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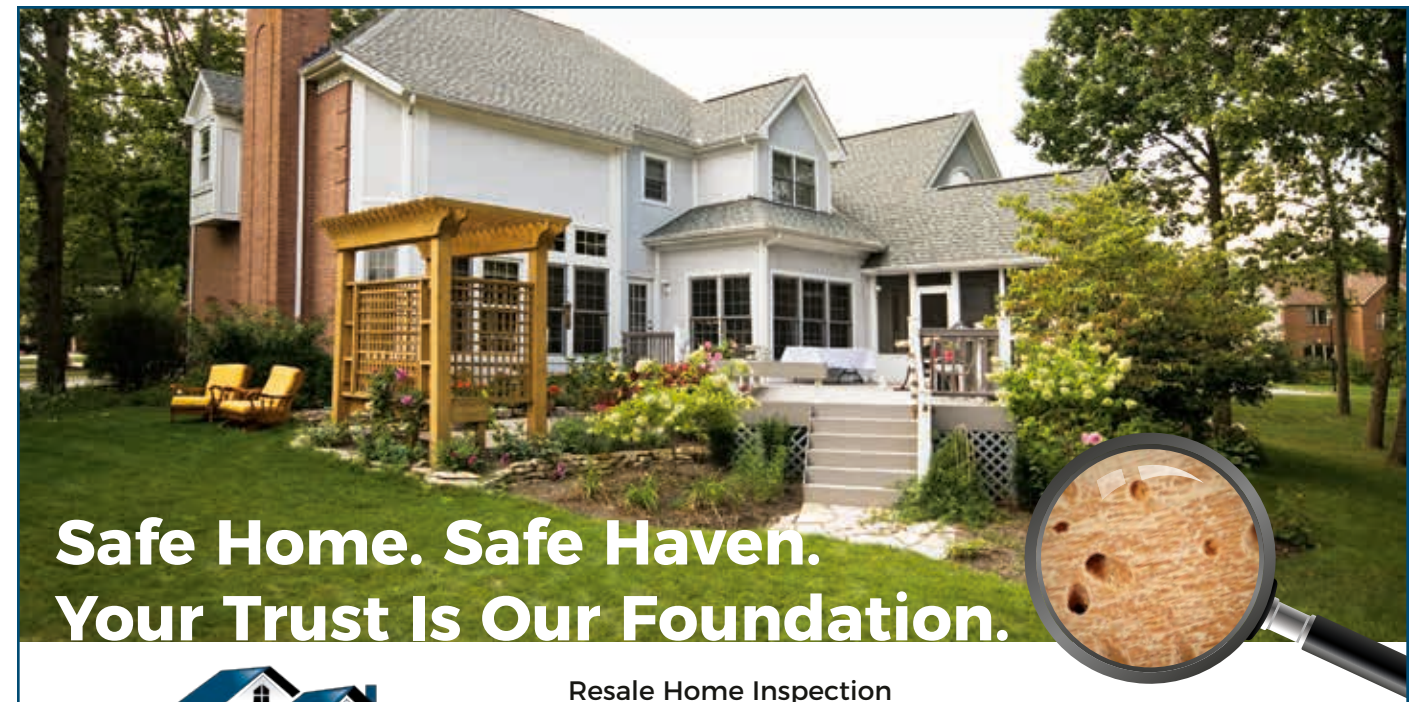
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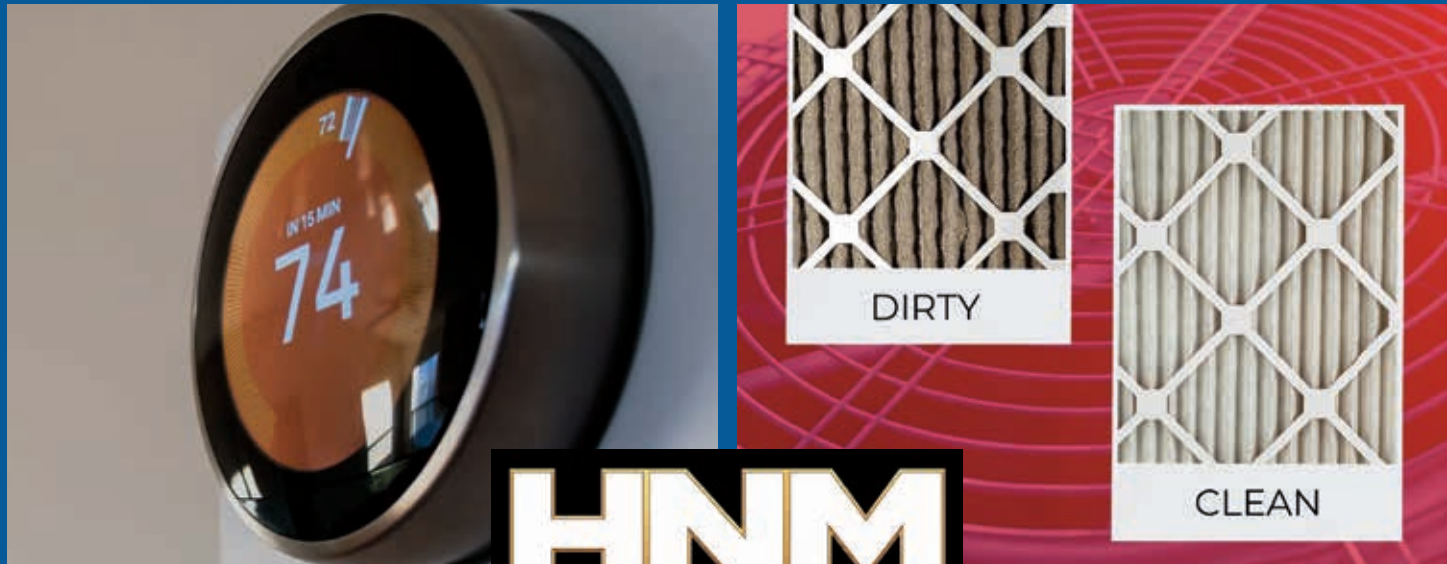
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BY DRAKE ABSHIRE

A New Season, A New Quarter

Fall is just around the corner, and with it comes a fresh season—and the start of the final quarter of the year! As we head into Q4, we're excited to keep the momentum going and continue bringing our Acadiana real estate community together.

A huge **thank you to everyone who joined us for The Content Lab!** We had an incredible turnout, and we hope you left with fresh ideas, practical tools, and plenty of inspiration to elevate your social media presence. It was so much fun seeing our Realtors and Preferred Partners connect, create, and learn together.

We're also thrilled to welcome several new Preferred Partners to the *Acadiana Real Producers* family: **Pelican Pool Service, St. Landry Bank & Trust, Megan Montgomery Design, Westwood Professional Services, and Brightway Insurance.** We're grateful to have you as part of our community and look forward to introducing you to our readers and Realtor partners.

Here's to a strong finish to 2026, new connections, and plenty more opportunities to **connect, grow, and celebrate together!**

Thank you always,



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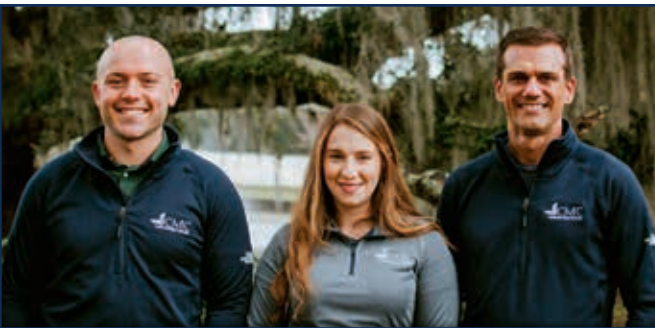
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A home showing becomes memorable when buyers do more than view square footage, they *experience** how life could feel there. Engaging the five senses strategically helps create an emotional connection, reinforces perceived value, and makes the property easier to remember.

1 / SIGHT - CREATE AN IMMEDIATE VISUAL YES

Before Buyers ever inquire about seeing a home they have likely seen photos on line and have formed their first impression. A strong visual presentation makes rooms feel brighter, more spacious, and more intentional, both online and in person.

- Maximize natural light: open blinds, clean windows, and replace burned-out bulbs.
- Use layered lighting in darker rooms with lamps, under-cabinet lights, and warm, consistent bulbs.
- Declutter surfaces, closets, counters, and entryways to emphasize space.
- Style focal points: dining tables, beds, fireplaces, patios, and kitchen islands.
- Prioritize curb appeal with trimmed landscaping, a clean front door, fresh mulch, and welcoming exterior lighting.

- Use professional photography, video, floor plans, and virtual tours to create a compelling online first impression.

2 / SOUND - LET THE HOME FEEL PEACEFUL

Sound is often overlooked, yet it can dramatically affect whether a home feels relaxing or stressful. A quiet, calm environment allows buyers to focus on the property rather than distractions.

- Turn off televisions, loud appliances, fans, and notification devices before showings.
- Address squeaky doors, rattling vents, dripping faucets, and noisy HVAC equipment.
- Schedule lawn care, construction, or repair work outside showing windows where possible.
- Use soft, unobtrusive background music only when it suits the home and audience.
- Highlight positive ambient sounds when genuine, such as birds in the yard, a gentle fountain, or a quiet neighborhood setting.

3 / SMELL - MAKE "CLEAN" A SIGNATURE SCENT

Scent has a powerful connection to memory and emotion. The goal is not to perfume tor mask smells in the home; it is to make the home smell unmistakably fresh, clean, and neutral.

- Remove pet bedding, litter, trash, dirty laundry, damp towels, and strong cooking odors.

- Deep-clean carpets, upholstery, drains, garbage disposals, and refrigerators.
- Air out the home before showings when weather permits.
- Use only mild, natural scents sparingly, such as our S. Clare signature scent.
- Avoid heavy candles, plug-ins, incense, and overpowering air fresheners.

4 / TOUCH - INVITE BUYERS TO FEEL QUALITY

Buyers often evaluate a home through their hands without consciously realizing it. The feel of surfaces, hardware, textiles, and finishes communicates quality and maintenance.

- Ensure doorknobs, cabinet pulls, faucets, drawers, locks, and light switches are clean and work smoothly.
- Use clean, plush towels in bathrooms and neatly made beds with inviting linens.
- Present countertops, flooring, railings, and fixtures free of sticky residue, dust, or visible wear.
- Make closets, cabinets, and storage areas easy to open and explore.
- Set a comfortable indoor temperature so buyers can linger without discomfort.
- Stage outdoor seating with cushions or throws, helping buyers imagine using the space.

5 / TASTE - SUGGEST A LIFESTYLE, NOT A SALES TACTIC

Taste can create hospitality and help buyers slow down during a showing. It should be simple, clean, and optional, never intrusive or overly elaborate.

- Offer sealed bottled water or individually wrapped refreshments.
- Consider a small, clearly labeled display of locally made treats.
- Stage a coffee bar, breakfast nook, wine station, or outdoor dining setup to illustrate everyday living.
- Remove dishes, leftovers, and visible pet food before tours.

THE CORE PRINCIPLE - The strongest home presentation is authentic. Every sensory detail should support the home's real strengths: a sunny kitchen, a peaceful primary suite, a welcoming front porch, a functional family room, or an entertaining-ready backyard.

When sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste work together, a listing shifts from a property that buyers merely inspect to a place they can vividly imagine calling home.



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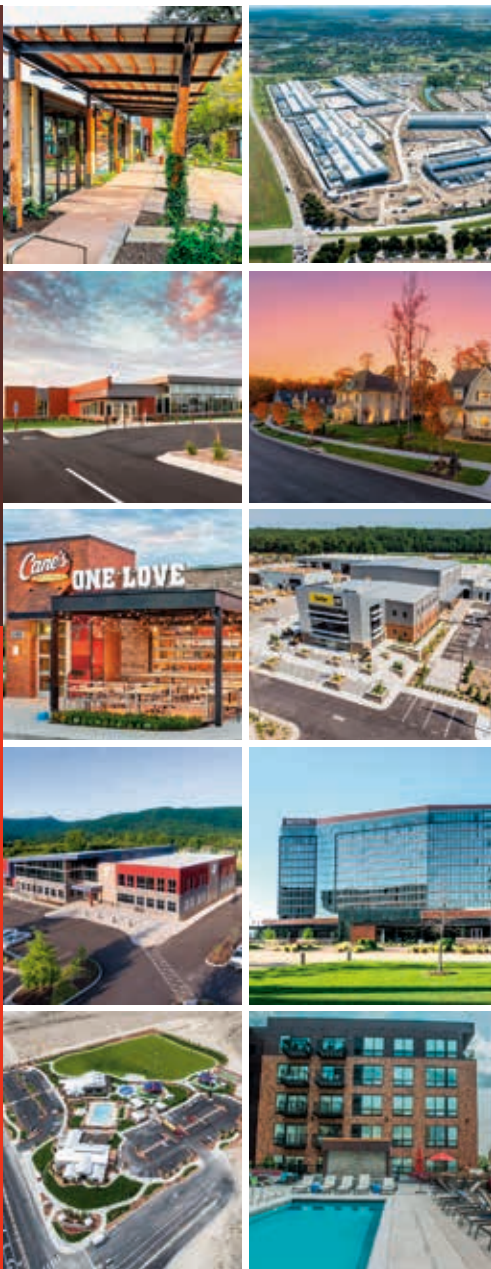


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What's HIDING in Your House?

COMMON ISSUES A HOME INSPECTION CAN REVEAL

BY STEVEN "BUBBA" DALE, LICENSED HOME INSPECTOR #11177



When people think about buying a home, they often focus on the exciting parts—finding the perfect neighborhood, choosing paint colors, or imagining where the furniture will go. But every home

has a story, and sometimes that story includes hidden problems that aren't visible during a casual walk-through.

A professional home inspection is designed to uncover those issues before they become expensive surprises. While no home is perfect, understanding a property's condition gives buyers confidence and helps sellers address concerns before they become deal breakers.

Here are some of the most common issues we find during home inspections.

1 / Termites: The Silent Destroyers

Termites are one of the biggest threats to homes throughout Louisiana. Because they work behind walls, beneath flooring, and inside structural wood, homeowners often don't realize there's a problem until significant damage has already occurred.



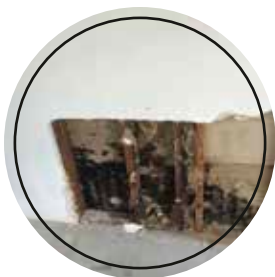
Signs may include:

- Mud tubes along the foundation
- Damaged or hollow-sounding wood
- Discarded wings near windows or doors
- Wood that appears blistered or soft

Even if there aren't visible signs, a licensed termite inspection is an important part of the home-buying process. Catching termite activity early can save thousands of dollars in future repairs.

2 / Mold: More Than Just an Eyesore

Mold doesn't always announce itself with black spots on a wall. It often grows behind drywall, under flooring, inside HVAC systems, or in attics and crawl spaces where moisture is present.



Common causes include:

- Roof leaks
- Plumbing leaks
- Poor ventilation
- High indoor humidity

Beyond damaging building materials, mold can negatively affect indoor air quality and may aggravate allergies or respiratory conditions. Identifying moisture sources is just as important as addressing the mold itself because simply cleaning the surface won't solve the underlying problem.

3 / Foundation Movement

Nearly every home experiences some settling over time, but excessive foundation movement can lead to costly structural repairs.



Things inspectors commonly look for include:

- Cracks in walls or ceilings
- Uneven floors
- Doors or windows that stick
- Large cracks in the foundation

Not every crack indicates a major problem, but documenting the condition helps buyers understand whether additional evaluation by a structural specialist may be necessary.

4 / Plumbing Leaks

Even a slow drip can cause extensive damage over time. Hidden plumbing leaks often lead to wood rot, mold growth, damaged flooring, and increased water bills.



Inspectors check:

- Visible supply and drain lines
- Water heaters
- Faucets and fixtures
- Areas beneath sinks
- Signs of previous water intrusion

Finding a small leak today can prevent thousands of dollars in repairs tomorrow.

5 / Electrical Concerns

Electrical systems should always operate safely and efficiently. During an inspection, we evaluate readily accessible components for conditions that may require attention.

Common findings include:

- Double-tapped breakers
- Improper wiring
- Missing GFCI protection
- Loose outlets or switches
- Aging electrical panels

Electrical issues aren't always obvious, but they can create safety hazards if left uncorrected. Identifying these concerns allows homeowners to make informed decisions about needed repairs or upgrades.

6 / HVAC Problems

Heating and cooling systems are among the most expensive components of a home. An inspection

evaluates their general condition and operation, but it's important to understand that inspectors are not performing a full mechanical service.

Common concerns include:

- Dirty filters
- Poor airflow
- Aging equipment
- Improper temperature differentials
- Signs of deferred maintenance

Routine maintenance and annual servicing can significantly extend the life of HVAC equipment while improving energy efficiency.

Why Home Inspections Matter

A home inspection isn't about passing or failing a house. Every home—whether it's five years old or fifty—will have maintenance items and recommendations. *The goal is to provide an objective evaluation so buyers, sellers, and homeowners understand the property's current condition.*

For buyers, an inspection helps prevent unexpected expenses after closing. For sellers, it offers the opportunity to address concerns before listing or negotiating with potential buyers. For homeowners, periodic inspections can identify maintenance issues before they become major repairs.

The hidden issues inside a home aren't always visible, but they can have a significant impact on safety, comfort, and long-term costs. A thorough inspection provides valuable information that helps protect one of the biggest investments most people will ever make.

Whether you're buying, selling, or simply maintaining your home, knowing what's hiding behind the walls, beneath the floors, and above the ceilings can make all the difference. A professional home inspection gives you the knowledge to move forward with confidence—and peace of mind.

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Chris BIENVENU

with EDGE MORTGAGE



“My clients and Realtors know from the beginning that my cellphone is always on, after hours and weekends, too,” Chris Bienvenu emphasizes. “I’m available 24/7, 365 days a year because real estate is a time-sensitive business.”

As an exceptional mortgage loan originator with Edge Mortgage in Lafayette, Chris’s emphasis on being available isn’t just lip service; it’s the very keystone that’s helped him build a loyal clientele in the competitive mortgage industry. Since 2014, Chris has made it his mission to support his clients and Realtor partners through every step of the home-buying process, especially when the clock is winding down.

The Pivot

Growing up in the small town of Parks, just outside of Breaux Bridge, Chris initially pursued a career in physical therapy after graduating from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette with a degree in exercise physiology. However, the steep cost of continuing

education and a drive to get into the workforce sooner prompted him to rethink his career plans.

That realization led him to work as a regional sales manager for his brother’s company, Electronic Payment Services, where he honed his people skills for seven years. A true entrepreneur, Chris eventually started his own ATM company, which he ran for three years before selling it.

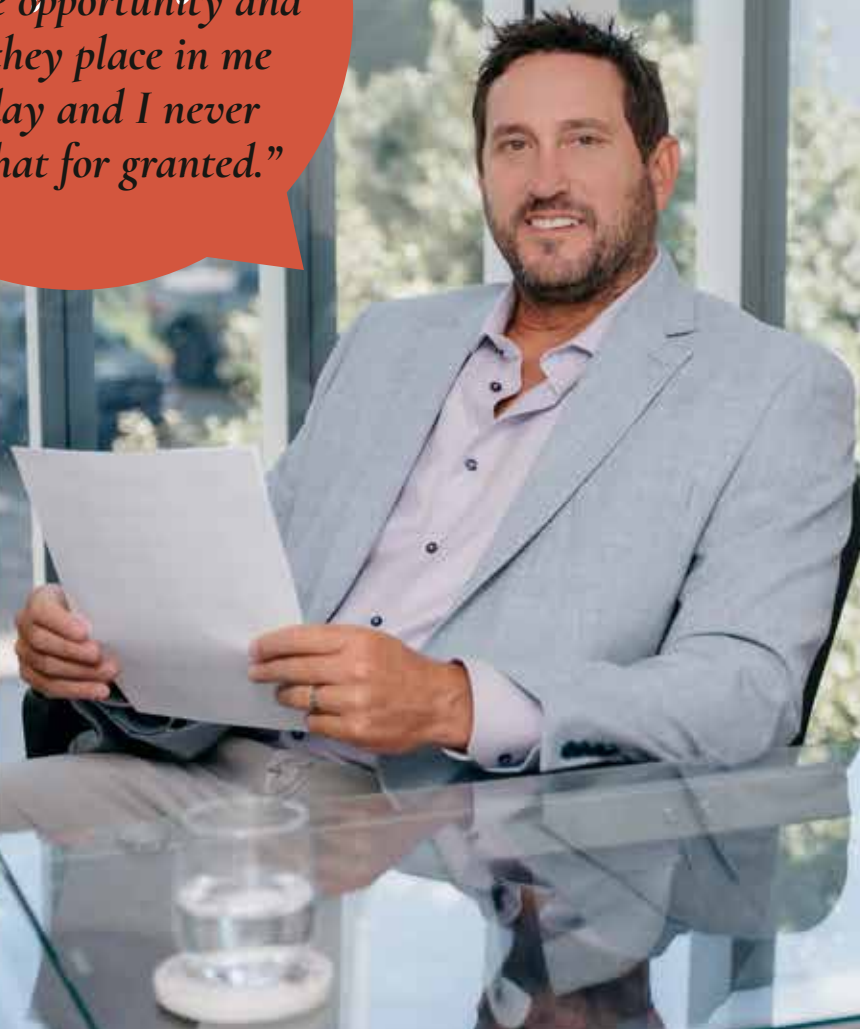
Through all of those years, a close friend in the mortgage business continued to nudge him toward the industry.

“My buddy kept asking me to lunch, always wanting to talk about joining his mortgage team or at least take a look at it,” Chris recalls with a chuckle. “This went on for a couple of years until one day back in 2014, I sat with him for lunch, entertained the idea — and from that lunch, there was no looking back.”

There was little doubt Chris was a great fit. A natural salesman, he learned the ropes quickly and enjoyed talking to people.

“

I am so grateful for the opportunity and trust they place in me each day and I never take that for granted.”



like those that remind me why I'm here.”

In addition to his client-centered approach, Chris and his company are committed to giving back to their local community. Edge Mortgage frequently partners with Realtors to support charities and other initiatives that benefit Lafayette and the surrounding areas.

And with over a dozen years of experience in the mortgage industry, Chris has witnessed many significant changes over the years, particularly in how interest rates respond to broader economic factors.

“The rates are volatile right now, so we're always staying on top of the market to make sure the clients get the best rate possible,” Chris points out. “Any given day rates can go crazy!”

Despite the constant fluctuations, Chris maintains

a positive outlook for the future, understanding that the mortgage business is cyclical and requires adaptability. Staying informed allows Chris to serve his clients with confidence, regardless of market shifts.

“We're absolutely growing despite the volatility and people are still buying,” he adds. “The last two years have been just as busy as it was during COVID when we were processing all those refis.”

On The Homefront

In a job that requires him to be constantly available, Chris is grateful for the support of his family, particularly his understanding spouse, Sheila. Married for 16 years, the couple has two amazing boys, Jax and Finley, who share their father's passion for sports, especially when it comes to all-things football. Chris and his wife also enjoy

a good pickleball match when time allows.

“But when we get a break from sports, hanging out by the pool and grilling for them is my perfect day,” he shares.

Looking down the road, Chris notes he has zero ambitions to let off the gas and future plans even include more growth ahead with the right people while staying relevant in an ever-changing industry.

“We're always looking for new loan officers with exceptional attention to detail and a passion for customer service,” he concludes. “But ultimately, my goal is to continue maintaining great relationships with my Realtor family and their clients; I am so grateful for the opportunity and trust they place in me each day and I never take that for granted.”

“Back when I started, 5%-6% rates seemed high, and no one wanted to do the tough deals in flood zones,” Chris recalls. “But I was hungry to learn, and getting through those deals helped me thoroughly understand the business. Now, nothing makes me nervous anymore.”

Over the years, Chris transitioned between companies and ultimately joined Edge Mortgage five years ago with a group of former colleagues that have decades of industry experience.

Prioritizing Service

Edge Mortgage provides clients with multiple loan options as a mortgage broker, offering everything from conventional loans to refinances, non-QMs, and home equity loans. Chris is personally licensed across Louisiana, Texas, Alabama, and Florida, and with 10 exceptional employees, the company benefits from the combined experience of seasoned professionals who understand the complexities of the mortgage process.

Chris's commitment to service stands out in an

industry that can sometimes feel impersonal. His focus on availability and responsiveness sets him apart from many in his field. This level of service has earned Chris the trust of many Realtors, who appreciate his openness, reliability, and understanding of the often urgent nature of the business.

“I have friends who won't touch their phones after 5 o'clock, but for me, I know that if I don't take care of my clients, my family won't get fed. Realtors are the same as me!” he notes. “Clients call me

at any hour, so I have to be available for them.”

The Best Feeling

Beyond the practical aspects of his work, Chris finds true fulfillment in helping people achieve their dreams of homeownership.

“Nothing is more satisfying than helping a client purchase their first home at 20 years old or helping a single mom achieve this goal to have a better place to raise her kids,” he shares. “I also love thanking a veteran by putting them in the home of their dreams. It's moments



Jeremy

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Real Estate Journey & Achievements

What inspired you to take the leap into real estate, and what was that first year like for you?

My husband inspired me to take the leap. He was sick of my planning it out and making sure I had my ducks in a row and kind of pushed me into taking the leap through his supportive nature. My first year? Equal parts excitement, panic, and Googling things in my car before appointments. I'm so grateful for the first year because I was just so excited to do all the things. I often look back and remind myself how I felt to help get through the "don't wants"

PHOTOGRAPHY
BY WESLEY SUN
CHEE FORE



What's one transaction or client experience that had a lasting impact on you?

One of my first transactions in real estate was to a friend who I had been a mini mentor to for some time. We went from roommates, to her being my tenant in my first rent house, to me selling her a home of her own. It was so rewarding to see her grow and achieve homeownership through my guidance over the years. We both felt accomplished.

If you could go back and give your rookie self one piece of advice, what would it be?

Stop worrying about knowing everything. Clients don't need a walking encyclopedia. They need someone honest who will find the answer.

What's a personal milestone or achievement in your career that you're most proud of?

I would say making the top 10 a couple of times when working amongst some really hard hitters.

What's the best piece of advice a mentor or colleague has ever given you?

"Just take care of your people, and they will take care of you." -PG

Challenges & Growth

How do you handle difficult clients or challenging personalities in negotiations?

I remind myself we're all stressed for different reasons and give people the grace I'd hope they'd give me. Stay calm (try to), keep the facts front and center, and refuse to let someone else's emotions live rent-free in my head.

How do you stay resilient when deals fall apart or the market shifts unexpectedly?

I don't; I fall apart too! BUT...the deal you lose on Monday can be replaced by two on Friday. I let myself be disappointed for about five minutes, then it's back to work.

What's a challenge you're still working on overcoming in your career today?

Learning to say no. I genuinely love helping people, but I've realized I can't

pour from an empty cup... or an empty coffee mug.

How do you manage stress when juggling multiple deals at once?

Checklists, calendars, and controlled chaos. If it's not written down, it doesn't exist. My phone works harder than I do some days.

What's a misconception people have about being a Realtor that you wish more people understood?

That we just unlock doors. If only! Behind every sale are negotiations, inspections, contracts, lender calls, title issues, repair drama, and about 487 text messages.

Personal Insight

What's a personal or business slogan that keeps you motivated every day?

Leave people better than you found them.

Where do you see yourself in five years, both personally and professionally?

Personally, making more memories with my family. Professionally, continuing to grow my business while creating systems that let me work smarter and perfect my customer experience. I'd also like to continue mentoring other agents along the way.

How do you balance the hustle of real estate with your personal life and self-care?

Balance is a work in progress. Some weeks I crush it. Some weeks my family reminds me to put my phone down. They're usually right.

What's one non-negotiable daily habit that helps you stay focused and successful?

Caffeine and going through notifications often. Swift communication with my clients is a non-negotiable that helps me stay on top of tasks and exceed expectations of clients, lenders, and other agents.

What's one thing your clients would be surprised to learn about you?

Most people are surprised to learn that I don't like bacon, I'm scared of frogs, and I'm not a fan of shopping. 🐸



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THE CJ GROUP

WITH JANA HICKEY AND RUSTY STEEL

"It's really about the people that walk through these doors every day, numbers aren't the goal," Jana Hickey explains. "We work towards them but it's really about our agents, which are our clients."

WRITTEN BY
JESS WELLAR
PHOTOGRAPHY
BY WESLEY SUN
CHEE FORE

For a team that closed nearly \$70.8 million across 317 transactions last year, that perspective might sound surprising. But for Jana Hickey and Rusty Steel, co-owners and Team Leaders of The CJ Group brokered by eXp Realty, volume has always been a byproduct of something far more important: creating an environment where people genuinely want to show up and grow together.

Founded in 2016 and now 34 members strong, the Lafayette-based group has evolved considerably over the past decade, but its culture has remained remarkably consistent. Together they've created a supportive atmosphere rooted in individuality, accountability, collaboration, and the belief that when you take care of people first, the rest tends to follow.

Shared Vision

Real estate was practically part of Jana's DNA. Raised in Alexandria, she earned her bachelor's degree from the University of Louisiana Alexandria and spent seven years purchasing and negotiating contracts for Acadian Ambulance. With both her mother and grandmother working as REALTORS®, Jana became the third generation to enter the profession when she earned her license in 2011.

Rusty's path was decidedly different. Originally from Nashville, Arkansas, he attended the University of Central Arkansas before spending eight years managing multiple Hobby Lobby locations throughout Louisiana. Under his leadership, his stores received numerous accolades as the top stores in the country. He later opened several donut shops before selling them and turning his entrepreneurial instincts toward real estate in 2015. Years spent managing businesses and people proved to be ideal preparation for what came next.

Their different personalities have ultimately become one of The CJ

Group's greatest strengths, as certain agents gravitate to one or the other. Rather than trying to lead alike, the two have learned to appreciate what the other brings to the table.

"This balance is the very foundation of the team," Rusty elaborates. "We truly treat every agent on our team as a unique individual and an equal."

"We know that the path to success looks different for every one of our agents and we allow them to be who they are and teach them how to build a business as big as they want," he continues. "Our goal is to support their efforts and enhance the business that they have."

Culture Is The Strategy

Ask Jana and Rusty what sets The CJ Group apart and neither hesitates: it's all about the culture. In fact, as Jana points out, she believes another team could copy their systems and playbook page for page and still struggle to replicate the results because the real difference lies in the people executing them.

“
WE TRULY TREAT EVERY
AGENT ON OUR TEAM AS
A UNIQUE INDIVIDUAL
AND AN EQUAL.”



That philosophy shapes everything from team growth to goal-setting.

“Recruiting has never been our focus. In truth, we feel the energy it takes to recruit is better spent on our team members,” Jana explains. “We have been very blessed to attract 95 percent of the agents we have organically; we are always open to agents joining the team, but very selective of who we let into our world.”

Once inside that world, agents aren’t expected to conform to a single definition of success. Someone ready to sprint receives the resources to run, while an agent entering a slower season is supported without judgment.

Rusty believes that investment ultimately reaches far beyond the office.

“Our focus is on our agents, our culture, our environment, our service, professionalism, integrity, and knowledge and we know that when we pour into those avenues, it will overflow into the client experience,” he states.

That culture was tested during the first half of 2026 following a period of rapid growth. Ten agents had joined within six months in 2025, prompting a major office renovation just as staffing changes left the group stretched thin amid an influx of files. The team also suffered a loss of an agent passing away suddenly. Rather than

unraveling under the pressure, team members stepped forward to help: Jeff and Cassie doing whatever they could to make things happen and Robin Godeaux offered to take over staging to alleviate the staff. It was a difficult season that reinforced for Jana and Rusty why investing in the right people matters.

Paying It Forward

For Jana and Rusty, giving back begins inside their team. They see helping agents create businesses capable of funding better lives for their families as its own form of service.

“We invest our time in our agents and support them to turn their dreams into reality,” Jana offers.

Looking ahead, that means developing more leaders rather than making themselves indispensable. Jana dreams of creating a self-sustaining team where agents recognize their own leadership potential while she explores Paris to live like a local for a few weeks sooner rather than later; meanwhile Rusty and his wife are pursuing a personal goal of taking their children to all 48 contiguous states before age 18.

For Rusty, however, the greatest reward remains helping others discover what’s possible.

“We have a front row seat to watch lives be transformed and that’s why we get up everyday,” he concludes with a smile.



THE CJ GROUP: A LOOK BACK

2008: Where It Started
Charlotte “Mama” Ducote earns her real estate license, setting in motion what would eventually become The CJ Group.

2011: Jana Joins In
Jana earns her license initially to help her mother stage homes and assist with showings and discovers her true passion, real estate.

2016: The CJ Group Is Born
After several years working together, Charlotte and Jana officially form The CJ Group. They hire their first assistant, Adrienne, an early believer in what the mother-daughter duo could accomplish who is still involved in handling property management as an honorary team member.

2018: A New Partnership
Recognizing the group’s potential for growth while Charlotte enters a different season of life, Jana strikes up a conversation with Rusty. The two decide to partner as The CJ Group’s new owners.

Within days, longtime family friend and newly licensed agent Pam Bergeron asks to join before the group even has team contracts and processes in place. Christa Granger, a past client turned agent, follows days after — both of whom are still on the team to this day.

2021: Strength Behind The Scenes
The group hires Cassie Melancon, whose decade-plus of transaction coordination experience immediately strengthens the level of support available to agents.



2022: A Blockbuster Year
The CJ Group purchases its own building at 102 Amaryllis Drive and expands its operational infrastructure. Melanie Webb is hired to bring greater organization to business finances and the owners’ personal LLCs, freeing leadership to devote more energy to agents and growth.

Nine new agents joined that year, including Jeff Bower, who moved into the Listing Coordinator role. With two Team Leaders, a Listing Coordinator, Transaction Coordinator, Director of Operations, and Executive Controller, the group’s support system reaches a new level.

2023: The Move To eXp
The CJ Group moves to eXp Realty specifically for a team structure that provides greater financial benefit to its agents. The switch puts nearly \$20,000 more into each agent’s pocket.

2024: Operations
Jeff Bower moves into the Operations Director role. This restructuring was a turning point that was instrumental in taking the team to the next level.

2025: Experience Multiplies
For the first time, two brokers join The CJ Group—a mother-daughter duo with more than 20 years of experience each. The year also marks a major growth period, with 10 agents joining within six months.

2026: Investing In What’s Next
The team adds a new position, Agent Growth Partner, who provides hands-on guidance to help newer agents launch their careers. The CJ Group remains focused on what has guided it all along: surrounding itself with good people committed to growing their businesses professionally and ethically. ▀



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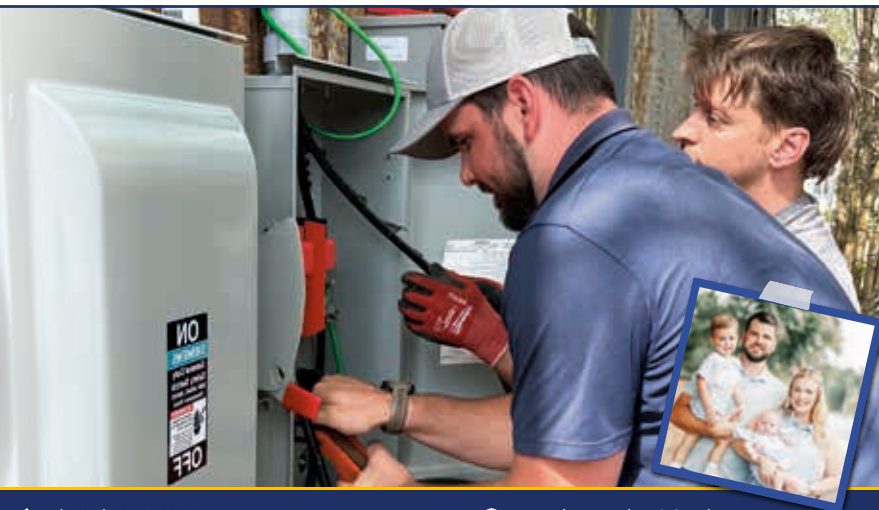
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