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## So You Want to be a Realtor?

Dallas pros talk about how to make money in a competitive market

By Paige Phelps  
Real Estate Editor

Annamari Lannon started her career in politics in Washington, D.C. Now a Realtor, she thinks playing pundits on Capitol Hill might have prepared her for selling high-rise condos.

“Maybe you need a little politics before you get into home sales,” she said with a laugh.

Anthony’s success in Allie Beth Allman’s Urban division, which focuses on high-rise sales, makes residential real estate look easy.

In reality, making a buck these days is a tightrope act of salesmanship and service while trying to keep traditional commission intact. Add to that the current buyer’s market, the growing ranks of discount brokerages, do-it-yourself home selling kits, and the rising numbers of Realtors and succeeding at all seems like a miracle.

“It’s a hard first two years,” said Christina Benoit, a Realtor with Abio AHK Realty. “My advice? I’d say save a lot of money and expect to work seven days a week, 10 hours a day.”

Chris Pyle, a Realtor with the Ben Jones Group of Virginia Cook, Realtors, concurs, saying the real estate sales business is a 24/7 job and professionals new to the industry should be ready to exercise a great deal of patience.

“My first year was pretty tough,” he said. “By the end of it, I was ready to move back to Austin.”



Staff Photo: Christina Barany  
Briggs Freeman Realtor Becky Frey visits a new Devonshire home. Frey says those considering the real estate field should develop thick skin.

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That was seven years ago, Pyle said, and he didn't give up. Early in his career, he spent weekends working open houses and learned that the best way to succeed is to know your product, including the hot areas and properties, even those that have yet to hit the market.

"You won't be able to work with buyers unless you know what you're talking about," Pyle said.

Veteran Realtor Becky Frey of Briggs Freeman said prospective Realtors should keep four things in mind: expenses, time, developing a client base, and growing a thick skin.

She said many newbies are amazed at the amount of cash it takes to market not only listings, but themselves.

"They're shocked at how much it costs," Frey said. "That part of our business is very competitive today."

Bettie Abio, the owner of Abio AHK, a real estate company with four branches around town, said that she has, without a doubt, seen the market grow more competitive over the years. "But there is plenty of business out there; there is work if you want it," she said.

It is work that rookie Realtor Lindsay Clarke is counting on.

Recently divorced with three little girls, Clarke said residential real estate sounded like an exciting career to tackle. She just listed her first house, and she hopes to have a steady income — "as steady as it can be in real estate"— in a few months.

"I'm really excited about the office I chose," Clarke said, referring to her Abio associates. "Everyone is there to help me, to answer my questions, and they want to do that," she said. "They want you to be successful; it's not backstabbing or conniving like you think some Realtors are. We're a little family, and everyone is there for support."

Clarke's optimism conflicts with the numbers.

According to a September article in MSNBC's *Motley Fool*, "The National Association of Realtors has seen its membership swell by some 63 percent since 2000, to roughly 1.25 million people."

The article also reported: "According to a Real Trends/Harris Interactive survey, 62 percent of real estate brokerage firms are feeling pressured to negotiate commissions."

In fact, Realtors, by federal law, do not have set commissions.

"In the traditional agreement, the homeowner agrees to pay 6 percent commission," said Garth Lewis, the owner and broker of a Help-U-Sell branch in Dallas. He described Help-U-Sell as "a full-service realty company like an Ebby Halliday, but different because we have a set fee for services instead of the traditional percentage."

In Lewis' model, Realtors are cut out of the picture altogether. Homeowners are encouraged to hold their own open houses, although the firm can do that for them for a higher fee. Lewis said his business has steadily increased since he opened two years ago. His services cost about \$2,950 to \$3,950 on average because Help-U-Sell does all the paperwork and cuts out the standard commission.

"We've sold homes as low as \$90,000, and we've sold homes up to \$700,000," Lewis said. "It's in the higher-priced homes that people save the really big dollars."

For Benoit, she believes commissions are perfectly fair.

"Each agent does business their own way, but it's about the way you present service and marketing

so the client understands. I tell them I'm paid to market your house up front, and I don't get paid unless it sells," Benoit said. "I work hard and expect to get my commission."

In the end, the resulting paycheck is just one industry benefit.

"There are many joys that are in it that you find by helping people, working with them, and getting people in the right house," Frey said. "It's almost like an addiction."

*Staff writer Tricia Scruggs contributed to this story.*

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