

GIVING HOME A MAKEOVER. Staging can up sales price

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DEBBIE GOODSTEIN MOVED OUT of her 18th St. apartment while it was up for sale, and the partly furnished rooms she left behind weren't particularly welcoming. But when she had it overhauled by a stager - the real estate equivalent of a makeup artist - she sold the \$3.5 million flat in no time flat.

"The staging made a huge difference," Goodstein said. "When I saw how good it looked, I wanted to move back in."

Staging, or redecorating homes for sale, has been common practice on the West Coast for 30 years. But it's just catching on in a big way here.

Growing numbers of city real estate brokers are convinced that even in a hot market like this one, clients won't get top dollar unless houses and apartments look attractive and that the most efficient way to fix them up is to hire a professional.

"I'm not a decorator - I'm a marketer," said Nairn Friemann, the founding president of the local chapter of the International Association of Home Staging Professionals.

Home-sellers are mistaken if they think people will want to buy their property because they'll imagine its potential, Friemann said.

"The average person will make a judgment based solely on what they see," she explained. "They can't visualize beyond that."

Most staging jobs cost just a few thousand dollars. In the city, stagers charge \$300 on average for a consultation, and, like the flamboyant redecorators on "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy," produce an action plan for every room.

After the rooms are painted and cleaned, the stager goes to work, charging an average \$1,000 per day for herself plus an assistant. They rearrange the furniture, re-hang the art, place new accessories and do floral arrangements.

Stagers charge \$85 per hour for other tasks, like supervising painters or moving men - who are often called in to cart away whatever part of the seller's possessions that could hurt in a sale.

Unless you're in the design business, it's more effective to hire a professional than stage your home yourself, the experts contend.

"It's important to bring in an objective eye," said Susu Erca, who staged Goodstein's 18th St. apartment.

They agreed to share some of their secrets with Your Money: Eliminate clutter. Dispose of junk, send excess furniture to storage. And clean those closets.

"Your closets shouldn't look like a sitcom, like a joke waiting to happen," Erca said.

Put away personal photos and controversial art collections. Things that are too personal distract home-shoppers from paying attention to the property, Friemann said.

Stay away from strong colors like salmon and lime green, which could be unappealing. Go for creamy yellow and white - they make the place look light and bright

In bathrooms, consider shades of aqua and blue from the sea and sky and add white accents to create a "spa" effect.

Add more light with table lamps. Put silver and crystal bowls next to them, to reflect the light. Be sure the broker turns on all the lamps before showing the place.

Check on the little details before inviting bidders.

"Every room has to sing," Erca said. "Prospective buyers need to say, 'I want to live here - it's so cool.'"

She's sold on 'real estate styling'