

How to Get the Most Out of Your Home Inspection

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Would you close your eyes and pick a doctor out of a phone book? Would you have someone choose and buy a house for you while you are at work? Of course not! Yet, everyday, people are more careful picking apples at a supermarket than they are choosing their home inspector. To make matters worse, once they do choose their inspector, many homebuyers tend to rely solely on the inspector's report to determine the structural integrity and condition of the property they are thinking of sinking their hard earned cash into. Ken Austin, chairman of HouseMaster, a national home inspection chain, estimates that about 25% of the company's clients rely only on the report and insist that they just do not have the time to accompany the inspector!

The home inspection is more than just a step in the home buying process; it is the "physical exam" of the house you are purchasing. In considering this very important step, buyers should keep in mind the following points:

- You must shop around for competent, objective inspector
- You must have the inspection during daylight whenever you are available
- You must come prepared with questions, notes, and the willingness to ask more questions
- You must accompany and question the inspector during the inspection
- You must seek to understand the inspector's terminology and meanings
- You should combine the inspector's report with a corresponding contractor's estimate if you are thinking of trying to use the report as a price negotiation tool
- You should not insist that sellers do repairs needed
- You should keep the report handy and not in the "house" folder!
- You must list, prioritize, and actually do the repairs suggested in the report

Competent/Objective Inspector

Your first step is to choose a competent, objective inspector. Unfortunately, competence is a tricky term. Usually, we can only get an idea about competence from professional certifications, degrees, and associations. This does not always translate into actual competence in the field. Many buyers choose a licensed engineer while others choose a "home inspector". Please note that home inspectors do not have to be actual, licensed engineers. Although they may have extensive training and experience in home inspection, a "home inspector" cannot be confused with a licensed engineer. When you are shopping around for a home inspector, you should first ask, "Are your inspectors licensed engineers?" No matter if you choose an inspector or an engineer, making the right choice from the start makes a big difference in the value of your effort.

Objectivity is another aspect of a home inspection. The inspector is not allowed to push you toward or against buying a home, but this is not his role anyway. What the inspector should be is honest, accurate, and complete in his evaluation of the property. If being so lessens the chances that you will buy the home, so be it. The true home inspection is legitimate, not some game where people go through the motions, smile, and fill out some papers. Many buyers prefer to choose their own inspectors and lenders, deciding not to go along with referrals or suggestions. This is certainly one way of keeping all parties more objective and independent.

Daylight Inspections/Buyer Presence

It is obvious that inspections should be made during the day so that any defects or problems can be seen. Anyone who has shopped for a home at night knows that there is no comparison between seeing a home at night and in the day. You get a much better idea of the condition of the property during the day. Also, you should make sure that the inspection is made whenever you can personally be there to accompany the inspector, ask questions, and take notes. Many buyers do not know or do not even ask about weekend inspections, for example.

Accompany Inspector/Ask Questions

"Being there" does not mean sitting in the living room drinking coffee while the inspector checks out the house. The buyer must accompany the inspector, asking questions and listening to the points made at each portion of the house. Notes should be taken and questions asked, since this is the chance to really learn about the house. There is no comparison between reading about a problem as compared to discussing it right at the problem site. Some people like to have the seller accompany the inspection, so as to be available for questions and explanations. Others prefer to do this inspection beyond the ears of the seller, and have the seller available afterward for any explanations or follow-ups on concerns.

This is also the ideal time to "get into the inspector's head" and understand what she means by various terms such as "poor", "satisfactory", and, why not, "great shape!" Sometimes the words read one week later do not convey the message meant.

"It's Like Playing Poker!"

Once the buyer is armed with some defects and problems, he can get a repair estimate from a contractor and approach the seller with some suggestions. Will the seller bite? It depends on what the buyer is "cooking" and what the market "kitchen" looks like. A buyer's market lends itself to significant negotiation in this area, but a seller's market, as the present one still is, makes such tactics less effective. While the buyer cannot expect the seller to do everything, he can take a shot at getting some concessions, especially where immediate repair is needed. If the seller is not willing to accept these suggestions, then at least the buyer knows where he stands. The contractor's estimate is for convincing the seller that the "problems" are not the work of someone's imagination.

In many ways, it is like playing poker! The buyer gets stronger cards with an effective inspection, but it is not certain if those cards will translate to a winning hand. Still, it is better to have strong cards than weak ones, and those who don't take this seriously are playing with less than a full deck!

"Thanks, But No Thanks"

Inspectors strongly warn against trying to force the seller to do repair jobs. This may go against instinct, since many would say, "Why do I have to fix his mistakes?" The problem is that your goal is to have the job done right, not just to have the job done. In a way, a poorly done job is worse than no job done at all since the poorly done one creates the illusion of completion and quality leading to forgetting about a problem hidden behind the veneer of so-called quality. Some inspectors say that you are better off with an undeveloped home than one nicely dormered, since you have no idea what kind of work was done on the "mint" home.

You are better off calculating the costs of the job or jobs, trying to get some concessions or breaks from the seller, and then developing a schedule of what needs to be done and when it should be done. It is more likely that you will be more careful and attentive than an escaping seller.

Keep Report Handy/Act on It

Many people develop a nice map of what they will do and then do nothing with that map. You must actually act on the map. Since you have determined costs and the relative importance of each task which must be done, you will have all the information which you will need to plan your repair and improvement schedule. Keep this information handy and review it carefully.

Conclusion

The home inspection usually costs about \$300 to \$700, but it is much more than that. It can mean the difference between great satisfaction and great distress. It can be used effectively or misused foolishly. How it is used is ultimately the responsibility of the buyer. Follow these bits of advice, and you will increase the chances that your purchase of a home will be judged as "great" and not "needs work".