

SECRET WEAPONS - HOW A SECOND OPINION CAN HELP YOU IN TODAY'S MARKET

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HELP WANTED

When 32-year-old Karyn Schmeidler fell in love with a 700-square-foot one-bedroom on "It was my decision to make," says Schmeidler, a first-time buyer who works as a genetic counselor. "But I wouldn't have done anything without my parents' support."

Unfortunately, her parents weren't that up-to-date on the harsh realities of the Manhattan market. The \$300,000-plus Karyn was willing to spend had bought another one of their daughters a brand-new, three-bedroom house in Atlanta.

And in this market where apartments are flying off the market, the Schmeidlers felt rushed. "Not having to see other properties certainly put us at a disadvantage," says Karyn's dad, Peter. "There was no way to compare things."

Karyn ended up with the place - after doing a sales job that involved e-mailing her parents pictures of other apartments and their concomitant sky-high prices - but her story illustrates an overlooked point: The biggest obstacle to your next apartment probably isn't high prices. It's your parents, your best friend or whomever comes to second-guess a potential pad.

With that in mind, here's our guide to managing second opinions.

Yes, you need a second opinion. Even though brokers insist, in the words of Cristina Marzullo of Douglas Elliman, "if you wait you will lose it," there's tremendous worth in seeing your potential purchase through somebody else's eyes.

"It's very valuable to ask for second opinions," says Lois Vitt, author of "Ten Secrets to Successful Home Buying and Selling." "And if you've never owned before or you're moving to a new area, it's essential."

Sometimes, you'll want to make sure your second-opinion person helps keep your feet on the ground. "For first-time buyers, the second opinion is usually a financial one - they want to know it's a worthwhile investment," says Linda Stillwell, a senior vice president at the Corcoran Group. "In many cases, they're spending their very last dollar and they want to be sure."

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Of course, second or third opinions rarely excite brokers. “Usually that person is brought in to look for pitfalls, not celebrate the glory,” says Kathy Braddock, a principal of real-estate consulting firm Braddock + Purcell.

Finding someone who is wise but not a consistent wet blanket is tricky and it leads to

Pick someone who balances you out. If you’re enthusiastic, find someone practical; if you’re a pessimist, pick an optimist.

When Patrick Inverso, 26, wanted to find the perfect place to call home, he knew just whom to call - his childhood pal and recent roommate, Brent Simon.

“I’d see a place and get excited - I immediately remember only the things I like about it,” says Inverso. “And then I’d call my roommate.”

“Brent’s analytic - he’s totally a grounding perspective,” says Inverso, who works in marketing. “He would take an apartment and put it into perspective for me. He’d say, ‘This is what you told me what you wanted out of a place, and this is not indicative of that.’”

Take the case of a co-op on East 33rd Street, which had a tiny living room and was nowhere near the West Village or SoHo locations Inverso was hoping for. Simon didn’t even have to see the place before he told Inverso, “Don’t bother.”

Talking through his real-estate wants with his buddy helped Inverso realize he was setting his sights too low. “I thought I’d never get what I wanted, so I was ready to make an immediate concession,” he says.

At Simon’s urging, he held out, and when the right pad came along - a 650-square-foot co-op on Bleecker Street, with great exposures and a new kitchen - Inverso felt he had struck real-estate gold. He was more certain when Simon backed him all the way.

“Buying a home is not only a huge investment, but it’s a hugely emotional process,” Inverso says. “To me, having the outside perspective is absolutely necessary.”

Listen to your second-opinion person, because they may help you crystallize your priorities.

Meredith Silver, 27, had been looking since September for a one-bedroom, priced in the \$500Ks, in the West Village, Chelsea or Flatiron.

“I couldn’t find a lot of renovated space in a prewar with a doorman in my price range,” she says.

So when she came across a listing for a spacious postwar, she decided to take a look. The corner apartment was charming, with lots of windows, but Silver was concerned about the ceiling height.

“That was my one sensitivity - I didn’t want to feel claustrophobic.”

Silver liked the apartment enough to put in an offer - but she wouldn’t sign a contract without her mother’s approval. Fortunately, Silver’s mom, Ilene, had accompanied her during her initial few weeks of searching, and was familiar with Manhattan’s apartments and prices.

Fortunately, too, Ilene’s an interior designer. Within a week of Meredith’s offer, Ilene walked in and said, “It’s fabulous! It has a lot of great bones.”

“My mom’s excitement rubbed off,” says Meredith. “She helped me solidify my decision. I was probably 90 percent sure, but this was my first apartment that I bought, and it’s hard to make that decision yourself.”

You can always put your thumb on the scale.

For many first-time buyers, the approval - or disapproval - comes from mom and dad, who may not have been home -shopping in a generation.

"An uneducated opinion is worth zero," says Marzullo, "even if it is from your mother or sister."

The worst offenders are out-of-town parents. "If \$600,000 buys a three-bedroom house in their neighborhood, they're going to freak out when they see a converted studio," says Ivana Tagliamonte of Halstead Property. "Agents are always nervous when there's a second showing with the mother involved."

Come back to Karyn Schmeidler, whose parents, Lois and Peter, had lived in the same four-bedroom, 2,500-square-foot house in south Jersey for decades - which, today, is roughly equivalent in value to Karyn's one-bedroom co-op.

The initial viewing didn't go terribly well. The apartment "was a shock to me," says Lois. "It just wasn't what I was expecting for what she was paying. The bathroom area looked like a cheap motel."

"I didn't say, 'Don't buy it,' but I didn't say it was the greatest thing since sliced bread," says Peter. "It was a lukewarm endorsement."

A week of tense negotiations ensued. ("I was really nervous," says Karyn, "I was almost trying to sell it to them.") Though the co-op needed some renovations, Karyn and her broker, Dana Simonetti of the Corcoran Group, pointed out the positives: It was spacious, with a courtyard view and a great location. "It was good value for the money," says Simonetti. "Karyn had gone through the process, but her parents didn't have the visual comparison. They had to take our word for it."

"I knew what I was seeing," says Karyn. "I knew it was a good find."

Don't cry wolf. If you're committed to getting an OK from a certain person, do try and be as honest as possible.

When Minyoung Shin, 32, shopped for a Manhattan studio, she leaned heavily on her sister, Minsook Kim, 33, a real-estate broker in Houston. Throughout Shin's yearlong search, she and her sister were in constant communication via phone and Internet.

"I wanted to buy a place so much that I wanted to believe every apartment was OK - and I wanted Minsook to believe it was great," says Shin, a technical designer for Diane von Furstenberg.

But Kim wasn't easily duped. "I was pretty skeptical," she says. "Every time she saw something she liked, she said she liked it better than the last one. I always made her tell me what was bad about it - if she didn't give me any negatives, it seemed like she was being unrealistic."

Like the spacious studio in the non-doorman building, or the pad on Beekman Place that had a great layout but faced a brick wall. Such drawbacks, says Kim, are bad for resale - and that her sister should aim for a pad with a great view in the best neighborhood possible, even if it may need an update or two.

And ultimately, that's what Shin bought on the Upper East Side. "Minsook put me into perspective," says Shin. "I'm glad she did - I could've made some mistakes."