

Staging

A SMALL INVESTMENT WITH A BIG RETURN

By Nancy Lucas

Some investors dismiss home staging as an extra expense when the budget is already tight. Some home sellers think their house is so appealing that staging is unnecessary. Statistics and the psychology of sales suggest otherwise.

Studies back up home stagers' claim that staged houses sell in less time, and for a higher price, than un-staged houses. According to members of the International Association of Staging Professionals, 95 percent of staged homes sell in about 35 days, those that are not staged sit on the market for about 187 days.

STAGE COACHING

The term "staging" was coined in 1972 by Barb Schwarz, CEO of Stagedhomes.com, now headquartered in La Quinta, California. Staging means marketing the home to appeal to the target buyer. (It is not interior decorating, which is designed to appeal to personal taste.)



Schwarz started as a realtor, struggling with sellers who thought it was fine to show their homes with dust bunnies in the corners, the kids' toys scattered on the living room floor, and pots of dead geraniums on the front porch. Once she got the sellers to clean up, clear out the junk, and toss the dead flowers, the houses would sell.

Schwarz uses selling your car as an analogy. It's easy to see that detailing (thoroughly cleaning and buffing the interior and exterior, and under the hood), will help you get the most money for your car.

"It's the same with houses," says Schwarz. "Buyers only know what they see. Agents and appraisers only know what they see, too."

REALITY TV?

Home renovation as seen on Home and Garden Television is about as accurate a depiction of the process as *Leave it to Beaver* is to American family life. It's a prettified picture where the tough times are swept under the rug. If all projects were on time, on budget, and beautifully executed by hunky, charming craftsmen and divinely talented, amiable designers, we'd all be renovating all the time.

So if you're planning to have anyone come in to your home to do anything at all, erase all memories of HGTV shows.

The \$2,000 makeover? They imply that staging does not include labor costs. And they make it look like it can be done in a couple of hours. It's misleading at best.

Still, HGTV programs and their Web site are great resources. Just remember, the shows are designed to be entertaining. They are not documentaries.

INVEST IN STAGING

Maureen Bray, who owns Portland, Oregon-based Room Solutions Staging, also started as a realtor and moved into staging. Bray knows what's important to investors because she comes from a family of real estate investors and she invests on her own. She buys slightly ailing single-family homes and breathes life into them with renovation and staging.

"We consider ourselves partners with home sellers and real estate agents," said Bray. "The first step in staging is to identify the target buyer and price range. From there, we add and subtract, mostly subtract, from the home to appeal to that buyer."

Like many new ideas, home staging took hold in the West, and has worked its way East.



Stager Joyce Pace, founder and owner of Joyful Home Staging in South Dartmouth, Massachusetts (about one hour south of Boston), says that people have heard of staging in her area, but it hasn't taken hold as a pre-requisite to selling a home. "Fortunately, it's no longer necessary to explain what staging is," said Pace.

Television programs have had a major influence. "People are more aware of staging now because of Home and Garden Television and The Learning Channel," said Bray.

IT'S THE ECONOMY, STUPID

Home staging reflects the real estate market. In the current market, staging can shorten the time holding the home and paying the mortgage.

"They (sellers) need us now more than ever," said Bray. "With so much flooding the market, and so much competition, you need to make sure it appeals to the target buyer."

Real estate agents are usually the ones who recommend staging to sellers, but some are reluctant to suggest staging because they are concerned that the seller will be insulted. "That's where communication skills come in. It's how you say it," says Schwarz. "If you were a doctor you wouldn't just walk up to your patient and say 'you have incurable cancer.' You'd work up to it carefully and say it with sensitivity."

SIDEWALK SALES

Most people think of staging the inside of the home. But staging the out-



side is more important. The outside is the first point of contact.

In the typical scenario, the agent drives his clients to the front of the house. If the buyers don't like what they see, they'll keep on going to the next house.

"They won't go inside if they don't like what's outside," says Schwarz.

Bray says she has always staged from the curb to the back fence. "You have to capture buyers' attention from the moment they drive by. You want them to say 'I can't wait to see the inside,'" says Bray.

The basics of curb appeal are making sure the house is visible from the street. Overgrown bushes or trees look like you're hiding something. The sidewalk and path to the home should be free of debris. Plants should

be healthy. (What could be more of a turnoff than dead plants?) Seasonal issues are important, too. In the fall, leaves should be raked into neat piles. In winter, clear snow from obstructing the house or making the walkway dangerous.

AS SEEN ONLINE

Most buyers start their home searches on the Internet, looking at photos. The first photo is the front of the house. A search may turn up an overwhelming number of homes to review. "At that point, they are usually

decision moment as well. "Curb appeal is essential for the Internet because the first photo shows the front of the house," says Pace. "It's as important as the cover of a magazine."

Most photos on listing service are very poor. Many homes look more like The House on Haunted Hill than Home Sweet Home. Photographic sins include the house hidden by overgrown foliage or dark shadows. Most photos are out of focus.

"Learn to look at your house through the eye of the camera," says Schwarz. "This is how it will be seen on the Internet. Make them want to see more."



"Another good idea is to have photographs of the outside of your home in all four seasons," says Pace. "If you're selling in the winter, show photos of the garden in full summer bloom."

You may want to learn the basics yourself, or call on a friend or relative who knows how to handle a camera. At the very least, take the photo when there is the most sunlight on the front of the house.

It may be worth hiring a professional who specializes in real estate photography. "It's a reasonably priced marketing tool that does make a difference," says Bray.

COST OF NOT STAGING

Staging is an upfront cost; but home stagers demonstrate the value of their services with less time on the market and higher selling prices. For investors, every day on the market adds carrying costs that cut in to their profit

margin. "There are three important ingredients to selling a house; location, price, and condition (staging is part of condition)," says Bray. "If these are aligned there will be a faster sale. My goal when working with investors is to make a fast sale to get more equity."

Staging shows off the most important aspects of the home and draws attention away from flaws. "Every single time there's anything that looks like it needs to be redone or updated that comes off the price," says Pace. "The investment in staging is less than the first price drop." ■



BARB SCHWARZ'S EIGHT STAGING TIPS

1. Clean. Every inch of the home should be Q-tip clean.
2. Clutter free. "Clutter eats equity."
3. Color. No more than three colors on the outside. Inside use a neutral color on floor and walls. Use color in area rugs, art work, as accent and punch.
4. Curb appeal. Include front, side, and back yards.
5. Stage entire outside.
6. Pledge to get seller top dollar. Don't leave money on the table. Share the truth and you can help the seller.
7. Lighting. Light up dark areas.
8. Hire a professional photographer to show the home at its best.

looking to eliminate, to pare down to the best choices," she Pace.

Someone in New Hampshire searching online for a winter retreat in Arizona will make a judgment in a few seconds based solely on the photo. And when real estate agents show clients a listing sheet, that photo is a

RESOURCES

Avant Gardeners
www.avantgardeners.com

Joyful Home Staging
Joyfulhomedesign@yahoo.com
 508-999-3505

Room Solutions Staging
www.roomsolutions.com
 503-246-1800

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