

HOME STAGING

Depersonalizing as a Sales Tool

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A picture may be worth a thousand words, but when you're selling your home, that picture may cost you time and money.

Family photos, along with personal collections and even works of art, make a house a home, but they don't necessarily make it more saleable, say real estate experts. Home staging — the art of neutralizing and depersonalizing to allow a prospective buyer to mentally move in — does that.

Staging solves common design dilemmas, clutter among them, and employs tricks to maximize a home's best assets. According to one report, staged homes sell up to five times faster than their non-staged counterparts.

In the 1970s, Barb Schwarz coined the word "staging" and developed it into a marketing concept. Using her background in interior design, theater and real estate, she's since staged thousands of homes and founded the International Association of Home Staging Professionals.® "A house is like a theatrical set," she says. "The audience is the buyers coming through."

Staging is not the same as decorating. In many ways, it's just the opposite. Decorating personalizes a property to an owner's tastes. Staging depersonalizes it to show off the space. Buyers only know what they see, not the way it could be.

Surprisingly, even an estate that has been transformed by an interior designer's touch can benefit from professional staging. A fine work of art might be considered an acquired taste or a period antique collection, however valuable, could distract would-be buyers and cause them to dwell on the items, rather than the home's features, energy and flow. "In this economy, buyers have so many homes to look at, they can be extremely picky," Schwarz says. "The star in each home should be the space."

Staging can be as modest as a paint job and some decluttering or as extensive as a room-by-room overhaul involving furniture rental, repurposing or rearranging. Among the considerations: Is anything impeding flow? Are the areas where the eye settles positive or negative? Think model home — sparkling clean.

Among Schwarz's suggestions:

- Remove family photographs, trophies and certificates
- Pack away religious items
- Stow personal collections and controversial artwork, no matter how valuable
- Declutter countertops and dresser tops
- Use neutral colors on the walls and floors; for pop, use "movable" color on pillows, towels, etc.
- Neutralize smells from smoking, pets, even strong room deodorizers

A 35- to 55-page home staging consultation report detailing what work needs to be performed averages about \$350 and can run as high as \$750 for a larger home, Schwarz says. Homeowners can use the report as an action plan and do the work themselves or hire the stager at an additional fee for a turnkey solution. Depending on the size and condition of the residence, that could be \$1,500-\$8,000 for an average high-end home, plus rental and storage fees, if needed. The numbers sometimes surprise sellers, but as Schwarz puts it, "An investment in staging your property is far less than a price reduction." However, she says two things sell a home — staging and pricing. Staged homes sell for more money, but they still have to be in a price range that makes sense.

Robbie Briggs of Briggs Freeman Sotheby's International Realty in Dallas, Texas,

figures about 35-45% of his clients' homes are staged in some way, whether that involves professional stagers or recommendations from real estate agents. "We believe in it quite strongly. Every one of us gets used to our own home. We don't see it through a professional eye," he says. "A professional gets it looking its very best so buyers pay more and buy it quicker. Staging is a very important process in the overall marketing plan of a property."

Briggs says some homeowners initially don't see value and are even offended at the suggestion. But it is not a reflection of the owners' tastes or their design sensibilities.

"As an example, an owner could have exquisite museum-quality mounts, but we know that half the buyers might find even beautiful animal heads offensive." Cutting out a large share of the potential market is not the best way to sell a home.

While Briggs says staged homes sell faster, sometimes staging can also turn the "unsaleable" into the saleable. He cites the example of a property listed by another agency for its lot because the home was considered a teardown. The property languished on the market for nine months. Briggs Freeman Sotheby's International Realty eventually took the listing and had it staged with new furnishings, carpeting and paint. It sold in two weeks. "That kind of effort pays off time and time again," he says.

John Poole, of Sotheby's International Realty Canada in Toronto, Ontario, is another proponent of staging and says any home will benefit from it, no matter what the price. His firm works with a number of professionals. "It's an important relationship we have with them. You have to trust in the person that you're turning your clients over to."

He says more agents are taking the initiative in suggesting staging to sellers. "The way you live in your home is not the way you sell a home. At the end of the day, our job is get sellers the most money for the property, as quickly as we can. Staging is one of the things that can get us there." He says the rule of thumb in his market is that every dollar invested on staging yields a \$1.60 return. "It might not show up in actual dollars, but time on the market might be shortened quite a bit," Poole explains.

A downside? Sellers sometimes fall back in love with their homes. "That's happened," says Poole. "And on the rare occasion, they take it off the market."