

# 10 Dos and Don'ts for Summer Open Houses

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By Tara-Nicholle Nelson



I often joke that I spent the first few years of my kids' lives just trying to keep them alive. While this is a (slight) exaggeration, the reality is that most of our parents do spend our formative years teaching us the do's and don'ts of everyday life. Chances are, though, that this did not include a list of Open House faux pas; things that can get between you and your dream home, or your dream sale.

'Tis the season for Open Houses, though, so we thought we'd pick up where Mom and Dad left off, tipping you off to a list of pointers for both buyers and sellers about what to do – and what not to do – at this summer's Open Houses.

**Do: Use Open Houses as a convenient time for touring homes with your agent.** I'm sometimes surprised by how many buyers write in to ask whether it's appropriate to meet up with their agent at an open house, as though they're concerned that it might be offensive to the listing agent or agent who is holding the home open. Well over 80 percent of serious buyers - people who are actually qualified to buy a home - are represented by agents, and listing agents know this!

Given that very few unrepresented buyers walk into an Open House off the street and buy that house, I submit that using the few weekly open house hours as a regular time to meet up with your agent and tour homes that are being held open is a very efficient way to see homes you're interested in, without having to make scattershot appointments with individual sellers - and that savvy listing agents will welcome your attendance as a represented, qualified buyer and their agent at their Open House.

**Do: Open every door.** If you're seriously interested in a home you're touring at an Open House, make sure you open every door - even doors that look like they might just be hall closets. I've had buyers come back and realized that all the closets were a couple inches deep, or that the home had multiple walk-in closets they weren't even aware of. Once, I even had a buyer miss an entire little room, because we all thought the narrow door was just another closet. Since storage is such an elemental consideration when you're homebuying, it's important to know what's behind every door.

**Don't: Open every drawer.** I'm specifically talking about drawers to furniture, rather than kitchen drawers and other drawers that are built into the property itself. Why do you need to see what's inside someone's bureaus to decide whether or not you like the home? You don't - I know that some people find the voyeuristic aspect of Open House hunting (i.e., seeing how others live) to be fun and compelling, but there's certainly a line beyond which it's rude to cross. Opening the owners' underwear drawers is definitely on the wrong side of that line.

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**Do: Offer hospitality to buyers.** If you want prospective buyers to attend and enjoy your Open House, it's critical that you remove all the friction involved with attending it. It should be very clear and simple for visitors to discover that your home is being held open, then to navigate to, park at and access your home. If your home - or even your front door - is hard to find, make sure signs clearly point the way. If your neighbors park in front of your house or you normally park your cars in the driveway, ask them to move, and move your own cars, too.

**Don't: Overdo the hospitality.** Unless the property is Candy' Spellings \$150 million listing (which sold at the low, low price of something like \$85 million, according to reports) there's really no reason to have an espresso bar with baristas, a catered lunch with waiters passing hors d'oeuvres, or chair massages - all of which I have actually seen at Open Houses. Here's the problem, no one will complain. People will take the shrimp balls, order their dirty chai lattes and get their deep tissue neck rubs. What they won't do is pay attention to your house! Have a plate of cookies and some cool bottles of water - that's just nice manners, especially on a hot day. But when you overdo the perks, you distract the buyers from the real matter at hand. Even if they like your home, they're much more likely to recall the cute waiter or the dim sum than your upgraded kitchen and the dining room.

**Note:** I'd say there's an exception for brokers' open houses - sometimes the excessive hospitality works just to get brokers to attend, which is huge; many a broker has had an a-ha/light bulb moment standing in a house they only went to for the champagne, when they realized which of their clients (or their colleagues' clients) would love this place.

**Do: Intensively clean and de-odorize the place.** Start way in advance, and either clean or hire someone to clean your home so that the word "immaculate" applies. This is not the time to cut corners. And understand that at an Open House, people - including the most serious buyers - will open doors, drawers, cupboards, explore your garage, open the garden shed - so there's really no place to shove and hide a messy pile of clothes or dishes. Heck, there are some who'll scope out your dog house, if they want their own precious pooch to park there.

This is your opportunity to start eliminating things you don't need and packing things you'll want to move that are excess to the neat-and-clean version of your home's space you want to showcase at the open house.

**Don't: Overdo the sensory staging.** Some people are highly sensitive, even allergic, to fragrances or scented oils - these types can run screaming from an overly "air freshened" open house. Music on low is fine, but it should be a very neutral, non-objectionable type - and you'd be surprised what some folks object to. Also, skeptical buyers might suspect you're trying to cover something up with aggressive air fresheners, cookies in the oven, music on the stereo and white noise playing in every room.

Look to your agent and your home's stager (if you have one) for direction here, and don't overdo it. Serious buyers will want to see, smell and hear what the experience of the home is actually like, without all that artifice.

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**Don't: Under do the home prep/curb appeal, landscaping, exterior prep.** I cannot tell you how many times, when I was selling homes, I would pull up to an Open House with my buyer clients and see them roll their eyes, sigh or even veto the visit once they saw the state of the home's exterior. And on the flip side, I can't express the number of times I witnessed buyers minimize or overlook wonky rooms or funky annoyances on the inside of a home (for better or for worse) because the place had overwhelmingly charming or breathtakingly chic appeal from the curb.

Before you host an Open House, it's equally - maybe even more - imperative that you make sure your landscaping, sidewalks, front doors and exterior paint are immaculate and maxed out on their attractiveness as it is to make sure the inside is pristine.

**Do: Make sure there are smart print-outs and flyers for buyers to take away, and basic documentation buyers will want to see.** Check in with your agent in advance about what handouts will be available for prospective buyers that visit your home. At the very least, there should be a property flyer listing out the home's basic characteristic, offering a few color photos and providing the agent's contact information; if you're offering any incentives like closing costs or paying a year's worth of the buyer's HOA dues. Additionally, it can be helpful to have a friendly mortgage broker prepare some financing scenario flyers.

If you've had home or pest or roof inspections, or your home favorably compares to recently sold nearby properties, make sure those inspection reports and comparables are out at the Open House.

**Do: Take the take-aways.** Buyers, hanging on to the property flyers of the homes you've seen (and using them to note your reactions to them) can up your house hunting and offer-making game significantly. If your agent isn't with you, it makes for easy communication about what you saw and how you felt about it, which can minimize the number of homes you don't like that your agent shows you going forward. Also, a home that you think you'll pass on while you're in it might grow on you, or might even become the comparable for another property you're interested in-in the future.

If you're in active house hunting mode, it can only help you to have a collection of flyers from the properties you've seen.

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