

Home staging becoming more important for a sale as real estate rebounds

BY STEVE JONES

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Dewey and Judy Baldwin's Realtor told them not to expect a quick turnaround when they put their home up for sale in January.

But with only a couple of weak nibbles by the end of July, the couple decided to do what an increasing number of homesellers are doing nationally.

They called a home stager, who brought in furniture and furnishings to spruce up the vacant, 3,500-square-foot home in Long Bay Estates.



"The house looks a lot better with furniture in it," Dewey Hill said. "It brings out the features of the house."

Home staging has been around for decades, said Maureen Bray, board president of the Real Estate Home Staging Association, but it's really taken off in the last five years, a trend she at least partially attributes to broadcasts on HGTV.

Yes, she said, staging should help a home sell more quickly, but how much could depend on who you're talking to.

Homes in Portland, Ore., where she is located, are on the market for an average of 77 days, she said. Those that have been staged by her company, Room Solutions Staging, sell in an average of 13.5 days.

Bray said staging has become more important as the real estate market has revived and buyers look at maybe a dozen homes before deciding which to purchase.

"The ones that look the best make buyers feel like they can move in," she said.

The Baldwins chose new stager Charity Keefer, who recently opened her Showhomes franchise on the Grand Strand.

They got her mini-makeover package, and Dewey Hill said there is more buyer interest, and solid interest, in the home since Keefer did her work and had a brokers open house.

A former pharmaceutical saleswoman, Keefer said she got into staging as a way to get out of the constant road trips her job required and to spend more time with her husband and two small children.

But in addition, it gives her a chance to express her creativity.

"I've always had this creative side, and I wasn't sure what I'd do with it," she said.

Keefer said that besides the furniture and furnishings, her company painted the inside of the Dewey house, installed new light fixtures and put new tiles on the fireplace surround.

Keefer bought the franchise earlier this year and did one other home before she officially hung out her shingle. Since the Deweys' home makeover, she has gotten a contract for a Socastee home being sold by Ron Boykin of Re/Max Southern Shores.

"When (a home) is vacant," Boykin said, "it's sometimes hard for people to visualize their own stuff in it."

He said the owners of the custom home that borders a park and the Intracoastal Waterway signed for a \$4,000 package that will have Keefer staging the entire downstairs and the master bedroom upstairs.

He's not sure what to expect, but the home already has been on the market for a year, and Boykin hopes the staging will prompt a sale in three months.

Bray cautioned that people check out a home stager before they hire one. Among other things, she said that certification, while not required, is a plus because it shows the stager's dedication to the profession. Further, she said that stagers should have their own liability insurance to protect the homeowner's policy.

Keefer said she has both those, but she's short on the experience that Bray said clients should also ask about. A stager's website is another plus, Bray said, as are local references and before and after photos, which clients should want to see.

Besides the staging, Keefer will also be arranging live-in managers to give otherwise vacant homes that lived-in feeling, a hallmark of the Showhomes franchise.

While Bray doesn't think managers are necessary, Showhomes believes that they can provide that extra oomph to houses that are for sale. Besides the lived-in feel, managers are responsible to see that the home is kept clean and show-ready.

"They really have to be meticulous in the way they live," Keefer said.

Staging is not just cosmetic, although things like fresh paint and curb appeal can be important.

One of the most important things sellers should do is to declutter and depersonalize their home.

"It's one of the main turnoffs for buyers," she said of clutter. "It prevents buyers from seeing the main features of the house."

Good staging will let buyers focus on the space of the house and to appreciate its architectural details.

But even before staging, Bray said it's essential that sellers price their home to sell.

"Staging isn't going to cure an overpriced home," she said.

Keefer said homebuyers decide within 15 seconds of walking through the door of a home for sale if they could live there. Bray said the decision certainly comes within the first 60 seconds, so it's critical for a stager or seller to focus on the home's entry.

"You want whatever people see to make them want to see more," Bray said.

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