

Your Place or Theirs?

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"Staging" a house for potential buyers means detaching your emotions and purging your stuff."

Barb Schwarz swoops into a home that a friend soon plans to put on the market in Concord, California, a booming suburb 30 miles east of San Francisco. She enters a huge modern kitchen so stylized and perfect that it seems transported from a furniture showroom. She sighs, but with the friendly efficiency of someone who has made a lifestyle of crossing things off "to-do" lists while motivating people to buy real estate.

"This needs work, but we can do it," Schwarz says cheerily. Then she starts darting around the custom cabinets, the tiled island, the gleaming appliances. All the while, she is piling up things that will have to go into storage if her friend hopes to net or better the \$1.1 million asking price.

"This plate doesn't need to be here," she says, taking down a huge porcelain display platter draped with a decorative piece of fringed brocade. "This mirror behind the stove will have to go... Pictures and personal stuff put away... Water pitcher in the fridge... Spoons in the dishwasher... Taht's better, it already looks bigger."

Thus begins the process of turning her friend's Spanish-roofed ranch house from a home into a product. "The way you live in your house and the way you market your house are two completely different things," Schwarz explains. "Sell the room and the space, not your things."

Schwarz, who once was an interior designer and became a real estate agent in 1972, calls it "Staging". She claims to have originated the idea of primping or "styling" a house to ready it for sale, beginning to teach others about it in 1985. While the concept first became popular in competitive West Coast markets, it has begun to take hold across the country. A & E Television airs a home staging show called *Sell This House*, HGTV has *Designed to Sell* and Schwarz is working on her own pilot for the ABC Family Channel. Schwarz' Concord, California- and Bellevue, Washington-based company, StagedHomes.com, has trained more than 600,000 real estate agents and decorators nationwide.

In 2000, she began to offer an "Accredited Staging Professional" course that requires hands-on training and adherence to a code of ethics and Staging criteria. There are now more than 4,000 Accredited Staging Professionals in the United States, Canada, and Europe. ASP fees range from \$50 to \$150 an hour, approximately \$350 for an initial consultation, and an average of \$1,500 to Stage a whole house. It need not cost a fortune. Schwarz has Staged rooms just by raiding people's garages. She's created custom headboards out of sheets and outdoor furniture cushions. She has fashioned curtain rods out of old fishing poles and tree branches.

Won't her friend be annoyed that she's taking down all her decorative flourishes and hiding all her stuff? "No," Schwarz says with the confidence born of personally Staging

more than 3,000 homes. "She won't be upset because she wants the money. It's all about the money."

No truly national statistics on the results of home Staging exist. However StagedHomes.com posts a 2003 survey of 2,000 real estate agents that shows that spending just a few hundred dollars on simple measures like cleaning, removing clutter and lightening rooms can increase a home's sale price by at least 20 percent in today's market. That can mean an extra \$500 to \$500,000 on the sale of a home.

Says Terrylynn Fisher, a Concord Realtor who's been selling homes for 28 years, "The house will sell anyway, but how do you know how much you could have gotten for it if you had done some of the simple Staging things, such as reducing the amount of clutter or choosing a paint color? The value added, dollar for dollar, that people get from Staging can't be done any other way."

Schwarz recently took on a Spanish home in the Seattle area listed at \$1.4 million. She cleared and cleaned up the overgrown shrubbery to reveal an elegant courtyard entry with a fountain. She Staged and repainted all the rooms and had the hardwood floors refinished. With that investment of \$25,000 in Staging, the owner re-listed the house. It sold in three weeks for \$1.9 million, \$500,000 above the original asking price.

Here's Schwarz' eight-step process for getting a home prepared to go on the market, as she plans the Staging of her friend's Concord, California home:

1. **Stand in the doorway to look at each room**

"If the buyer's not in the room, they're not buying the house," Schwarz says, as she stands, hands on hips, below a decorative wrought-iron tree festooned with beaded ornaments and in front of a large living room crammed with knickknacks and red upholstered furniture. "Where does your eye go? Buyers only know what they see, not the way it's going to be."

2. **Make a plan and pick a focal point**

Every room has a focal point: a fireplace, a bed, a desk. "In this living room, it's the fireplace," Schwarz explains. "We have to make sure it's not covered up."

3. **De-Accessorize**

"Get rid of the 'room dandruff,'" she says. "We usually take everything out and pile it in the hallway." She starts stacking unnecessary stuff on a red couch: extra throws, an exercise machine, burgundy wineglasses filled with sprays of iridescent eucalyptus branches, magazines.

4. **Decide what furniture leaves and how to arrange the furniture that stays**

"Most rooms have too much furniture. You don't need more than three to five pieces in a living room," says Schwarz. "When you put things into storage, you can breathe. There's more room. There's less for the buyer to deal with. It's less stressful." In this carefully decorated Concord living room, Schwarz will recommend getting rid of a wrought-iron end table, two stools, a magazine basket and probably one of the oversize easy chairs.

5. **Re-Accessorize**

From the pile you've created, put just a few things back. Schwarz likes to work in groups of threes, and positions decorative items on the glass coffee table. "That feels better," she says. "It's freer, cleaner."

6. **Keep going back to the doorway, keep reassessing what you've done**

"It's important to create an airy, open feeling for each room. Remember that

- potential buyers aren't going to be hanging out in your house, but wandering around it. Try to think about what breaks up the flow of walking," she says.
7. **Fine-tune**
"The tags on these cushions will have to go," she says. "The cords from the blinds will be tied up. It will be clean, Q-Tip clean."
 8. **Set the scene**
Turn certain lights on to show the room off to best advantage. Set the stereo to a station that plays something nonassertive, like light jazz. Arrange a few pillar candles or votives on a table.

Schwarz goes back to the entryway and surveys what she's done. "Lights, music, action," she says, and the home is ready to go on the market.