

'Staging' Results in Faster Sale, Richer Price

By Noelle Knox for USA TODAY, October 27, 2006

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Fran Freedman took down the family photos and most of her artwork. She had the fence in the front yard ripped out, and she got rid of half the clothes in her closet. And that was just for starters. She wasn't redecorating. Rather, she was "staging" her house for a potential home buyer.

With 3.75 million homes on the market -- a 7.3-month supply -- sellers must work harder these days to attract buyers. Yet oddly enough, the trick to making your home stand out is often to make both the interior and exterior look generic, almost bland. And that's where home staging comes in.

"The philosophy is the buyer must be able to picture themselves living in your home," says Freedman, 65, a lawyer in Philadelphia. "They don't want to see your family photos and your artwork. The decor should be understated so they can say, 'This would be the perfect place for my...'"

Does it work? When Coldwell Banker Residential Brokerage in Los Altos, Calif., looked at nearly 2,800 properties in eight U.S. cities in 2004, they found that the staged homes, on average, sold in half the time that the non-staged homes did. The sellers with staged homes ended up with 6.3% more than their asking price, on average, while sellers with non-staged homes sold for 1.6% more than the asking price.

The cost of hiring a company to stage your home tends to range from \$1,800 to \$3,800 but can go much higher, depending on the size of the house and the amount of work involved.

Freedman says Tailored Transitions, the company she used, "had a hard time convincing me and my husband to spend the money. People don't spend money on this kind of thing. I'd never heard of staging."

In the end, they spent \$2,500 for the interior, \$4,000 for the exterior, \$500 to rent "props" like less eye-catching artwork and decorative pillows and \$500 to move their excess furniture and boxes into storage. In hindsight, she says, it was worth every dime.

They listed their home this month for \$949,000, and Freedman says, "I don't know if we would have priced it that high when it wasn't so attractive."

Judee von Seldeneck put her staged home in Philadelphia on the market this month; it sold in one day, for \$700,000.

From moving shrubs to planting flowers, to replacing the knobs on kitchen cabinets and ripping up the carpet on the stairs, every change was made to accentuate the house's best features. There were even pumpkins on the porch to lend a homey, inviting look.

Inside, the stagers "put furniture that looked comfortable but not too heavy, not cluttered," says von Seldeneck, CEO of an executive search firm, who's "in my 60s." The books on shelves, colors of the rug, the furniture -- all were "geared more toward younger people."

She spent \$8,000 on the job and says, "It was the best money I ever spent."

Short of hiring a company to do the work, there are some simple steps any seller can take to stage a home:

*Cleaning. The house should be Q-tip clean. Every surface should sparkle; every groove should be dirt-free. And above all, wash the windows.

*Clutter. Pack up family photos, stacks of paper, medicines on the bathroom counter, the books overflowing the bookcase. Hide trash cans, ashtrays, the laundry hamper, the kitchen sponge, the cat's litter box and food dishes.

"Clutter eats equity," says Barb Schwarz, the self-proclaimed inventor of home staging and author of *Home Staging: The Winning Way to Sell Your House for More Money*.

*Color. Dark walls make the house look smaller. Walls should be off-white, or have earthy tones if the room has lots of light. Ideally, the carpet would be "real estate beige." Open or take down the curtains, so the rooms will have as much light as possible. Leave on the lights in darker areas.

*Focal point. To think like a professional stager, stand at the doorway of each room. What features do you want to accentuate? Where's the focal point? (A room should have only one.) So if you have a fireplace and a big-screen TV, take out the TV. Arrange the furniture so the eye is drawn to the focal point.

*Furniture. Most rooms have too much furniture, which makes rooms look smaller. Reduce the number of pillows on the couch to zero, or have an odd number like three. Remove afghans and blankets. Reduce the number of paintings on the walls.

*Dining room. Take out the leaves from your dining table and put no more than four chairs around it. Set the table as if for a meal, and put an appealing centerpiece in the middle. Reduce the number of dishes in the china cabinet, leaving only a few.

*Kitchen. The exterior of the refrigerator should be bare. Store any appliances you don't use daily out of sight. Hide the trash can, and put the sponge and soap under the sink. You can spruce up an outdated kitchen simply by changing the knobs and hinges.

*Master bedroom. Buy a new bedspread, if necessary. Clear off bedside tables and chests of drawers. Hide the alarm clock. For the closets, pack up any clothing you're not using this season. It'll make the space look larger.

*Bathroom. Replace bar soap with liquid. Coordinate all towels using one or two colors. Fold them in thirds and hang them neatly. Clear everything out of the shower except for one bottle of liquid soap and one bottle of shampoo. Clean or replace the shower curtain. Make sure all grout is clean and in good condition. Remove all cloth toilet lid covers, and keep the lid down. Hide the trash can.

*Outside. Keep the lawn mowed and the edges neat. Trim shrubs, especially around windows. Put flowering plants near the front door. Does the house need painting? Consider painting or staining the front door; it's one of the least expensive ways to spruce up the entry. If there's furniture on the porch, make sure it isn't plastic but rather good wicker or wrought iron. Power-wash or stain the deck. Remove or hide old cans and bottles, auto parts, boats and RVs.

"When you start staging your house, emotionally, you need to say goodbye to your house," says Starr Osborne, CEO of Tailored Transitions in Philadelphia, the staging firm Freedman hired. "It's like hotel living. It's not a comfortable experience, but your home will sell more quickly and for better money."

The de-cluttering process is "one of the biggest challenges we find," she says. "Sellers feel it's an indictment of the way they live. You have to remember what you're selling. You're not selling your taste; you're selling tastes the buyer wants to see."

Freedman recalls it was "kind of traumatic" when all her family photos were packed away. Another tough moment was when she stood in front of her closet, wondering what she could throw out.

But in the end, Freedman says, the process was "cathartic." "It made us realize we had too much," she says. "When we move, we won't use it all."