

Looking to buy a home? Here are five essential tips for making the process as smooth as possible.

### **Get your finances in order.**

Start by getting a full picture of your credit. Obtain copies of your credit report. Make sure the facts are correct, and fix any problems you find. Next, find a suitable lender and get pre-approved for a loan. This will put you in a better position to make a serious offer when you do find the right house.

### **Find a house you can afford.**

As with engagement rings, there's a general rule of thumb when it comes to buying a home: two-and-a-half times your annual salary. There are also a number of tools and calculators online that can help you understand how your income, debt, and expenses affect what you can afford. Don't forget, too, that there are lots of considerations beyond the sticker price, including property taxes, energy costs, etc.

### **Hire a professional.**

While the Internet gives buyers unprecedented access to home listings and resources, many aspects of the buying process require a level of expertise you can't pick up from surfing the web. That's why you're better off using a professional agent than going it alone. If possible, recruit an exclusive buyer agent, who will have your interests at heart and can help you with strategies during the bidding process.

### **Do your homework.**

Before making a bid, do some research to determine the state of the market at large. Is it more favorable for sellers or buyers? Next, look at sales trends of similar homes in the area or neighborhood. Look at prices for the last few months. Come up with an asking price that's competitive, but also realistic. Otherwise, you may end up ticking off your seller.

### **Think long term.**

Obviously, you shouldn't buy unless you're sure you'll be staying put for at least a few years. Beyond that, you should buy in a neighborhood with good schools. Whether you have children or not, this will have an impact on your new home's resale value down the line.