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WIN LISTINGS WITH PREFERRED SERVICE

By Dan Gooder Richard

How do you convert first-stage prospects into second-stage shoppers?

How do you nudge a fence-sitter into action?

Here are some tips for providing service that goes above and beyond to help prospects take that next step with you.

What carrot will compel the truly motivated prospect to step forward out of the prospect pipeline and become a client or customer? One of the most effective techniques is to create a menu of service for a Preferred Customer Program.

Basically, buyer or seller prospects who enroll in your program will receive special services reserved for program members only—but first, they must qualify as ready shoppers. I suggest only highly motivated and qualified customers be accepted.

Some prospects sign up at first contact. Others need to be sold on the benefits of the preferred services during your prospect follow-up campaign, and will sign up when they are ready to be serious. The secret to the Preferred Customer Program is that it's designed as an offer that truly motivated prospects can't refuse. Here are some tips for developing such a program.

1. Give your Preferred Customer Program an impressive name.

Call it Qualified Buyers Program, Red Carpet Club, Certified Seller Program, or Perks Club. Once prospects are enrolled, they receive special services, such as a

personal shopper or home buyer hot list, available only to qualified preferred customers.

2. Start enrollment for buyers right over the phone.

To enroll buyers in your program, prospects are first required to be qualified by your lender by phone, and then they are notified within an hour as to whether they should make a personal appointment with the lender. If further information is needed, prospects are told what to bring into the office to complete the loan application. In addition, to qualify, prospects must have a private session with you, either in your office (for buyers) or in their home (for sellers), to submit their application and, for buyers, personal financial information.

3. Promote the number of enrollees.

Let's say that today you have 24 buyers enrolled in your program. Tell your prospective sellers that you've got 24 buyers in your buyer pool who are looking for houses right now. Take advantage of enrollment to attract even more prospects.

4. Prepare a personal enrollment package.

Assemble an impressive enrollment package that prospects receive when they are accepted. This package is essentially a pre-qualification kit for buyers or a pre-listing kit for sellers.

Have a picture taken of the kit and use it in your program flier or brochure where you describe the benefits of your program. In your kit, include the following:

Your mission statement

Testimonial letters

List of ancillary services or recommended suppliers

List of affiliated professionals

Open house guest pass (for buyers; once a buyers' agency agreement is signed, prospects can show this pass to open house associates to indicate that they are exclusively represented by you.)

Steps in the process of buying or selling a home

Steps in the loan-approval process and information about closing escrow/settlement

MLS abbreviations decoded to enable prospects to ready property profile sheet

Information brochures and special reports on specific topics

Area maps with subdivision or neighborhood names

List of documents the prospect should sign or gather

Video on buying a home or pricing and fixing up a home to sell

List of satisfied customers from the prior two years

Seven Sure-Fire Preferred Customer Services

Once you have the program organized and ready to go, you can offer some of these services:

Personal Shopper Program

At its simplest level, this is exclusive representation by a buyers' agent. However, the secret here is the promotion of this service as that of a personal shopper.

A top producer with RE/MAX Greater Atlanta-Intown, Zac Pasmanik, uses a personal shopper program very effectively. Pasmanik assigns the

prospect to a buyers' agent, who completely services the prospect's needs. He runs ads touting the benefits to buyers of working with a personal shopper and plugging the associates as home shopping experts.

Personal Homebuyer Hot List

This hot list is a property search and notification service that is either manual or automated. Using buyer prospects' property search requirements, you mail, fax or e-mail them daily (or weekly, or monthly) a hot list that is a thumbnail description of each new listing that matches.

The preferred customers benefit by getting a jump on properties that have just come onto the market before they are advertised. Only your preferred customers get this advantage. You can do an MLS search manually or use software to provide the service automatically by printed report, fax, or e-mail.

First-time Buyer Hot List

This is a specialty hot list for properties attractive to low-down-payment, below-market, first-time home buyer prospects. These properties are "bargains" or "values." Prospects who have expressed interest are sent a list of handyman specials, Real estate-owned properties (REOs), relocation management third-party listings, foreclosures, divorce or estate sales, distressed properties or condominiums or whatever suits their price range or specific needs. Properties might also be selected from your database of clients who may be selling soon or from your expireds database. All these hot list properties, as well as your negotiating skills, can deliver a greater average percentage discount than the market standard listing-price-to-sales-price discount. Be sure to track your success and promote it to first-stage prospects.

Personal Price Hotline

Enrolled customers can call your team with the address of any properties for sale, and your office will provide the prices by phone. You can also provide, via fax or e-mail, a complete MLS profile of properties they inquire about if they prefer. Preferred customers benefit from the convenience of dealing with one information source they know they can trust.

Personal Open House Tour

For Preferred customers under a buyers' agreement, an associate prepares a personal self-guided open house tour. On the morning of the tour, or the night before, the associate's office faxes,

e-mails or drops off a map with the property locations, directions and a profile sheet for each house held open by your company that day.

A high-tech variation of the personal open house tour is a private virtual tour on the customer's own personal Web site, which you have prepared.

A web page is created just for the prospect with his or her private access password. The site is a virtual tour of houses that fit the prospect's search criteria. Software such as Photoshare can do the tour beautifully with music, voice-over and professional transitions. PictureWorks software can also help you prepare a home tour specifically designed for a Web page.

Whatever your prospects want to see (and you have time to input) is available in the privacy of their own home on their own time.

Personal Comparable Alert for Sellers

You can give preferred seller prospects a competition alert. The associate sends them notice of new comparables. Because these comparables are now on the market, the competing properties may affect the prospect's soon-to-be-decided asking price, terms and fix-up plans. Such notifications can be sent via e-mail, fax or mail. A variation is simply to send enrolled homeowner prospects a weekly "Just Sold" report on area sales.

Preferred Property Program for Sellers

This program for sellers sets standards for a property, not a prospect, to be accepted as a "preferred property." The seller is educated during the follow-up phase, then enrolled at a prelisting presentation. Before the property goes on the market, it must be certified as having passed eight Preferred Property criteria to earn a special sign rider. The prospective seller must often complete various preparations before the property is accepted.

Curb appeal. Is the first impression perfect? Be sure to look at landscaping, front of house, door, hardware, windows, walk and driveway.

Market value price. Is it within 5 percent of fair market value?

Appraisal. Will the seller pay for a professional appraisal? Since buyers typically won't accept an associate's or seller's opinion of value, high offers can result when an appraisal has been done. It also enables the seller to market the property as being "Below Appraisal" to achieve a fast sale.

Home Inspection. The seller does repairs after a professional home inspection but before the house goes on the market, thus saving money because buyers typically ask for more expensive replacement rather than simple repair.

Warranty. The buyer is assured that unexpected expenses will not come up, and the seller's liability is reduced.

Pest Inspection. Preferred before the listing period begins so that any problems can be corrected.

Cosmetic Improvements. These items are more than elbow grease, but less than a remodel. They might include fresh paint, new floor coverings and professional cleaning to pass a room-by-room "white gloves" inspection.

Property Display. A collection of documents that merchandise the property to prospective buyers, such as subdivision plat, property survey, history of utility costs, garden and plant map, floor plans, warranties, owner's manuals, chronology of improvements with project costs — in short, a home book.

After the prospect has signed a listing or buyer agreement, continue to follow up to lay the groundwork for referrals during the sales process.

Tell your clients and customers that if you're not available, they can always reach your team for answers and information. One of the first postagreement calls should be a welcome from a team assistant giving a direct number and offering personal assistance.

Don't forget to extend membership in your Preferred Customer Program to all your past clients and customers as a value-added benefit.

At any moment, you have scores of prospects in the pipeline at all stages in the process. Constantly nudge them along the pipeline to your mutual goal: buying or selling a home by creating a Preferred Customer Program and marketing it as a special service.

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