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## **Peek in the Seller's Closets, Nix the Bathroom Stop, and More Ways to Ace the Open House**



*Getting in the seller's good graces means leaving the kids at home*

For buyers and nosy neighbors alike, open houses can be a welcome opportunity to poke around other people's homes and see how they live (and decorate). But if you're genuinely looking to buy in a city as rife with bidding wars as NYC, the open house is *also* a crucial time for you to make a good impression. The seller's broker could be silently vetting you for a massive financial transaction and, if you're looking in a co-op, how you'd fare in a board interview, to boot.

"How someone conducts themselves in an open house is generally a good indication of how they'd act in a board interview, and how likely they are to be approved," says Halstead Property agent Chris Kromer. And no seller wants to waste their time with a candidate who'd never impress the board.

Coming across as the ideal buyer is a delicate balance: you don't want to seem desperate or likely to overpay, but you do want to come across as a legitimate, interested purchaser with the means and the know-how, not just another voyeur who stopped by to gawk. You also want to leave the sellers with the impression that you'd be easy to work with. "We definitely get a sense of a person's personality and how the process would go [during the open house]," says CORE agent Dana Karson, who adds, "it can sometimes lead to the seller wanting to work with someone else."

So how do you leave an open house in good standing with the seller and ahead of your competition? We grilled experts for the best tips (and cautionary tales), and came up with these no-fail guidelines:

## 1. DON'T overdress

While a seller might assume you're not serious if you show up in sweats, it's also possible for the pendulum to swing too far in the other direction. "Some people walk in flaunting everything they've got like it's a special occasion—diamond jewelry, the works—but you don't really want the listing agent to assess your financial situation from what you're wearing," says Gea Elika, principal broker of Elika Associates. "It's important to show that you're a strong candidate, but not over-the-top. Think professional, not flamboyant—don't go in dressed like Liberace."

Mostly, the rule of thumb is not to overthink it, and Karson advises to aim for "comfortable and appropriate."

## 2. DO play it cool

As with outfit choice, you want to show that you're legitimately interested in (and capable of) buying but not come across as over-eager, lest you ruin any future attempts at negotiation. "I wouldn't make any declarative statements, like 'I will definitely be bidding,'" Warbug Realty broker Jason Haber tells us.

"An open house is about learning about the property," rather than becoming best friends with the listing agent, Elika adds. "If you try to negotiate there, it shows that you're not qualified and you don't know what you're doing." Put it this way: "Would you ever walk onto a used car lot and say, 'I love that car!'"

Another upside to *not* spending the whole time gushing to the seller: the opportunity to eavesdrop.

"Listen to other people and see what they think," advises Elika. It could give you a sense of the competition, *or* potential points for negotiation down the road.

## 3. But DON'T play it *too* cool

If you're interested in making an offer, say something more along the lines of "I love the home, it could be a great fit for me, and I'll get back to you as soon as possible," Elika suggests. Ask smart, specific questions about the building's financials and maintenance charges, and how many residents live there year-round.

You want to be remembered. "It will always raise eyebrows if the seller or their broker gets your offer and doesn't even remember meeting you at the open house," explains RealDirect CEO Doug Perlson.

Since so many ultra-competitive buyers are in the habit of putting "placeholder" bids on the apartment right then and there—and never following through—you should have a brief, polite, conversation letting the broker know that you're seriously considering the place (not just bidding to keep it on the back burner), and will be in touch again.

## 4. DON'T be an armchair critic

Openly critiquing the apartment won't score you points, and it definitely won't score you a better price. "Lots of buyers think they have to be poker-faced—or worse: negative—in order to have better leverage when making an offer. Not so," says Realty Collective agent Tina Fallon. "The listing agent will be more willing to work with a buyer who demonstrates a sincere interest in the property."

"Don't be mean," adds Brennan Realty Services broker Barbara Wilding. "You can explain why a place isn't for you—not enough space, too dark, etc.—without being personal." After all, home decor is something that can be changed, but making a terrible impression—or offending the seller—isn't.

## **5. DO surrender your shoes**

No one likes walking through an open house in stocking feet, but think of it as a necessary evil. (And also, pretty understandable if a seller's got dozens of people coming in off the city streets and tromping through their home.)

"Don't roll your eyes if they ask you to take off the shoes," says Halstead's Kromer. The no-shoes request is particularly common in higher-end listings, but is a universally accepted practice. "I've even had listing agents give us medical booties to put on over the shoe," says Citi Habitats broker Corlie Ohl. Best to wear your good socks and go with the flow on this one—after all, if you can't handle a basic request during an open house, how will you respond to the building rules if you're a resident?

## **6. DON'T use the bathroom (and if you can't help it, at least close the door)**

Bathroom use is a lightning rod of open house etiquette—some say it's strictly verboten, but everyone agrees that if it absolutely can't wait, you must follow certain rules.

"Use it for 'number one' only," our etiquette columnist Jamie Lauren Sutton advises. "Don't stink it up, or worse, clog or break the toilet—which has happened," Brennan broker Tiffany Lee adds. If you simply can't wait to get to a Starbucks, always *ask* before availing yourself of the apartment's facilities. And be quick: "Especially if the open house is crowded, understand that everyone's going to want to see the bathroom, and getting in there to use it makes things a little awkward," Kromer says.

One *major* don't he's encountered after years of open houses: a well-known retired athlete using the bathroom during a showing *with the door open*. It should go without saying, but just in case: Don't. Do. That.

## **7. DO snoop—within reason.**

The whole point of an open house is to scope out a potential purchase, so don't be shy. "Sometimes people are hesitant to do things like open up closets, or they sort of lean into a bathroom instead of walking in," says Haber. "If someone has an open house, though, they're anticipating people poking around the apartment, and you should do that."

That doesn't mean rifle through the medicine cabinets and the bedside table. A good rule of thumb is to refrain from opening drawers in furniture that'll be going along with the seller—coffee tables, dressers, etc. "You're buying the apartment, you're not buying the seller's underwear," Haber says. "You've got to get acquainted with the space, while being mindful that all the stuff in the apartment isn't yours when you buy it." Sit on the furniture to "test it out" if you'd like, but know that it's not likely to be part of the purchase.

## **8. DO stay on schedule**

Yes, we told you to play it cool, but no need to be "fashionably late." "If the showing's from 12:30 to 2 and you show up at 1:59 expecting a full tour, the listing agent probably has other places to be," says Kromer. Besides potentially irritating the seller's broker, it won't give you the time you need to properly scope the

place out. Citi Habitats' Ohl recommends allowing yourself at least 15 minutes to look around the apartment and ask a few questions. And if you're a leisurely browser, get there towards the beginning so you don't have to rush yourself.

### **9. DON'T let your kids run wild.**

In fact, you may not want to bring them at all. Simultaneously keeping an eye on your kids and a potential apartment will distract you from the whole process, and you want to focus your attention on the property (which probably won't be childproofed if the seller doesn't have kids). Let the kiddies scope out the place for themselves if you like it enough for a second visit.

If you do need to bring your children, "they should behave as they would on a school interview," etiquette expert Sutton advises, and they shouldn't wander the house unsupervised or touch valuables.

Depending on their age, put them in a stroller or hold their hands while you walk through the place.

"Children have a way of finding plugs or other knick knacks and causing damage," Ohl says.

Sometimes, though, they can make unexpected appearances: "I once had a client go into labor while she was at a showing," recalls Warburg's Haber. "Her kid was almost there by accident!"

### **10. DO be careful with the snacks (and the wine).**

Outside food or drink is a no-no at the open house (after all, dozens of people may be coming through, and the seller doesn't want any unnecessary mess or stains). On the flip side, a lot of open houses serve up snacks and wine (the better to keep you lingering in the apartment).

If you'd like to stay in everyone's good graces, do your eating near the table, or make sure you're putting all your detritus in a trash can, not on the coffee table. (As with so much etiquette advice, a lot of this comes down to common sense.)

If you're *not* making a serious play for the apartment, well, the rules are (hypothetically) a little looser. At one of Haber's open houses, which he hosted in an East Village townhouse on Halloween, a woman came in off the street, had a few glasses of wine, and passed out downstairs. "We turned off the lights when we left and she slept there overnight," he says. "The owner came in the next day, said hi, made her breakfast, and they had a nice chat. These things happen; it's the East Village."