

What's the difference between a real estate agent and a REALTOR®?

When you're looking for a good restaurant, you might get some advice from a friend, coworker, or family member. The same is true when you're searching for a real estate agent to help you buy or sell a home. In fact, referrals are one of the top ways that agents get new clients. When you get a recommendation, how much research do you do about that restaurant? What about that real estate agent?

You might simply visit the restaurant instead of scouring the Internet for confirmation of your friend's good recommendation. But when it comes to choosing a real estate agent, it's a good idea to do your own research since buying or selling a home is an important transaction.

The first thing you can do to vet a real estate professional is to find out if the agent merely holds a real estate license or is a Texas REALTOR®. There's a difference between the two, and the difference matters.

Becoming a REALTOR®

Before a person can sell real estate in Texas, he must be licensed by the Texas Real Estate Commission (TREC) as a salesperson and sponsored by an established broker. He must also take 180 hours of required educational courses and pass the real estate licensing exam. Within two years, the licensee must complete an additional 90 classroom hours of real estate education.

But holding a real estate salesperson or broker's license from TREC does not make someone a Texas REALTOR®. After earning the license, many agents elect to join their local association of REALTORS®, the state-level association, and the National Association of REALTORS® (NAR). Only after all these steps are taken can a person be called a REALTOR®. Membership in this three-level system gives REALTOR®s (and their clients) advantages over agents who don't join.

Why use a REALTOR®?

REALTORS® must adhere to NAR's REALTOR® Code of Ethics, which clearly identifies their responsibilities to the consumer. The Code of Ethics is the cornerstone of what it means to be a REALTOR®. REALTORS® pledge that they will treat all parties fairly and protect their clients' interests. It's a consumer-oriented code that holds REALTORS® to a higher standard of professional behavior.

Adhering to the Code of Ethics isn't the only way REALTOR® are set apart from real estate licensees. Texas REALTORS® in particular have a long track record of working with state and local officials, as well as other regulatory bodies. These highly organized and effective efforts are focused on four main areas: keeping the cost associated with real estate transactions reasonable; preserving private-property rights; protecting consumers from proposals that make homeownership more difficult; and maintaining the overall health of the real estate economy.

If that's not enough, Texas REALTOR®s are plugged into the best information and education, so they know more about the process of buying and selling real estate. The Texas Association of REALTOR®s provides educational opportunities for members to further their real estate knowledge and become more proficient in their industry.

Plus, Texas REALTOR®s have exclusive access to more than 100 forms for every type of real estate situation imaginable, which can help keep you out of legal trouble when you're dealing in

real estate transactions. Texas REALTOR®s even have Spanish translations of many of the most widely used forms. Although not legally binding documents, these translations help explain the forms to Spanish-speaking consumers.

It's a difference that counts

Whether you're buying or selling property, working with a Texas REALTOR® can make a huge difference in the level of professionalism and skill you'll receive during the process. You'll enjoy a smoother transaction by working with a knowledgeable practitioner who puts the needs of her clients first.