

# London estate agents are adopting new tactics to sell houses

Estate agents are desperately seeking new ways to keep afloat.

By Anna Tyzack

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Once upon a time they spoke their own lingo – gazumping, contract races and bridging loans – but these days your London estate agent is speaking a new language: a foreign one. Yes, if you phone a branch of Douglas & Gordon and say, in your best Russian accent: "*Ya khotel by kupit dom,*" the estate agent at the end of the phone will know what you mean. "I want to buy a house."

"We have seen 20 per cent more online registrations from overseas buyers compared to last year," says Ed Mead, from Douglas & Gordon, whose office employs Catalan and Gujarati speakers.

But in areas less popular with foreigners, an A-level in French or Spanish is not enough to keep an estate agent in business. Here, those precious words "I want to buy a house" don't seem to exist in any language, so agents are adopting other tactics.

One Wimbledon-based estate agent called SW19 has launched a scheme whereby it covers the buyer's stamp duty on any purchase, and charges it to the vendor on completion.

Meanwhile, Wellingtons has been hosting US-style open houses at the weekends. Last Saturday morning, a house on Munster Road in Fulham saw more interest in the hour that it was open than many properties on their books have seen in the past four months. "An hour is sufficient in the current market – it's of minimal inconvenience to the owner," says Robert Sturges, of Wellingtons, who is opening a £320,000 garden flat in Battersea to the public today.

Open houses are still not a very British thing: "People do not like viewing houses with other potential buyers around – it doesn't work," says Mead. But personally, having swung by a couple of open houses in Manhattan last weekend (I had a choice of 2,200), I came away thinking they were a good idea. I didn't have to register with an agent or meet the owners (who were probably watching with interest from the coffee shop across the street) and it seemed a good way of getting me, and dozens of other (more serious) buyers through the door.

Robert Sturges uses the open house ploy for mid-range family homes and low-priced properties aimed at local



investors and first-time buyers. Invitations are sent to applicants registered on Wellingtons' books, and posted through letterboxes on neighbouring streets. "The good thing about open days is that it gives you the chance to present your house in the best possible light," says Ollie Hooper, of Huntly Hooper, a buying agent who has attended an increasing number of open houses this autumn. "It's hard to keep a property looking perfect over the whole time it is taking to sell property these days."

Of course, if only one person turns up, it's a disaster: "As a buyer, this strengthens your negotiating position as you can see the limited competition," says Hooper. "But anything should be tried."

- Edmund Conway returns next week

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