ENTER STAGE RIGHT

Preparing your home for a quicker sale through Home Staging

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Prospective home buyers make their buying decisions within five seconds of walking into a house. Fact or fiction? "It takes just a few seconds for a prospective buyer to get an impression and know whether they want to buy your house or not," says Susan Bowman, a real estate agent with Kent Associates in Marin County.

So, when you're getting your home ready to sell, what can you do to encourage a quick yes?

Home staging is the secret weapon of real estate agents and their savvy clients. And staging sometimes results in several prospective buyers saying yes. When that happens, there's no telling how much over your asking price you'll get when a bidding war starts.

While staging is certainly about clearing the clutter and rearranging the furniture -- the stuff that distracts the eye -- it also can include painting, carpeting, landscaping and redecorating. And in the extreme case or for a new house, home staging can be decorating from scratch, and quickly. Whatever the degree of staging you do, it can make a significant difference in how quickly and for how much your home sells.

Does it make much difference? Just ask John and Carol Sauer. Their Mill Valley house hadn't been redecorated since they moved into it 13 years earlier. Last fall, they put it on the market, but it didn't sell. They took it off the market for the holiday season and at the beginning of the year became serious about selling. Their real estate agent, Jane Richmond of Pacific Union, strongly encouraged them to stage the house because it would show better.

"It needed more than just taking stuff off the dressers," Richmond says. "There was a definite '70s feeling to the place that could be easily updated with the right approach."

Staging makes a house appeal to the widest possible range of people. Prospective buyers want to imagine themselves, not you, living in the house. That means putting away personal items.

"When you stage your house, you have to realize that it's not your home anymore," John Sauer says. Richmond brought in a professional stager for a consultation. The stager suggested the house needed recarpeting, repainting in places, rearranging of some furniture and, for the family room, a key selling feature in any house, complete refurnishing.

With that in mind, the Sauers sorted through their personal items, determining which to keep and which to give away or toss. They packed what they kept.

Then the staging work began.

The '70s feeling came from the natural wood trim on all the windows and doors. This was dramatically changed simply by painting it all white. The walls, which were light beige, were in good condition and left alone.

All the carpeting in the bedrooms and halls was replaced, giving the house a fresher, more updated appearance. The furniture was simply rearranged to appear more inviting, except in the well-loved family room, which was completely overhauled with new furniture, plants and accessories.

The house was put back on the market for more than the previous asking price. The Sauers immediately got five offers. Their house sold within the first week for far more than the new asking price. The time and money the Sauers invested in preparing the house was realized many times over in the price they got.

"What helped us was the initial meeting. We got ideas about what should be changed and how it would look," Sauer says. "We also realized that the professional stager should be given as much autonomy as possible for this process to work well." This is because stagers are not emotionally attached to the house or its furnishings, and they know what feeling the buyer is looking for when walking in the door.

How do you know whether your home is a good candidate for staging?

Put yourself in the place of a prospective home buyer. Walk through your front door as if you've never been in the house. Look hard. Be objective. Get past the familiar feeling of coming home. What do you see, and how do you feel? If you can't be objective, recruit a close friend to be honest, not polite.

If the feeling is chaos jumping out at you, your house is definitely a good candidate for staging.

Some basic things can help make a house show well. Clear the clutter. Take everything off the dresser, the mantle, the refrigerator door, the kitchen and bathroom counters. Everything. After you've thoroughly cleaned all the surfaces, put just a few nice pieces back. A stager's trick is to add three interesting pieces, grouped together rather than spread out. This creates visual appeal.

Sort, toss or store neatly all that stuff in the closets, cabinets, shelves and storage areas. There are companies that help people sort through years of accumulation so this burdensome chore can be lifted from your shoulders.

Clean. A clean, neat house always shows better than one where dust bunnies lurk in corners and beds are unmade. For more basics see "Staging Tips" on this page.

Sometimes staging your home is too much to handle; the furniture's too old, there's no one to give you honest answers about whether your house looks great or you have to move before the house sells and you can't leave everything behind until it does. Then what do you do?

Bring in a professional stager -- someone with a trained eye, a warehouse full of designer furniture, accessories to die for and thriving plants.

Watching a stager is like watching a magician. A stager can move a sofa from one side of the room to another and completely change the feeling and focus in that space. A stager offers not only a fresh perspective, but an understanding of why a change is important. They also bring with them a Rolodex full of resources to get the necessary work done quickly.

Typically, the real estate agent decides the overall impression the house should convey to the buyer, then calls in the stager. The stager comes into the house and takes notes. They look at how traffic flows in a space and how to highlight the good architectural focal points and minimize the awkward ones. They think about what furniture style will best suit the house and provide the most appeal to prospective buyers.

If the owner's furniture will be left in the house, they recommend what to remove and what to bring to enhance what's there. Depending on how much preparation is necessary, recommendations may include remodeling old bathrooms, replacing appliances, painting, carpeting and landscaping. As with the Sauers, this work is done first.

If it's a large staging project, it's not uncommon to see a stager arrive with several trucks filled with furniture, bolts of fabric, boxes of accessories and tall, dramatic plants. An installation can take from a couple of days to a week, depending on the size of the house and the scope of work.

Some stagers have warehouses full of furniture, others rely on suppliers who work exclusively with professional stagers, and others rent pieces from large, national furniture rental companies.

Almost all stagers have their own inventory of accessories, the stock-in-trade items that they've collected. This inventory is usually quite large, covers a lot of different decorating styles and creates the ultimate look of a room. Some stagers rent accessories from showrooms and stores. And art dealers often lend or rent pieces to give their artists exposure.

As a final touch, stagers add those wonderful large, healthy plants. Most of the time they're real plants and have to be professionally maintained. This is included in the staging package.

There are as many prices to staging as there are stagers in the business. And, like buying a car, the price depends on the style in which you want to arrive.

Often the real estate agent pays for the initial consultation because a lot can be accomplished in that meeting. Also, the stager can say things to the homeowner that the agent might feel awkward about saying, since the agent has a longer- term relationship with the seller.

A one-hour consultation gets ideas on the table about the scope of the project and the time line necessary to get all the work done. Typically a consultation of this nature is included in the price of the staging, but if it's a small project and the homeowner will do most of the work, this meeting might cost from $100 to $400, depending on its length.

A basic staging involving some furniture rearrangments, the use of some accessories and plants, and about a day's work costs around $2,000 at the low end. The price of a full empty-house staging, on the other hand, has been known to cost as much as $30,000. But this represented a fraction of the asking price for a house listed at several million dollars. The house sold the first day it was shown to brokers for $1 million over the asking price.

The Sauers spent $25,000 to prepare their home for sale. The selling price of their home increased by more than 10 times that amount. "The price we got was 30 percent more than an offer which fell through five months earlier," John Sauer says -- not an insignificant return on their staging investment. Whatever level of staging you do, it will make a noticeable difference in your favor.

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