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Research report · 2026

The most informed consumer in real estate history

What 2026's buyers, sellers and renters know, how the process makes them feel, and why they still rely on agents.

Source: Zillow Consumer Housing Trends Report 2026
Prepared for: Real estate professionals

Inside this report

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Methodology

How we did this research

Zillow's Consumer Housing Trends Report is an annual survey of household decision makers at every stage of the housing market. In 2026, Zillow fielded 21 surveys between March and July, reaching more than 144,000 people.

Buyers purchased a home in the past two years, sellers sold a home in the past year, and recent renters moved into a rental in the past year. Respondents were recruited through online panels, and each group was weighted to Census benchmarks.

Year-over-year changes noted in this report are statistically significant, as reported by Zillow.

Sample size

n = 144,000+

Field dates

Mar–Jul 2026

Weighting

Census-based

Respondents

Buyers, sellers, renters

About Zillow

Zillow Group is reimagining real estate to make home a reality for more people. As the most visited real estate website in the U.S., Zillow connects consumers with technology, trusted agents and loan officers, and digital solutions. With industry-leading tools and resources, Zillow supercharges real estate professionals so they can grow their businesses and deliver exceptional client experiences.
Learn more about Zillow.

About Inman

Real estate industry professionals from around the world turn to Inman first for accurate, innovative and timely information about the business of real estate. Known for its award-winning journalism, cutting-edge technology coverage, in-depth educational opportunities, and forward-thinking events, Inman is the industry's leading source of real estate information. Learn more about Inman.

Introduction

Better prepared than ever, still in need of a guide.

Buyers, sellers and renters have never had more information at their fingertips. Most now use AI, and many use it to learn about their own move before they ever speak to a professional.

Yet all that research hasn't made the process easier. A third of consumers cried along the way, surprise costs remain common, and the moments that matter most still call for local knowledge and judgment.

This report follows that story in three parts: how consumers arrive informed, where they still feel overwhelmed, and why agents remain at the center.

51%
Informed: buyers who use AI daily

44%
Overwhelmed: first-time buyers who cried

89%
At the center: sellers who used an agent

More information hasn't replaced the need for a guide. It has raised the bar for what a guide should deliver.

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01

Meet the 2026 housing consumer

Who is buying, selling and renting this year, and what's driving their decisions?

01 — Meet the 2026 housing consumer

Repeat buyers lead, first-timers make up 42%.

Most of this year's buyers have done this before. Repeat buyers made up 58% of the market in 2026, and first-time buyers accounted for 42%, down from a 2023 peak of 50%.

58%
Repeat buyers

42%
First-time buyers

First-time buyers as a share of all buyers



Base: recent buyers

Why it matters

Many clients will compare this purchase with their last one. First-timers need more explanation at each step.

01 — Meet the 2026 housing consumer

Life moves sellers, and they watch the clock.

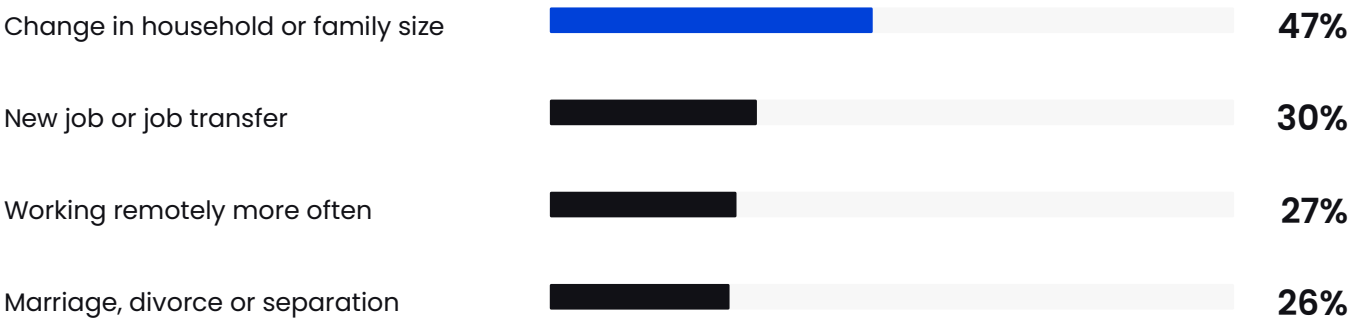
Most sellers (77%) say a life event influenced their decision to sell. Profit is still the top priority, but more sellers now put their timeline first, and low rates mattered less than last year. Renters return in section 05 as tomorrow's buyers.

52%
put maximizing profit first, down from 58%

36%
put meeting their timeline first, up from 33%

35%
were influenced by low rates, down from 49%

What influenced sellers' decision to sell



Base: sellers

Why it matters

Seller conversations start with life changes and timing, not just price. Agents who ask about what's driving the move can plan around the calendar that matters to the client.

01 — Meet the 2026 housing consumer

Experience changes what sellers want.

Sellers who have done this before want more exposure. Repeat sellers are more likely than first-timers to say that appearing on public sites and apps is essential, and to call reaching the largest possible audience extremely important (45% vs. 37%). First-time sellers find the process more emotional and are twice as likely to have seriously considered renting out their home instead.

52%
of repeat sellers say appearing on public sites is essential

41%
of first-time sellers say the same

First-time vs. repeat sellers

40%
of first-time sellers cried (35% of repeat)

30%
seriously considered renting out instead (15% of repeat)

66%
contacted only one agent (70% of repeat)

Base: sellers

Why it matters

First-time sellers need more reassurance; repeat sellers expect a wide-reaching marketing plan. Tailor the listing conversation to which one you're talking to.

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02

Informed

How are consumers using AI and online research before they ever talk to an agent?

02 — Informed

AI is part of the move for nearly everyone.

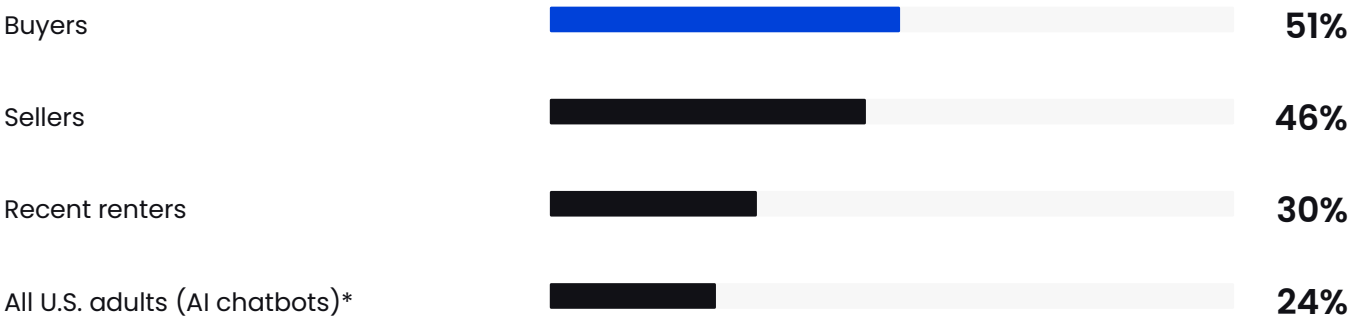
Roughly eight in ten consumers in every group use AI in their daily lives, and most have brought it into their housing decisions. Half of buyers use AI every day, about twice the share of all U.S. adults who use AI chatbots daily.

82%
of buyers use AI at least occasionally

84%
of sellers

78%
of recent renters

Use AI daily or more



Base: buyers; sellers; recent renters. *Pew Research Center, Feb. 2026; measures AI chatbot use only

Why it matters

Clients increasingly arrive having already asked AI their first questions. The first conversation with an agent starts further along.

02 — Informed

Buyers use AI to learn first, then to shop.

Among buyers who used AI while shopping, the most common use was learning how the buying process works (74%), followed by market insights (71%) and home recommendations (70%). Every one of these uses was higher among first-time buyers, led by learning the process: 80% vs. 66% of repeat buyers.



Base: buyers who used AI when shopping for their home

Used AI for their purchase, among buyers who use AI

70%
of first-time buyers

53%
of repeat buyers

Why it matters

Buyers use AI to get up to speed. Agents can build on that by turning general answers into advice that fits the local market and the client's situation.

02 — Informed

AI shows up on both sides of the transaction.

More than half of sellers who used AI relied on it to help decide whether to sell at all. Younger buyers are the most likely to spot their agent's AI use: 59% of Millennials vs. 29% of Boomers.

57%

of sellers knew or suspected their agent used AI tools, as did 48% of buyers.

How sellers who used AI put it to work



Base: sellers and buyers who used an agent; sellers who used AI when selling

Why it matters

Consumers expect their agent to use modern tools. Being open about how AI supports your work, and where your judgment takes over, builds confidence.

02 — Informed

Research isn't always understanding.

Access to information is not the same as expertise. Only about half of prospective buyers correctly said pre-approval means a lender has verified their credit, income and savings; another 16% didn't know. Meanwhile, two in three 2026 buyers (66%) would trust AI-generated financing insights, which makes expert guidance on the basics all the more valuable.

51%
correctly defined pre-approval

17%
thought it meant they had saved a down payment

17%
thought it was the same as pre-qualification

Base: prospective buyers, Zillow Consumer Housing Trends Report 2025

Overestimated how much home they could afford (2026 buyers)

23%
of first-time buyers

14%
of repeat buyers

Why it matters

Even well-researched clients can carry misconceptions into a transaction. Checking what clients think they know is part of the job.

02 — Informed

The agent search often starts online.

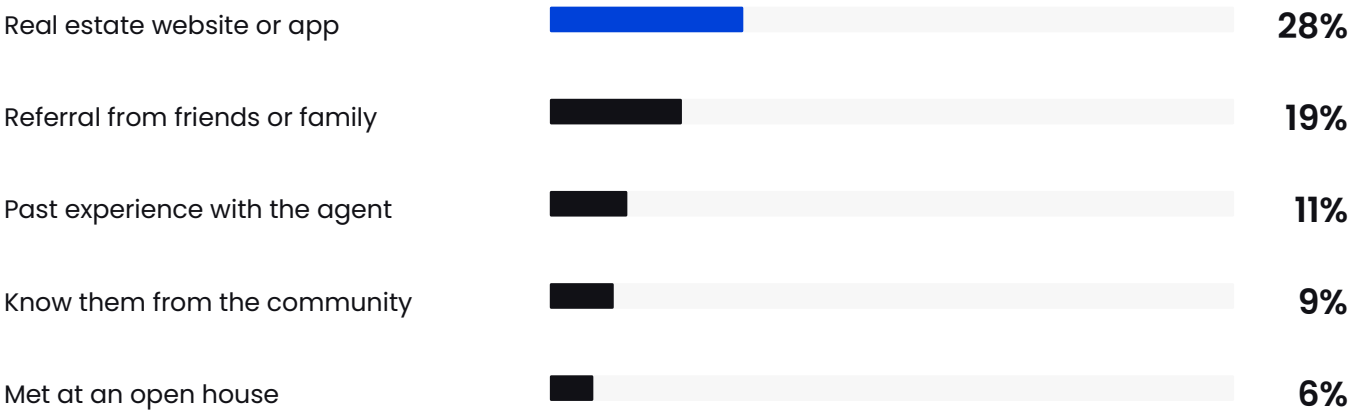
More than a third of buyers (37%) and sellers (35%) who used an agent first found that agent online. Most buyers start with the homes themselves: about six in ten installed a real estate app before taking any other step.

41%
of first-time buyers first found their agent online

37%
of all buyers

35%
of sellers

Where buyers first found their agent



Base: buyers and sellers who used an agent

Why it matters

Buyers and sellers find agents on listing sites and apps, through referrals and in their own communities. Being visible and well reviewed in those places is what puts an agent on the shortlist.

02 — Informed

Consumers decide quickly. Most hire the first agent.

Agents are now part of nearly every buyer's first steps: 95% contacted an agent as one of their first three homebuying activities, up from 80% in 2025. And most commit fast. Sellers led the way, with two-thirds contacting only one agent before hiring. Yet few repeat buyers went back to an agent they had worked with before.

67%

of sellers contacted only one agent before hiring, up from 62% in 2025.

Repeat buyers

60%

hired the first agent they contacted (46% of first-time buyers)

15%

found their agent through past experience with them

Base: sellers and buyers who used an agent

Why it matters

Most repeat buyers don't return to a past agent. Staying in touch between transactions is one of the clearest growth opportunities in the data.

02 — Informed

Buyers choose agents for what they know.

Local expertise (38%) and specialized skills, such as experience with a price point or property type (33%), are the top reasons buyers chose their agent, followed by personality and trust (22%). Priorities shift sharply with age.



Base: buyers who used an agent; primary reason for choosing their agent

How priorities shift with age

45%

of buyers ages 30–39 chose for specialized skills (13% of buyers 60+)

35%

of buyers 60+ chose for personality and trust (10% of buyers 30–39)

Why it matters

Technology supports the work, but knowledge and skill win buyers. Lead with your specialty for younger clients and the relationship for older ones.

02 — Informed

Sellers look for trust and responsiveness.

Eight in ten sellers want an agent who comes across as trustworthy, and online reputation matters more than the brokerage name.

80%
trustworthy first impression

77%
responsive first impression

75%
neighborhood-specific knowledge

74%
positive reputation in the community

Also very or extremely important

62%
online reviews and ratings of the agent

49%
part of a recognizable brokerage

Base: sellers who used an agent; rated very or extremely important

Why it matters

Responsiveness, local knowledge and strong reviews earn the first yes.

02 — Informed

The listing is the first showing.

Before anyone steps inside, the listing does the work. Buyers are far more likely to view a home with a floor plan they like, and sellers favor agents with strong listing media. Confidence in buying from a screen is growing: 29% of buyers would be very or extremely confident making an offer based only on a virtual tour, up 5 points from last year.

82%
of buyers are more likely to view a home with a floor plan they like

78%
of sellers favor agents offering high-res photos

75%
of sellers favor agents offering virtual tours

Gap between buyers who used each digital tool and those who would ideally use it

+12 pts
3D virtual tours: 32% used, 44% would ideally

+22 pts
Self-touring by phone: 22% used, 44% would ideally

Base: buyers; sellers

Why it matters

Listing media helps win both the listing and the showing, and offering the digital options clients want is an easy way to stand out.

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03

Overwhelmed

If consumers know more than ever, why does the process still feel so hard?

03 — Overwhelmed

One in three cried.
Knowing more didn't help.

Moving remains one of life's most emotional experiences, and nearly half of first-time buyers cried along the way. Buyers in the West were the most likely to cry (50%).

34%

of buyers cried during the process, along with 38% of sellers and 30% of recent renters.

Cried during the process



Base: buyers; sellers; recent renters

Why it matters

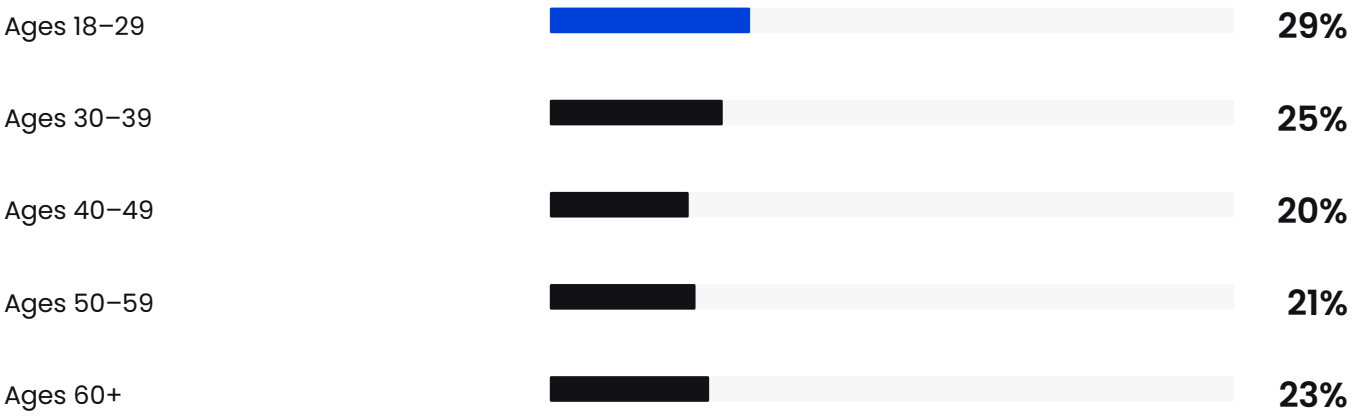
The emotional side of a move is part of the job. Setting expectations early and checking in often can make a hard process feel manageable.

03 — Overwhelmed

New and younger buyers feel the most stress.

Two in three buyers (64%) found buying at least somewhat stressful. Stress runs highest among first-time buyers and eases with age.

Found buying very or extremely stressful, by age



Base: buyers

27%

of first-time buyers found it very or extremely stressful

22%

of repeat buyers

For first-time and younger buyers, the most valuable thing an agent offers may be a clear picture of what comes next.

03 — Overwhelmed

Surprise costs persist. Show clients every fee.

Nine in ten buyers did not fully expect at least one of five common costs, and first-time buyers were less likely to expect every one. Renters want the same transparency.

91%
of buyers did not fully expect at least one fee

51%
of first-time buyers paid more in closing costs than expected

96%
of renters say listings should show all fees

Fees buyers did not fully expect to pay



Base: buyers; first-time buyers; renters

Why it matters

Walking clients through likely costs before they come up is one of the simplest ways to build trust.

03 — Overwhelmed

Consumers want to see every home.

Some homes are marketed only within a private network rather than being listed publicly where they are visible to all buyers and agents. Buyers and sellers are far more likely to say these hidden listings benefit agents than to say they benefit buyers or sellers. About 40% of buyers say they would feel cheated if a home matching their criteria sold privately without their knowing.

Buyers who say hidden listings benefit...



Base: buyers. Sellers answered similarly: agents 69%, sellers 58%, buyers 54%

What sellers want

74%

say being seen by the largest possible audience is very or extremely important

45%

say appearing on public sites and apps is essential

Why it matters

Consumers link transparency with fairness. Explaining how and where a home will be marketed helps sellers and buyers trust the process.

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04

Agents at the center

Where do agents add the most value for today's informed consumer?

04 — Agents at the center

Agents remain central to nearly every deal.

Despite more tools and more information, the large majority of consumers still work with an agent: 85% of buyers and 89% of sellers did so in 2026. First-time and repeat buyers use agents at the same rate (84% vs. 85%), and sellers rely on agents more than any other resource.

85%
of buyers used an agent

89%
of sellers used an agent

Said their agent's commission was fair

78%
of buyers

76%
of sellers

Base: buyers; sellers; those who used an agent

Why it matters

AI has changed how consumers prepare. Their wish to have an agent beside them has held steady.

04 — Agents at the center

Buyers want offer help. Demand rose 8 points.

Deciding the details of an offer is now the service buyers value most from their agent. Sixty-one percent ranked it among their top three, up 8 points from 2025 and one of the largest year-over-year shifts in Zillow's data. Paperwork and negotiations follow.

61%

of buyers rank help deciding offer details among their top three agent services.

Buyers' most valuable agent services (top three)



Base: buyers who used an agent

Why it matters

Offer strategy calls for judgment, negotiation and local knowledge. It's where buyers most want an expert in their corner.

04 — Agents at the center

Sellers count on pricing expertise.

Pricing tops sellers' list of agent services. Help pricing their home and understanding the local market ranks among the top two for 67% of sellers, and first for 42%. No other service comes close.

67%

of sellers rank pricing expertise among their top two most valuable agent services.

Sellers' most valuable agent services (top two)



Base: sellers who used an agent

Why it matters

Sellers come in with AI-sourced market data. Showing the local reasoning behind a price recommendation is where an agent's value shows.

04 — Agents at the center

One agent, two transactions.

Most sellers are buyers, too: 59% bought a home as well as sold one. Most sold before they bought, and about half traded up to a more expensive home (49%). Younger seller-buyers trade up in price and size, while sellers 60 and older look for newer homes and are the most likely to downsize.

81%

of seller-buyers who used an agent hired the same agent to sell and to buy, up from 73% in 2025.

59%

of sellers also bought a home

27%

of seller-buyers bought before selling

49%

bought a more expensive home

Base: sellers; seller-buyers; seller-buyers who used an agent

Why it matters

A listing is often the start of a purchase. Agents who plan the sale and the next home together, including timing, keep both sides of the business.

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05

What’s next

What does a steadier market mean for the year ahead?

05 — What's next

Deals are getting steadier.

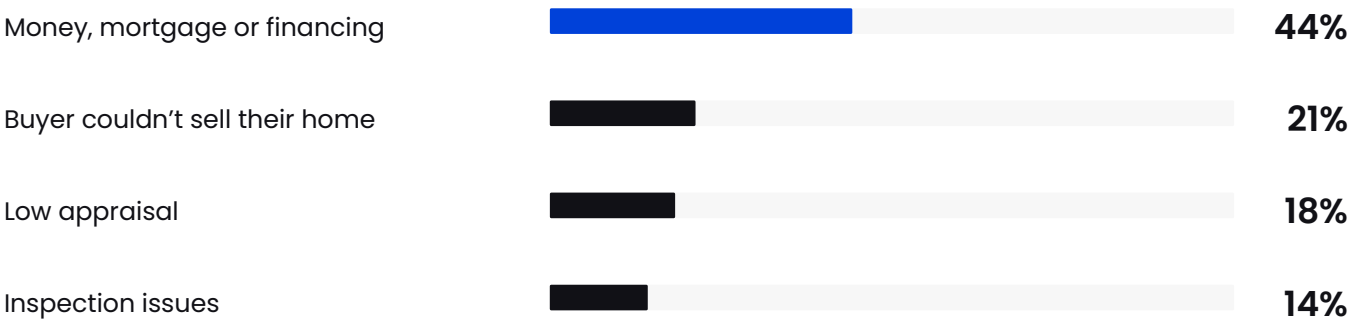
Fewer transactions are falling apart. Under half of sellers (47%) had an offer fall through in 2026, down from 54% in 2025, and fewer buyers reported a mortgage denial (22%, down from 29%). When deals do fail, financing is the most common reason.

47%
of sellers had an offer fall through, down from 54%

22%
of buyers reported a mortgage denial, down from 29%

59%
of sellers received at least one all-cash offer

Why offers fell through, among sellers who had one fall through



Base: sellers; buyers with a mortgage

Why it matters

A steadier market gives agents room to focus on preparation, and early financing checks prevent the most common failure.

05 — What's next

Tomorrow's buyers are already looking.

Six in ten recent renters (62%) considered buying during their search, and a quarter considered it seriously. In 2025, 20% of U.S. adults said they intended to buy a home in the next year, far more than the 3% to 5% who buy in a typical year.

62%

of recent renters considered buying a home during their search.

25%

seriously considered buying

36%

of renters moving within a year plan to buy

41%

would likely buy if rates fell

Base: recent renters; U.S. adults (2025)

Why it matters

Today's renters are tomorrow's first-time buyers. Relationships built now will matter when rates move.

Closing

Five numbers to remember.

82%
of buyers use AI at least occasionally

34%
of buyers cried along the way

85%
of buyers still used an agent

61%
want help with the offer

62%
of renters considered buying

The most informed consumer in real estate history still wants a trusted guide.

What this means for agents

01

Start where they are.

Ask clients what they've already researched or asked AI, then add the local context and judgment it can't.

02

Make the process visible.

Walk through costs, steps and marketing plans early. Surprises are where trust breaks down.

03

Lead where it counts.

Offer strategy and pricing are where buyers and sellers most want an expert in their corner.

The full Consumer Housing Trends Report is available at zillow.com/research.