

WHAT DO YOU ACTUALLY NEED TO KNOW TO STAY SAFE?

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Reducing the Risk of Being Targeted

The first step in preventing yourself from being a victim of a crime is eliminating as many “attractors” as possible. That being said, a big part of marketing yourself as a real estate agent is making yourself and your picture as prominent as possible. This section is about how to market yourself but make minor changes that remove as many “attractors” as possible.

Images

Images are an important part of marketing yourself and your listings. However, they are also often the item that starts the targeting process.

A predator’s motives are power and control and they will therefore be attracted to characteristics such as weakness, subservience, and vulnerability. Your professional photos can act as an attractor to the predator by conveying vulnerability. Typically, an agent’s headshots fall into one of two types... a personal smile (right picture) and a professional smile (left picture).

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A personal or intimate smile is the smile one would expect to see when someone they love says I love you. It's typified by a slight tilt of the head, eyes that appear more oval than round, and a flatter smile where the ends of the mouth are pointing towards the lower connection of the ear. In pictures, as in real life, intimacy is vulnerability, and an intimate smile is more likely to attract the attention of a predator.

Conversely, a professional smile will make an agent less attractive to a predator because it projects power, confidence, and authority. A professional smile is typified by the head being straight, the eyes wide open but not strained, and a big smile where the ends of the mouth are pointing towards the upper connection of the ears.

It should be noted that by projecting confidence, power, knowledge, and authority you will attract more buyers and sellers. Basically, personal smiles increase the likelihood that you will be targeted by a predator and less likely that a buyer or seller will contact you. At the same time, a professional smile makes it *less* likely that a predator will target you and

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increases the likelihood that a legitimate buyer or seller will contact you.

To reduce the risk of being targeted by those with a power motive:

- Avoid full body pictures.
- Wherever possible, use photos that are above or right at the shoulders.
- When using pictures that include the upper body:
 - Be professional.
 - Wear a shirt that goes no lower than the top of the breast bone.
 - Don't wear anything form fitting.
 - Wear professional colors.
 - Wear a jacket when possible.
 - Be aware of facial expressions.
- Professional, authoritative smile and expression – We smile differently towards a client than we do towards a loved one. A professional smile is a facial expression that establishes a “boundary”, whereas a personal smile is a facial expression that is softer, warmer, and conveys vulnerability.
- Look straight into the camera.
- Keep your head vertical, no tilt to one side or another.
- Use professional eyes (relaxed and fully open, but not “strained open” as if you are surprised).
- For women, your make-up should be natural and understated.

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To reduce the risk of being targeted by those with a profit motive:

- Avoid pictures that depict you with an expensive vehicle.
- Avoid jewelry if possible.
- Jewelry should be minimal and understated.
- Wedding rings visible in photos should be a simple wedding band.

A predator's initial focus will almost always be from an image. However, once the initial targeting has occurred, the predator will go through a progression of behaviors that will typically start at professional research based in the target's website and other "professional" information and eventually progress to researching personal details of the target primarily through social media. These behaviors are part of the predators "offender cycle" and provide the predator with the emotional high they seek. The increasing depth of their research and eventual fanaticizing is a reflection of more shallow activities no longer being satisfying in the same way that the alcoholic or drug addict builds a tolerance.

If targeting occurs, an agent can increase the likelihood that the predator will cease to focus on him/her based on factors such as the language and information used in marketing and how social media is used.

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Marketing Language Matters

The words used in your marketing messages have connotations, which is to say that they have emotional value over and above the literal meaning. Those who commit crimes with a power motive are attracted to subservience and weakness because the “power high” is what they seek. Those who commit crimes with a profit motive are also attracted to subservience and weakness because it represents lower risk.

Agents should be aware that the language they choose in their marketing materials and website set the tone. Choosing words and messages that convey power, control, knowledge, authority, etc. will reduce the attractiveness for a predator.

For example:

“Here to serve all your real estate needs”

vs.

“Experience to handle the entire real estate process”

Notice that the first statement implies servitude, whereas the second statement implies confidence, authority, and power. It’s important to point out that authoritative language attracts more legitimate prospects and detracts predators.

Information to Avoid in Marketing

Earlier we mentioned that stalking behaviors give a predator a “high”; in addition to potentially planning an attack. Consequently, you’ll want to ensure that information included

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in marketing does not “feed the stalking high” or help a predator plan an attack in the event that someone does fixate on and target you. By limiting the “high” a predator can achieve through online stalking, you can increase the likelihood that the predator will lose interest.

For several years, agents have been told to include personal information in their marketing efforts. This is the wrong approach; a prospect does not care about your family, where you live, or what schools your children attend. What they do care about is that you are competent and are an expert in the area where he/she wishes to live.

An effective way of achieving this “expert” status without revealing personal information is to provide lifestyle information about specific areas. For example:

- “If you are looking at homes in these areas, there are 3 supermarkets nearby, this supermarket is typically less expensive, this other supermarket has a great organic section, this other supermarket has great meats.”
- “If you are looking to live in this subdivision and you have kids, there are 2 parks; this park is great for little kids, but this other park has a tendency to be popular with teenagers.”

Avoid including the following information:

- Do not include if you have children.

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- The neighborhood you live in - For example: avoid “I’m the expert in the Hills Subdivision, I’ve lived here for years”; instead use “I’m the expert in the Hills Subdivision, I’ve lived in the area for years
- DO not include pictures of your family.
- Your favorite places-restaurant, club, exercise, store, etc....
- Do not mention specific PUBLIC networking groups to which you belong.
- Do not mention specific neighborhood or school groups to which you belong.

Social Media

In today’s day and age, social media is an important marketing tool for the real estate agent. Unfortunately, it is also an important tool for predators and those who stalk. Remember, if you catch the attention of a predatory or obsessive individual, your best chance of having him lose interest is to give the predator little or no material of interest on which to fantasize or “feed the high”. The more personal information a predator can get on a target, the more he will fantasize about the target and the higher the likelihood that he will continue to progress through his offender cycle and eventually commit the crime.

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Social Media Do's:

- Have separate personal and professional pages and make sure that no personal information appears on your professional page and vice versa. Use different emails to create the pages. There should be NO shared information or images between the two.
- Abbreviate your last name or use a nickname on your personal pages, use your full name on your professional pages.
- Use different images on your personal and professional pages.
- Periodically, use search engines to search for yourself to see how difficult it is to find your personal pages.
- Use the social media site's security to help ensure your personal site information is hidden to all who are not your direct friend or contact.

Social Media Don'ts:

- Don't use location tracking.
- Don't post your habits (i.e. "I love this coffee shop, I come here every day").
- Don't post information that could be used to identify your children's school, spouse's workplace, etc.....

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Additionally, you should periodically search for yourself on the internet to test how difficult it is to find your personal information. You should also use tools such as Google Images® to search the internet for any place where images you use in your professional profiles are appearing.

Pre-Showing

If a predator has targeted you (bear in mind you will likely NOT know) and the predator does not lose interest, then the predator will eventually execute his plan to get you alone with him at the property. This will involve a phone call, and it is in this call that you have the opportunity to reveal “red flags” and raise deterrents to the predator. Additionally, after the initial call and before the meeting, there are specific techniques that can be used to help you differentiate and make better decisions about whether or not to take someone with you on the appointment.

The Initial Call

Using Active Listening to uncover “red flags”

Active listening is one of the most effective sales tools you can have in your toolbox because it quickly and effectively allows you to establish trust and to uncover a buyer’s wants and needs. Active Listening is also a valuable safety tool and can be used to uncover “red flags” that indicate that a prospect may have an ulterior motive.

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Let's take a look at an excerpt from an initial phone conversation:

Prospect: I saw this house online and I'd like to see it.

Agent: OK, what about the house appealed to you?

Prospect: I just liked it.

The prospect's answer should serve as a red flag. If someone liked a house enough to take the time to see it, there should be at least one specific thing that was attractive to him/her.

Agent: OK, I'd like to make sure I can answer any questions you may have during the showing. Is there anything about the house or neighborhood that's important for you to know?

Prospect: Not really.

Once again, the prospect's inability to specifically answer reasonable questions should act as a red flag.

Agent: That's easy then, I know you found the house online. How did you locate me?

Prospect: Online, the same site as the house.

Agent: Great, it's nice to know that I'm getting some attention, sometimes it's difficult to evaluate what sites are getting my name out there. What site did you find me on?

Prospect: BigDataRealEstate.com.

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In this part of the conversation, there are no red flags until the agent compares it with information only he/she would know; for instance, whether or not he/she pays BigDataRealEstate.com to promote him/her alongside properties in that zip code. If they don't, then that's an obvious red flag.

Agent: I understand that BigDataRealEstate.com also recommends mortgage providers, have you already been pre-qualified?

Prospect: Yes

Agent: Great, who have you been working with? (You may even tell them it's because as a matter of policy you need to have the pre-approval paperwork)

Prospect: I can't remember.

Obviously, not being able to remember the name of the company or individual that pre-qualified him/her would be a red flag.

Notice that each question built on some aspect of the prospect's answer to the previous question, sending the clear signal that you are listening to what the prospect has been saying, which is the first step in building trust. Practicing so you can be fluid in these conversations, not mechanical is important; thereby not giving the conversation the feel of an interrogation. The primary reason for this is that the vast majority of prospects are legitimate, and you don't want to scare those off. This fluidity can be seen in the following:

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Prospect: I found this house online and I'd like to see it.

Agent: OK, what about the house appealed to you?

Prospect: I've seen other houses in the neighborhood and wasn't thrilled, but I liked the looks of this house.

Agent: Sounds like you've been putting some time into this. Have you seen those houses with other agents?

As you can see, the agent adjusted her line of questioning based on the prospect's response and followed up with a question that was relevant but would still obtain important information for a legitimate sale as well as possibly uncovering red flags.

The above conversation was kept short for time consideration. However, in a real situation, if the prospect was a threat, he would often be more talkative and inquisitive, because he would be trying to increase *your* comfort level and obtain information he could use, thereby making you an easier target.

Using Property and Neighborhood information to deter a predator

Information about the property and neighborhood can be used to uncover red flags and deter a predator. For example:

Agent (spoken to prospect on the phone): I really like that property. The house has a great feel to it, lots of windows, great visibility. I've also met some of the

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neighbors and it seems like a close knit, pretty safe neighborhood.

It should go without mentioning that you should never lie to a prospect. So, if you are a listing agent, take the time to meet the neighbors when you get the listing; not only is it a good sales practice, but it allows you to learn valuable information that can be used both as a sales tool and as a deterrent and “red flag” investigative tool.

Referring to the above example of the agent’s statement to the prospect, the information the agent relayed would likely make the property more attractive and one might expect to hear a positive response such as the prospect’s tone of voice going up. However, if the prospect was a threat, the agent has essentially told them that it will be harder to get them isolated where he or she cannot be seen or heard because of the windows and visibility of the home and that there is a decent chance that someone will be “dropping in” because of the tight knit nature of the neighborhood. If, in listening to the response of the prospect, one detects a drop in the tone of voice or some other change that would indicate a drop in enthusiasm, that could be a red flag that would indicate the agent should bring an accompaniment.

Additionally, listing agents should include safety information in the broker only remarks so that buyer’s agents can see that information. Cooperation and collaboration are the only way to prevent predatory crime.

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The Training Play

During the initial call or follow-up, you will find the “Training Play” a useful tool in assessing the prospect. The Training Play is simple: during the call you mention that the office has asked you to help train a new agent and he will be joining the both of you on the appointment. The prospect’s reaction to that news may provide you with valuable information. You may even describe the new agent “You’ll really like Eric. He’s a great guy, he used to be a pro football player and he’s always telling stories”. If you choose not to bring someone with you on the appointment, you can simply mention that the other agent had something come up or he’s on his way.

Establishing Control

Remember that criminals with a power motive will be more attracted to a victim that is subservient, therefore an agent establishing control of the conversation and the situation can act as deterrent to a predator. This can be easily done with a few simple techniques. For example, when the prospect suggests a meeting time (say 6pm) you should not automatically accept it, instead you should say you need to make it 6:30. Don’t ask if 6:30 is OK, tell them that’s when you can meet. You are establishing power and control, thereby making yourself less attractive to the predator without sacrificing attractiveness to a legitimate buyer.