they would like to be addressed. If your client would prefer to be addressed by title and/or family name, you will want to reciprocate that notion by inviting them to address you in a similar manner should they desire. Also consider the different greeting of other cultures. Shaking hands is the predominant method of greeting one another in Western culture; however, other cultures, such as the Chinese, may greet one another by bowing.
- Show interest and attentiveness in your client's culture, religion, experiences, and ideas. Your client will maintain confidence in you if you politely ask and listen to their thoughts about these topics. For example, when talking with a client of a different cultural, you may want to ask them about the architectural characteristics of their culture or about the design elements they enjoy in order to better serve their needs.
- Adapt and perhaps change your level of formality, use of personal space, degree of physical interaction, and body orientation to match that of your client. This will help you and your client understand each other better while communicating. As stated before, shaking hands may not be the proper greeting in every culture; while even a tap on the shoulder, which is often practiced by Americans, can be thought of as threatening to certain Northern European cultures.
- Pay attention to your culturally diverse client. Do not become distracted while communicating. The length of eye contact is a cultural variable. Various Asian cultures see direct eye contact as unfavorable. When eye contact is made for too long, this may appear aggressive; and, when it is used for a short period of time, it may be perceived as disinterest. Focus on your client, as it may be a learning experience for both of you.
- Take care how you ask questions or make statements, and be mindful not to offend your client.
- Use an interpreter if the client does not speak your language.

CASE STUDY: John just finished the purchase of a property with a couple from Hong Kong. He likes to give his clients a gift after closing. For this couple, he decided to give them a mantel clock for their new home. He wrapped the clock in bright blue paper and presented it to the husband. The couple looked at the wrapped gift somewhat fearfully and didn't seem to want to accept it. But they did open it finally. Immediately, the man began to scowl and his wife looked dismayed. John could tell by their reactions that he had made some mistake, but he was too embarrassed to ask what he had done wrong. Later, he retold the story to a colleague who was Chinese-American. His friend laughed and told him that a clock is a symbol of death in Hong Kong and that blue is the color of mourning! John immediately contacted his clients and apologized for his cultural gaffe.

People with Disabilities (Continued)

The Fair Housing Amendments Act of 1988 (FHAA) added disability (physical and mental) to the existing protected classes. This act requires that housing providers such as real estate professionals, landlords, and vendors make reasonable accommodations (changes, adaptations, or modifications) to rules, policies, and practices in order to provide a person with a disability equal access to the benefits and enjoyment of home ownership.

Keep in mind that sellers should be encouraged to market their readily accessible home or homes to people with disabilities. Consider working with social services agencies and organizations to expand marketing options for people with disabilities.

CASE STUDY: John has an appointment with Mrs. Johnson, a new client who is visually impaired. He anticipates how he can be of better assistance to her. He will be glad to comply with any reasonable request, including:

- Reading written information aloud to his client
- Taking her arm to assist her up and down flights of stairs and guiding her through the property
- Accommodating her service dog by allowing the dog to join them for the property viewings

If a prospective client happens to be hearing impaired or speech disabled, there are a variety of ways to communicate and accommodate them.

- Hire an interpreter to assist you. Your client may read lips, so maintaining face-to-face contact is essential.
- Write notes back and forth, which may suffice with the hearing impaired.
- Provide an interpreter if you are working with contracts or other legal paperwork. Ask the client what their preferred form of communication is.
- Use Telephone Relay Service, an operator service that allows individuals with hearing disabilities to place calls to standard telephones using TDD, a personal computer, or any other assistive telephone device.
- Use a TDD, which is an electronic device used for text communication.

Gender Biases

Unfortunately, gender biases do exist between real estate professionals and their clients. How can we lessen these gender biases?

- Always ask yourself if you are providing the same level of service to everyone.

- Always ask questions that could easily be asked to a man or a woman.
- Be careful not to develop a marketing plan that would exclude any type of group or gender.
- Conduct business in a way that supports fair housing laws.

Religious Differences

In the past, groups of people may have been discouraged from living in certain neighborhoods. Many large cities and neighborhoods were divided by religious affiliations. The Fair Housing Act addressed this division in 1968. People would no longer be allowed to discriminate on the basis of religion.

Religious discrimination involves showing a preference for or against a religious group, or showing intolerance for that group's observation of its religious practices. As a real estate professional, you can help prevent religious discrimination by never encouraging or discouraging a client from purchasing a home because of the religious composition of the neighborhood.

Families

When working with families of any culture, their decision-making process plays a key role in how they will make the many decisions necessary to purchase or sell their home. It is important for you, as a real estate professional, to understand these different types of decision-making styles and know how your clients will make decisions.

In the United States, we are taught to value the type of decision-making in which one or more individuals represents the decision of the family. In other countries, this may not be so.

For example, within many Asian, European, Middle Eastern, and Latin cultures, the eldest man is expected to make most decisions. The key point to remember is that whatever decision-making process your clients use, it is the one best suited for them. Your goal is to make your clients feel comfortable and confident in the decision-making process, making sure that their questions are answered to the best of your ability.

It is important to understand how your clients handle the decision-making process and how they reach agreements. This knowledge will help you to understand how they will make a decision about their home purchase.

Generation Gaps

Elderly/Senior Clients

According to the US Census Bureau, 43.1 million people aged 65 and older live in the United States as of July 1, 2012. This group accounted for 13.7% of the total population. By 2060, this population is estimated to increase to 92 million, comprising about 1 in 5 of US residents. Also, 80.7% of householders aged 65 and older owned their homes as of the fourth quarter of 2013.

With figures like that, you, as a real estate professional, must understand the growing housing needs of this generation in the upcoming years.

Today's seniors are more active and have a greater quality of life than ever before. Communities that specialize in owners who are 55 years old and older have many special amenities and services that make them very attractive to today's older clients.

Some clients may be looking for lots of social activities, recreation, and other active lifestyle amenities. Other seniors will need services to help them with their daily lives. Whatever their needs, you should listen to their needs and goals and help them find the best properties that will satisfy them.

Generation Gaps (Continued)

Working with Senior Sellers

Many seniors face the difficult situation of having to leave their current homes, communities, and friendships to live in an unfamiliar area. This could be for any number of reasons, including simply a desire to down-size, or because they require skilled nursing or other long-term care. The sale of their existing home can cause emotions to run high. You must be able to recognize the situations in which their emotions may make them hesitant toward change. When approaching potential sellers in the senior market, ask them a variety of questions to help you become more aware of their current situation. Some questions may include:

- What does your current residence lack regarding the physical needs that you have?
- Have you had any trouble finding people (workers) to take care of the maintenance needs of your current home?
- Do you feel you have adequate security and access to care in your current residence?

Alternative Lifestyles

Clients with Alternative Lifestyles

Showing positive regard toward your clients is essential in the real estate industry. This means that you will respect prospective clients and appreciate their differences while granting them the right to be different from you.

In the real estate industry, it is extremely important to commit to a positive acceptance of not only cultural diversity, but to all types of groups within our society, including those with alternative lifestyles. This goes above and beyond just tolerating other people. You must respect other individuals unconditionally, regardless of cultural, personal, social, political, or professional differences. Diversity is not about assimilation or conformance to society; on the contrary, diversity celebrates individual differences. It may be difficult, at first, to completely abandon any assumptions, biases, or stereotypes that you may have developed for any particular type of person. First recognize your own attitudes and biases and make allowances for them. Get to know your clients. Show an interest in their differences. Treat them with the same respect with which you would want to be treated. As you continue to develop relationships with a variety of clients, you will likely come to realize that, fundamentally, all people have similar needs, wants, and desires. Entering into new client relationships already understanding this will better prepare you for service.

For example, you may have an opportunity to serve a client who is affiliated with a different political group from you. If you take a strong stand on politics, you may have to put that aside in order to communicate effectively and respectfully with your client. If your clients belong to specific social groups, such as the Masons or the National Rifle Association, you should still show them respect and positive regard no matter what your opinion of the group may be.

Appearing Professional

Your professional appearance is the first impression that a client will have of you. Of course, satisfying your client's wants and needs is your ultimate goal and will help you gain credibility. Other factors that will assist you in gaining credibility are:

- Your professionalism
- Dress and clothing styles (very professional, business casual, etc.)
- Body language
- Manners (politeness)
- Etiquette (cell phone usage, e-mail or text message usage, dining manners)

Tips for Real Estate Professionals

- The way that you are dressed may be your client's first impression. Studies show appearance forms approximately 55% of a first impression. The other 45% is represented by word choices and voice tones.
- Notice how other professionals in your office dress. Are they making the impression they want? Are they making the impression you would want?
- A good rule to remember is that if you have to apologize for what you are wearing, then you probably made incorrect decisions when you chose your wardrobe for the day.
- Know the limits of business casual.
- Speak professionally using correct speech and grammar.
- Ask open-ended questions to keep the conversation going.
- Keep your body language in mind when you are communicating with others. Body language is a very important component of how you appear to others.
 - Do you know what type of facial expressions you use?
 - Do you look at your customers when you are speaking to them, or do you avoid eye contact?
 - How is your posture?
- Use e-mail etiquette. Always check your spelling and punctuation. Keep e-mails professional, and avoid humor or jokes that could be offensive.

TIP: Be aware of cultural perceptions of clothing color when it comes to working with a diverse clientele. In Malaysia, yellow is worn only by royalty; Chinese see the color red as lucky; and in Japan, white signifies death.

Actively Listening and Communicating Effectively

Communication Tips for Real Estate Professionals

- **Be yourself.** Do you remember your parents telling you that you will be okay, if you just be yourself? The same principle is applicable to building relationships and rapport with your clients.
- **Don't be in such a hurry.** Buyers want to know that you will take the time to listen to their wants and needs and then try to provide the best service you can in finding them their home.
- **Listen and communicate.** A sure way to establish a good relationship with your clients is to balance asking questions with talking or giving advice. Talking too much will cause the client to tune you out. Ask too many questions, and they'll feel like they're getting the third degree. Stay somewhere in the middle. Ask a question, wait and listen, and then comment.

Conclusion