

Your Home: Maximize Your Sale Price

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Created on: 2006-03-03

There are several surefire ways to boost the value of your home (a Viking stove and an inground pool certainly never hurt).

But for sellers, there's only one way to maximize your investment that can A) be done in just a few days, B) can cost less than a plane ticket, and C) won't involve copious amounts of dust and contractor bills.

It's called staging -- that is, spiffing up your home in a number of small ways -- and it's getting more and more popular as the housing market cools and sellers try and set their homes apart.

"The way you live in your home and the way you market a house are two different things," says Barb Schwarz, the CEO and founder of StagedHomes.com, who has personally staged more than 5,000 homes over the past 33 years. "You have to think of your home as a product."

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A home that Schwarz recently staged in Seattle had been on the market for nine months at an asking price of \$1.4 million. Three weeks after investing \$8,000 in staging services (the average cost of staging is \$3,200), the sellers received an offer for \$1.9 million -- \$500,000 more than the asking price.

Staged homes also sell faster, according to Schwarz -- an average of seven days compared to 45 days for unstaged homes.

Here are six tricks from staging pros that will give you the home-court advantage:

Get On Your Hands and Knees

OK, so cleaning up sounds like a given, but this goes way beyond a vacuum cleaner and a dust rag. To get your home in shape for sale, you need to scrub around the faucets and the light switches. Banish the dustballs hanging around the baseboards and the cobwebs in the skylights. Powerwash the house and the driveway and keep the sidewalk swept clean.

"You would detail your car if you were going to sell it," says Schwarz. "You should detail your house too."

Follow the Basketball Rule

It's no secret that America is a nation of consumers. And all of that stuff we buy is strewn about our homes.

In the living room of one luxurious home that Schwarz staged, she unearthed a grand piano beneath mounds of clutter -- something she did not notice when she first visited. So while you might like being surrounded by your collection of trophy fish or glass figurines, these items can be a real turnoff to a potential buyer.

Here's a rule of thumb: Remove all items that are smaller than the size of a basketball. Pack up at least half of your books. And stash the photographs of you and the kids on your Hawaiian vacation.

You want the buyer to be able to envision himself in your home -- not you.

Color Your Walls Martha

Yes, of course your bright red dining room and purple living room are exquisite and fit your style to a tee. But the truth is that a prospective buyer is unlikely to appreciate your extraordinary taste and doesn't want to have to paint everything down after closing on the house.

Cover your walls in neutral, complementary hues -- Schwarz says Martha Stewart's line is your best bet. They make rooms look expansive.

Cast a Cold Eye

Stand at the doorway of each room and take in the impression it gives. Are there too many accessories on the wall? Too many area rugs? Do the plants look overgrown? Is the furniture clustered on one side of the room?

"Most master bedrooms have too much," says Schwarz. "They tend to look like furniture stores."

In the dining room, remove extra leaves and chairs. In other rooms, take at least half of everything out and see how it looks. Then reintroduce items into the room sparingly. Be sure to visit your garage, basement, and attic for inspiration. Schwarz recently transformed a humdrum child's bedroom into a nautical paradise using items she found in the owners' garage. An old fishing pole found new life as a curtain rod, a net became a headboard, and a fishing boot served as the base for a lamp.

The buyers for this \$1.5 million house were so taken with the handiwork that they stipulated in the contract that the contents of this child's room were to stay with the house. So go ahead and show some flair, but leave any dramatic artwork -- especially nudes -- out.

Set the Scene

If you're expecting an agent to stop by with a potential buyer, there are several last-minute touches you need to do before leaving the house. Empty the wastebaskets, put the toilet lids down ("I can't tell you how many people in million dollar homes leave their seats up," says Schwarz.), hide your laundry and grooming items, and place baskets of new, color coordinated hand towels in the bathroom. Always leave some lights on.

And have soft jazz or easy listening music playing. It will put people in a buying mood.

Call in the Pros

If staging your home is too big a project to pull off by yourself, there are scores of professionals willing to give you a hand. You can find Accredited Staging Professionals in your state at www.stagedhomes.com. But before hiring anyone, ask to see their portfolio.