

REAL ESTATE AGENT SAFETY

1. You have a listing that hasn't attracted many showings. You receive a call from a prospective buyer who is sitting in his car in front of the listing. He says he is a cash buyer and wants to close in two weeks. He would like to see the property immediately. What would you do?
2. You have scheduled an open house for Sunday afternoon. The home is located in a popular neighborhood and is occupied. What steps will you take to prepare for the open house? What IS a "safe open house?"
3. Do you practice "situational awareness"?

Learning Objective: After completing this section, you should be able to describe various safety skills and strategies for real estate brokers and the importance of implementing protocols and practices to enhance your and others' safety.

INTRODUCTION

Viewing vacant properties, going on listing appointments, hosting open houses ... if you are a real estate broker you undoubtedly perform these tasks routinely. Brokers frequently are in situations where they are alone with a client or customer who is a stranger and about whom the broker has very little information. These everyday situations can place brokers, both male and female, in potential danger, susceptible to becoming victims of violent crimes. Too many real estate brokers are assaulted, beaten, raped or murdered nationally every year while performing brokerage services.

Research involving survivors of violent crimes indicates that taking protective steps to stay safe can lessen your chances of being attacked. Brokers are encouraged to develop the following skills to lessen their chance of confrontation or attack.

1. Develop "situational awareness," *i.e.*, be keenly aware of your surroundings at all times and learn to accurately assess your situation.
2. Learn to recognize what you should be looking for and be *present*, focusing on the situation at hand and avoiding distractions.
3. Be alert, analyze your situation, assess your options, and be prepared to take appropriate action.

Don't be a crime statistic.

Additional safety tips are listed below. These suggestions and more are available in the *North Carolina Real Estate Agent Safety Guide* (hereafter “*Safety Guide*”), created by the North Carolina Real Estate Commission (NCREC) in association with the NC Association of REALTORS® (NCAR) with special thanks to the Washington Real Estate Safety Council for allowing NCREC to use their *Personal Safety Guide* as the basis for development of the *North Carolina Real Estate Agent Safety Guide*.

To view or order the brochure, visit the Commission’s website, www.ncrec.gov where you will also find a video on real estate agent safety at <http://www.ncrec.gov/Resources/VideoLibrary>. For more real estate agent safety resources, visit the North Carolina Association of REALTORS® website (www.ncrealtors.org) and National Association of REALTORS® website (www.realtor.org).

RECOMMENDED SAFETY PRACTICES

Every broker should develop a personal safety policy or practices for self-protection, regardless of whether the company or office has a formal safety policy, although the Commission strongly encourages every company/office to adopt a safety policy and ensure that all affiliated brokers are acquainted with office procedures. There are three forms that the NCAR Real Estate Safety Council recommends all offices use; these forms are in the *Safety Guide* and are:

1. A Client/Customer identification form;
2. An Agent Personal Information form; and
3. An Agent Itinerary form.

Safety Tips

1. Identify the consumer. Be suspicious!

Insist that new prospects meet you at your office and provide *photo identification* and basic information such as:

- name
- current address
- work, home and cell phone numbers
- name of employer
- where staying locally, if from out of town
- copy of driver’s license
- make, model, color and license plate number of automobile

Give this information to someone in the office in the consumer’s presence so they are aware that others have this personal information and introduce them to another staff member.

If for whatever reasons you can’t arrange to meet an unknown consumer in the office first before venturing out, then ***bring someone else with you*** when you go to meet the consumer. If you go solo, first arrange for someone to call you at a pre-determined time to check on you, write down the make, model and license plate number of the consumers’ car upon arrival, and relay that information to the office before leaving your car.

2. Always leave your itinerary. Where are you going, with whom, and when will you return? It is incredibly important that others are aware of your plans in case you don’t show up when expected and others can’t contact you. Obviously, it is best to avoid showing property after dark, but that may not be feasible certain seasons of the year.

Example: A broker went to preview a home alone one afternoon; when venturing onto the back deck, the door closed and locked behind her. She couldn't reenter, the deck was forty feet off the ground, and she had no signal for her cell phone. What could she do? Nothing but wait. Her office required agent itineraries. Sure enough, a couple of hours later, when she failed to return to the office by the time on her itinerary and could not be reached by cell, another broker from the office came looking for her and rescued her from the deck.

3. Have a fully charged cell phone and have it readily available – not in your purse or pocket. Program “911” and other emergency numbers into speed dial. Consider using a safety mobile app on your smart phone; several are available – some created especially for real estate brokers – and can do everything from instantly alerting others to accessing your GPS coordinates to requesting help.

4. Have a prearranged distress code. Create a distress code within your office and make sure that all brokers and staff members know both the code and the protocol to follow if/when you receive such a call. Having a prearranged code allows a broker to alert another office member that s/he is feeling uneasy with a client/customer and needs immediate assistance without letting the client/customer know. One suggestion is to use an acronym for “help;” for example: “Have Elizabeth Leave the Papers.” If there is no office “staff,” then share your distress code with family, colleagues and friends and discuss how they should respond if you call. As stated in the *Safety Guide* (p. 7):

The distress code should be used if you are uneasy, *but do not feel you are in danger*. If you are in immediate danger — stop the car and leave the area, or jump out of the car at the next stop. Do not hesitate to contact 911.... Be assertive and leave a dangerous situation early, but have a distress code for times you feel uneasy.

5. Implement a buddy system. Predators thrive on isolation, so team up with another broker or an assistant whenever possible. Working in pairs often reduces the chance of attack. What if you are a one person office? All the more reason to gather and verify personal information about the consumer before meeting him or her the first time **and** to leave an itinerary with a friend, or family member or partner, or *at the very least*, a note on your desk so authorities have some clue if you disappear.

6. Practice vehicle safety. Make sure your car is in good working order and keep your keys readily available. When parking, assess your surroundings and avoid areas where you could be blocked in, such as a driveway. Park on the street and away from hedges or other landscaping where people might hide. When showing property to a new prospect (stranger), ask the prospect to follow you in his/her own car. If you must ride together, you should drive.

7. Walk behind. Encourage prospective buyers to walk ahead of you when showing property. Be aware of possible escape routes and avoid having the consumer between you and an exit. Be wary of attics and basements.

8. Dress for safety and success. Dress professionally. Don't wear expensive jewelry as it may make you a target. Wear shoes that won't hinder your ability to run, kick, or fight back. Carry only the cash or credit cards you need. Act confidently, but not arrogantly, and set strong oral boundaries. Body language says a lot.

9. Conduct safe personal marketing and be careful how you use social media. *Closely related to #8, keep your photos strictly professional – avoid “glamour shots.” Limit the amount of personal information you share, both in written media as well as in your oral conversations with clients or customers. Control the privacy settings in your social media accounts, including the geolocation features. Note:* Many social networking sites will share your precise location with others unless you disable that feature.

10. Conduct a safe open house. Safe “open house” events *require planning and advance preparation.* Prior to an open house, introduce yourself to the neighbors. Evaluate the property, identify vulnerable areas and establish escape routes from each level of the house. Check all windows and doors before leaving.

Avoid advertising the property as “vacant.” On the day of the open house, keep your keys and cell phone with you and check in with your office routinely. Ask another broker to join you for the event. Some say *never* conduct an open house alone, especially in a multi-level dwelling.

11. Fight or Flight? Know your options and how you’ll respond to save your life. Your primary goal is to escape from danger and call for help. How quickly can an attack happen? The “average person” can run 21 feet in *2 seconds*. If you don’t plan and practice possible responses, you will be less equipped to protect/defend yourself if the need arises.

No resistance may be the best choice in some situations. If a would-be robber confronts you with a lethal weapon, give up your property. However, if you’re threatened with bodily harm or other situation in which you must defend yourself, scream and fight back and mean it. Consider taking a course to learn self-defense techniques and skills. Cultivate a survivor mindset. Merely purchasing self-defense tools, e.g., sprays, etc. won’t be very effective if you don’t know how to use them.

Conclusion

The bottom line is: **TRUST YOUR INSTINCTS.** If you feel apprehensive or have the sense that something isn’t quite right, trust your gut! Instincts are there to protect us. As one broker who survived a brutal attack by a client about whom she’d felt uncomfortable later said:

The one thing I could say to people is if you have a bad gut feeling, don’t second guess what it’s telling you. Listen to your gut feeling and protect yourself.

As noted in the *Safety Guide* (p 9):

Safety experts agree that it is best to assume that your instincts are right and to take the necessary precautions. Do not be so anxious for a sale that you ignore your own intuition in the heat of the moment. Use these same instincts before you give out your phone number or address, and especially before getting in the car with a new client.

(Italics added.)

BICs:

- Does your Office Policy have a section devoted to Safety Practices?
- How often do you review it with your agents?
- What safety practices do you employ if you engage in brokerage independently and have no affiliated agents?