

Guide on Best Practices for Consumer Ratings of Property Agents

Jointly produced by the Council for Estate Agencies (CEA)
in collaboration with the Ratings of Property Agents Workgroup

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Preamble

This Guide is jointly produced by the Council for Estate Agencies (CEA) in collaboration with the real estate agency industry players under the auspices of the CEA-led Ratings of Property Agents Workgroup (RPAWG).

The Guide seeks to introduce consistent standards for the ratings of property agents and to build trust among users of such rating platforms. Through common standards, consumers can better compare the ratings of property agents across various platforms provided by different property agencies and portals. Property agents can also appreciate and use the ratings received across various platforms to market themselves and improve their service levels.

The Guide is the result of collective efforts and active contributions from the RPAWG, which includes representatives from the real estate agency industry, industry and consumer associations, academia and a property portal company. It represents a concerted effort to increase the transparency of the property transaction process and to help consumers make a more informed decision when choosing their property agents to represent them in property transactions.

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1. Objectives

- 1.1 This Guide aims to introduce consistent standards for the ratings of property agents by platforms for the property agents' estate agency services in the areas of measurement, display, invitation to rate and management of ratings, as well as the recommended safeguards for such platforms in Singapore. By having common standards, consumers can better compare the ratings of property agents across different rating systems. Property agents can also better appreciate and use the ratings they have received on different systems to market themselves and to continuously adjust and improve their services.
- 1.2 The main objectives of this Guide are to:
 - 1.2.1 Build trust among users of platforms for the ratings of property agents, including consumers, property agencies and agents; and
 - 1.2.2 Spur property agents towards a higher level of professionalism and quality of service.
- 1.3 Studies have shown that consumers find ratings and reviews to be important, and that the ratings/reviews impact their purchasing behaviour and brand loyalty.¹ A recent local study has shown that ratings enhance consumer confidence, and agents who are rated are likely to perform better and earn a higher commission than agents who are not rated.² Potential clients would likely benefit from the availability of ratings as well, as it has been observed that more consumers are relying on online sources for information.³
- 1.4 This Guide does not cover the ranking of property agents and the display of rankings by platforms. If any ranking of property agents is performed by the platform based on the ratings received, with or without any other information obtained by the platform, the platform should ensure that this is made known to its users and provide information on how the ranking is done.

¹ Simon-Kucher & Partners (2019). *The Rating Economy- Consumer Survey*. Retrieved from <https://simon-kucher.com/en/TheRatingEconomy-Overview>

² Chua, C., Ong, S.E., Wang, D., & Wee, Y.Y. (2020). *OrangeTee Property Agents Review: Responding to Disruptive Innovations*. Ivey. Retrieved from <https://iveycases.com/ProductView.aspx?id=110035>

³ National Association of REALTORS® Research Group. (2019). *Real Estate in a Digital Age 2019 Report*. Retrieved from <https://www.nar.realtor/sites/default/files/documents/2019-real-estate-in-a-digital-age-08-22-2019.pdf>

2. Application

- 2.1 This Guide can be adopted by any online or digital platform that invites and publishes the ratings of property agents, regardless of whether the platform is run by a property agency or any other third party, and regardless of the size and reach of the platform.
- 2.2 All platforms are encouraged to abide by this Guide, to help them in designing a platform that users can trust.
- 2.3 Platforms are encouraged to comply with the recommended standards set out at Sections 4, 5, 6 and 7 of this Guide, as well as the optional standards described in the boxes. Platforms may choose to design their rating systems with additional features beyond what has been set out in this Guide, whilst ensuring that these features do not conflict with the standards set out herein.

3. Definitions

- 3.1 For the purpose of this Guide, the following definitions apply:
 - 3.1.1 “Client” refers to the person who retained or otherwise used the estate agency services of, or otherwise engaged or employed, a property agency through a particular property agent.
 - 3.1.2 “Estate agency services” refers to services rendered in relation to the acquisition or disposition of a property by the client, including introduction and negotiation work done for the sale, purchase and rental of residential, commercial or industrial properties. These services have been rendered for or in expectation of any fee, or in the course of the property agency’s business.
 - 3.1.3 “Rating” refers collectively to the score (on a five-point scale) on the attributes described at paragraphs 4.7 and 4.8 and any free-text reviews, as given by a client to his property agent in relation to the estate agency services provided by the property agent for the client’s property transaction.
 - 3.1.4 “Reviews” refers specifically to free-text reviews, as given by a client to his property agent in relation to the estate agency services provided by the property agent for the client’s property transaction.
 - 3.1.5 “Platform” refers to the underlying computer system that manages the rating process, as well as the website that publishes the ratings, regardless of whether it is run by a property agency or other third party.

4. Measuring and Displaying Ratings

Guiding principles for prescribed measures and methods

- 4.1. The components of the ratings should be standardised to cover attributes that best demonstrate the breadth of skills and knowledge expected of a property agent and for ease of comparison across platforms.
- 4.2. To help consumers make an informed decision, the ratings should be displayed in a fair and consistent manner across platforms. The platform should also provide safeguards against false ratings (see paragraph 7.3).
- 4.3. The platform should take reasonable steps to ensure the veracity of the ratings and reviews while maintaining the data integrity of its system. Adequate information should be provided to help users trust the veracity of ratings and reviews.
- 4.4. There should be clear due processes on the conditions surrounding the editing and withholding of ratings.
- 4.5. At all material times, relevant parties (including the platform and property agencies) should comply with all prevailing rules and regulations such as the Personal Data Protection Act 2012 (PDPA) which govern the collection, use, disclosure, and care of personal data by organisations.

Components of the ratings

- 4.6. The platform should employ a five-star rating scale, with one star being the lowest service level attained and five stars being the best service level achieved.
- 4.7. For the attributes for clients to rate their agents, platforms should select a **minimum of three attributes**, wherein at least one attribute should fit under each of the following three categories: Service, Professionalism and Skills.
- 4.8. A non-exhaustive list of **examples** of attributes that fall under each category is set out in the table below. When displaying the ratings and/or sending the invitation to rate to clients, platforms may wish to adopt their own explanation of each attribute (e.g. by framing it in a more concise or easy-to-understand manner).

	Rating Categories		
	Service	Professionalism	Skills
Attributes	<p>Communication: Refers to the agent's ability to convey information in a timely, clear and accurate manner.</p>	<p>Process Expertise: Refers to the agent's familiarity with the property transaction process such as the signing of the Option to Purchase, the payment schedule, the completion process and the stamp duties payable.</p>	<p>Marketing Skills: Refers to the agent's ability to reach out to interested parties to invite them to enter into the transaction.</p>
	<p>Client Dedication: Refers to the agent's commitment to complete the transaction process according to the client's instructions and agreed expectations, such as the effort and time spent on estate agency work.</p>	<p>Market Knowledge: Refers to the agent's ability to provide useful and relevant information about local amenities and facilities, and property market activities for the client's benefit.</p>	<p>Negotiation Skills: Refers to the agent's ability to negotiate favourable outcome(s) for the client such as a higher purchasing price for the seller client or a lower purchasing price for the buyer client.</p>
	<p>Value-added Services: Refers to the agent's ability to provide value to the client above and beyond that which is agreed and expected, such as through the use of digital tools (e.g. pricing calculators and virtual tours).</p>	<p>Reliability: Refers to the agent's ability to meet the client's expectations in an open, honest and reliable manner, and in the process, win the client's trust.</p>	

Optional

- *Platforms may wish to provide clients with the option of submitting free-text reviews to share details of their experience. To ensure that reviews are not too lengthy, platforms may wish to consider imposing a cap on the number of characters for such free-text reviews.*

Display of ratings

- 4.9. The platform should display on every agent's page the total number of ratings that he has received and are published. The platform should also display every rating received and the average score of all the ratings received on the one to five-star scale. For every individual rating, the identities of clients who wish to remain anonymous should be masked (this should be an option provided when clients are submitting their ratings).
- 4.10. When displaying ratings on its website, the platform should indicate on every rating the date that the rating was submitted, the type of transaction (i.e. whether it pertained to a sale, purchase or rental transaction), and the transaction identification number or other identifiers.
- 4.11. A transaction identification number or any other unique identifier (e.g. a user number) should be provided to the client, so that the client is able to check that a particular published rating with the same identifier was submitted by him.
- 4.12. When displaying ratings on their websites, platforms that are not run by property agencies should publish the name of the property agency that the agent was registered with at the time of the transaction that is being rated.
- 4.13. The platform should display each rating for a **maximum of two years** so that ratings are kept current. Removed ratings older than two years should not contribute to the average score of all ratings received.

Optional

- *The platform may wish to provide clients with other language options for reviews such as Chinese, Malay, and Tamil, etc.*

5. Inviting Ratings

Attribution of the ratings

- 5.1. For transactions where property agents worked in teams to represent the same transacting party, the platform should only allow clients to rate the lead property agent for the transaction. The platform may decide how to determine which agent is the lead (e.g. the agent who received the most commission). The property agent being rated should have been engaged by the client and conducted estate agency work for him.

Optional

- *Platforms may wish to mandate agents' participation in being rated via the platform, or to allow agents to participate on an opt-out basis to ensure a minimum level of participation.*

Mode and optimal timing for the invitation to rate

- 5.2. The invitation to rate should be sent to the client as soon as reasonably practicable, provided the transaction has been closed (e.g. immediately after the transaction is closed, or after the commission has been paid to the agency).
- 5.3. The invitation to rate should be sent directly from the platform to the client. If this is not practicable, the invitation to rate may be sent via the property agent.
- 5.3.1. In the case of the latter, the platform should put in place measures to ensure that the invitation to rate is received by the client (e.g. by confirmation from the client).
- 5.4. Regardless of how the invitation to rate is sent out, the response should be sent directly back to the platform.
- 5.5. Property agencies, property agents, platforms and relevant stakeholders should not incentivise consumers to rate agents as this may affect the impartiality of ratings submitted.

Optional

- *Platforms may wish to send out invitations to rate via text messages so that clients may use their mobile phones to send in their response. This may lead to a higher response rate than sending via emails, which could end up in the spam folder.*
- *Platforms may wish to send the invitation to rate immediately after the transaction is closed as this may facilitate a higher response rate.*

6. Managing Ratings

No editorial rights by clients except under an exceptional circumstance

- 6.1 In general, clients should not be permitted to edit ratings that they have submitted to the platform.
- 6.2 However, the platform may allow clients to edit ratings once if there are significant events which happen after the rating is submitted that substantially affect the quality of services rendered by the property agent, and it was not reasonably possible for the client to know of such events at the time the rating was first submitted.

Editorial control by platform administrator

- 6.3 In general, platforms, property agencies and property agents should not have editorial control over ratings under any circumstances. Only platform administrator(s) may have editorial control under the exceptional circumstances listed at paragraph 6.4.
- 6.4 The platform administrator(s) may have editorial control over the ratings received, including edited ratings submitted by clients at paragraph 6.2 and the responses by the property agent and client at paragraph 6.7.2, only in the following circumstances:
 - 6.4.1 To edit reviews for the purposes of removing obscene, inappropriate, defamatory and/or offensive language/comments, and/or spam;
 - 6.4.2 To withhold ratings where there is suspicious activity (e.g. where the rating could have been done by a person other than the client); and/or
 - 6.4.3 To withhold the edits of ratings submitted by clients if the exceptional circumstance provided at paragraph 6.2 is not present.
- 6.5 In the event that reviews are edited as per paragraph 6.4.1, the platform should indicate clearly on its website that the review had been edited by the administrator. The platform administrator should also edit or withhold ratings under the circumstances set out at paragraph 6.4.1 in a timely manner.
- 6.6 The platform should also clearly state the conditions of its editorial control over ratings on its website for users' information.

Collaborative approach in rating management

- 6.7 The platform should promote a collaborative approach in rating management, by allowing:
- 6.7.1 Members of the public to flag ratings to the platform if they are found to include obscene, inappropriate, defamatory and/or offensive language/comments, spam, and/or involve suspicious activity (e.g. fraud); and
 - 6.7.2 The property agent to respond to a review once, with a professional comment; and the client to respond to this once subsequently.

Optional

- *Platforms may wish to provide dispute resolution services for the resolution of any disputes between property agents and their clients using their platforms. Such an avenue would help to reduce disputes and ensure that disputes do not escalate publicly.*
- *Platforms may also wish to share their database of property agents' ratings with other platforms (provided that consent from property agents and consumers have been obtained). This would help to create a common ecosystem of rating systems which consumers and property agents can both rely on, while ensuring the consistency of property agents' ratings across platforms.*

7. Recommended Safeguards

Safeguards in users' participation for an open and transparent rating environment

- 7.1 The platform should ensure that both the property agent and his client have consented to participate in the rating system, before publishing the property agent's ratings and inviting his client to rate the agent respectively. The platform can obtain a one-time consent from the property agent to be rated for all his transactions, or seek the property agent's consent on a per transaction basis. The platform should also ensure that consent has been obtained before any personal or sensitive information in relation to the agent or client is published.
- 7.2 The platform should also ensure that clients are aware of the platform's terms of use before they are asked to submit their ratings. This can be achieved by clearly stating the terms of use in a conspicuous location for users to view and/or acknowledge.

Safeguards in ensuring the veracity of ratings

- 7.3 The platform should put in place measures to ensure the veracity of the ratings and guard against false ratings. Such measures include (but are not limited) to the following:
 - 7.3.1 Putting in place checks to ensure that the property transaction to be rated is a genuine transaction (e.g. by checking property transaction documents such as the Tenancy Agreement, Option to Purchase and/or Sale & Purchase Agreement where applicable);
 - 7.3.2 Putting in place a robust client identification process (e.g. by verifying the contact number or email address of the client) and measures to ensure that the rating was made by the client; and
 - 7.3.3 Allowing clients to check which published reviews pertain to their transactions (see paragraphs 4.10 and 4.11 above for details), as it would help to facilitate checks by clients on whether a particular published rating was made by them.
- 7.4 The platform should ensure that only ratings of property agents registered with CEA are published. At the minimum, this should be updated daily.

(Note: Platforms can visit www.data.gov.sg/dataset/cea-salesperson-info to check the latest listing of property agents registered with CEA. The data is updated every eight hours.)

-End-

Disclaimer

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Acknowledgments

This Guide was formulated with the participation, assistance of and valuable insights from the Ratings of Property Agents Workgroup whose composition is as follows:

Chairperson:

Ms Chia I-Ling Director, Policy & Professional Development, Council for Estate Agencies

Members:

Mr Derrick Law Director, Operations, Huttons Asia Pte Ltd

Mr Eugene Lim Key Executive Officer, ERA Realty Network Pte Ltd

Mr Lim Yong Hock Key Executive Officer, PropNex Realty Pte Ltd

Mr Loy York Jiun Executive Director, Consumers Association of Singapore

Mr Michael Tan Key Executive Officer, OrangeTee & Tie Pte Ltd

Prof Ong Seow Eng Professor, National University of Singapore

Dr Tan Tee Khoon Country Manager, PropertyGuru Pte Ltd

Mr Thomas Tan President, Singapore Estate Agents Association



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