

# staging a home



By Adriane M. Weinberg

Not that long ago houses sold immediately. Sans negotiation, offers were at or above asking price. If buyers hesitated, they knew someone else would grab it. Those days are gone, at least for now. Buyers are delighted. No longer held hostage to rapidly escalating prices and bidding wars, they are free to compare and counteroffer. Price reductions and incentives have become common. What is the savvy seller's secret? Home staging!

Home staging is the preparation of a house specifically to sell it for the most money in the least

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amount of time by maximizing its cosmetic and emotional appeal to the broadest range of buyers. Starting on the West Coast where houses are routinely staged for sale, the trend has slowly been spreading east. Staging is a proven marketing advantage. According to the July

ing price. Depending on what is needed, basic recommendations may include decluttering, ways to neutralize the seller's style, cosmetic enhancements and repairs.

Usually a good handyman can do all or most of the work, but professionals may be preferred for cer-

what you're selling—the house. Emotion-stirring vignettes, created in every room to draw in buyers, will capture their hearts and imaginations. The result is strong emotional appeal that engages buyers and invokes images of how they would live there. Without the ability to form that picture and feel an emotional connection, buyers walk away and opportunities are lost. These touches distinguish your house from the competition by giving it the “wow” factor to command top dollar. Avoiding this step is a costly mistake!

The moment a house goes on the market, it becomes a commodity for sale. Sellers must be objective about how their homes appear to buyers. Few, however, can do this. If you cannot, it's important to work with someone who can. In most cases, the way one lives in a home and sells it should be very different. Buyers do not want to see how you live in your house; they need to envision how they would live there, so do not expect them to imagine how it could look.

Home builders are master creators of model homes that elicit

feel-good emotions. But they don't have to deal with the clutter that home sellers do. An overabundance of stuff or eclectic décor will turn off buyers. Chairs ripped by Fido, Junior's wall art and broken closet doors will not give your house a lived-in look. It just will look neglected. Buyers will conclude that if the living areas were not maintained, neither were the HVAC, electrical and plumbing systems. They will make a low offer to compensate or cross the house off their list.

First impressions are vital. Before marketing and showing, make sure the house and property are in excellent condition. Start outside with curb appeal. If people are turned off by the exterior, usually they will go no further.

#### COMPARISON SHOPPING

Look at different, but not uncommon, scenarios where Barbara Buyer views three comparable houses in the same neighborhood. For the purpose of this example, Ms. Buyer goes inside each house. 1 Ms. Buyer's initial view of the first house is overgrown landscap-

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27, 2004, edition of the “Denver Post,” in 1999 and 2002, Joy Valentine, a California broker, surveyed approximately 3,000 homes in all price ranges. Both times, on average, staged homes sold in about half the time and for more money, often for tens of thousands of dollars.

The process starts with the home stager and seller thoroughly touring the house, inside and out. The stager points out major and minor drawbacks that buyers will notice and mentally deduct from the ask-

tain projects. Unfortunately many people, including Realtors®, mistakenly think that completes the process. Staging should go well beyond the basics.

#### FINAL STAGING TOUCHES

After completing the basic recommendations, perform the last critical step, what I call the “final staging touches,” to get the best results. Furniture and accessories are strategically placed to accentuate the home's look and feel, maximize square footage and focus buyers on

## GET ORGANIZED

ing and grass inundated with weeds, missing roof tiles, a cracked concrete driveway and several overflowing trash containers. Feeling quite apprehensive, she goes inside. Every room is cluttered, the walls need repainting and the carpeting is worn and stained. She knows it will cost several thousand dollars to get the house in good condition. The plethora of stuff makes it impossible to determine if her furnishings would fit or how they would look. She leaves, feeling emotionally drained. While trying to calculate the cost of repairs, she decides she doesn't want the aggra-

furnishings enhance uncluttered rooms and paint and carpet colors are neutral. She pauses in each room to visualize how lovely her things would look. Everything appears to be in good condition so she believes that the house has been well cared for. The house is in move-in condition so no work on her part is required. Upon leaving, she smiles because she found her new home.

You think the choice is obvious and it is. But you may be surprised to know that the first and second scenarios depict many homes on the market. Outside, buyers decide

enough makeup to enhance her features, she will quickly grab her date's attention.

In any housing market, staged homes sell faster and for more money than comparable unstaged homes. According to real estate guru Barbara Corcoran, staging can raise your selling price anywhere from 5 to 20 percent. It's an investment that pays for itself and costs far less than a price reduction. Home staging is the proven marketing tool to get the best result on the sale of your biggest investment.



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## Buyers do not want to see how you live in your house; they need to envision how they would live there.

vation nor has the time to hire trades people and wait for completion of the work. She quickly eliminates that house.

**2** Next, Ms. Buyer visits a vacant house. She surveys the grounds and notices one tree in the yard and scant green shrubs at the front of the house. The house is painted white. The house is empty, the walls are stark white and there are no light fixtures in some rooms. It is hard to estimate if her furnishings would work because there is nothing to provide perspective. Overall the house appears in good condition. The blah factor is huge because the house is devoid of life and appeal. As she walks to her car, she feels zero emotional connection. She continues her search.

**3** Ms. Buyer sees the outside of the last house. The lawn is neatly mowed, shrubs are trimmed, seasonal plants abound and there are no noticeable defects. Feeling very hopeful, she walks to the house and notices the freshly painted front entrance. Inside, the rooms are clean, light and bright. Tasteful

in 8 seconds if they like a house. Inside, it's 10 to 15 minutes. Does your house quickly captivate buyers?

To illustrate, a home I staged recently was the last of five listed for sale in a development. The seller received multiple offers. The house sold in 2 weeks at 98 percent of the asking price in a buyers' market! In fact, weeks later none of the other homes had sold and some had price reductions. Staging was given sole credit for the quick and profitable result.

Your house is like a blind date to buyers. Take a woman preparing to meet a blind date for dinner. She may look perfectly fine dressed in jeans and a baggy sweater, a rubber band holding her hair in a ponytail and no makeup. Her date may ask her out again if dinner goes well. However, she will not have a second date if instead she is unclean and wears torn, stained clothes, heavy makeup and perfume and too many accessories. If she chooses to wear flattering clothes with just the right accessories, styles her hair and wears just

## home staging tips

- Stage before marketing online (e.g., photos, virtual tours) and onsite showings.
- Clean the entire house; kitchen and bathrooms should be spotless.
- Declutter. Pack things you're moving and donate or toss the rest.
- Have plenty of light in every room (natural and artificial) and keep lights on in the evening for drive-by prospects.
- Wash windows, inside and out.
- Remove evidence of pets.
- Eliminate odors.
- Have single-purpose rooms. If a room has exercise equipment, home office furniture, playpen, toys, sofa, TV and ironing board, it will confuse buyers.