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Setting the Stage; Before the Curtain Rises on a Sale, Get your Home Ready for Its Close-Up

By Daniela Deane
The Washington Post

Get rid of at least half your stuff. Clean the house until it sparkles. Have your carpets and floors professionally cleaned -- or replaced, if they're worn. Paint if you need to.

Put crisp green apples into a stylish black bowl on your kitchen table. Turn all the lights on. Start some soft jazz on the CD player. Bake some chocolate chip cookies.

Lights, camera, action. It's time to sell your home.

Styling, staging, or fluffing a house -- whatever you want to call it -- is something most real estate agents wish their sellers would do. Even in times like this, when houses can sell in a matter of days, agents say staging a home as if it were the set for a play is a sure-fire way to get the best possible price in the shortest time.

"I tell sellers to look at their homes like a Hollywood set," said Barb Schwarz, a real estate agent from Seattle who founded the International Association of Home Staging Professionals, which runs training programs. "The audience is the buyer. The stager is the director. The critics are the agents who talk behind your back. And the goal is more money."

Staging, which first gained popularity on the West Coast, increasingly is catching on with agents in the Washington area.

"I staged three properties last month," said Deb Gorham, an agent with Long & Foster Cos. in Reston who recently took the association's two-day course. "And this month, I did five. The business has grown every month since I started in the spring."

Ron Sitrin, an agent with Long & Foster in Montgomery County, said: "We're spending more and more time on staging. I put a person on staff about two months ago and part of her responsibilities are staging homes for sale."

The cornerstone of the staging concept is that a property needs to be marketed just like any other product that's being sold to the public. This is a hard concept for many sellers to grasp because they are emotionally attached to their houses.

"It's a very delicate thing to go in and tell people that the way they've lived for 15 years is not the way they're going to get their house sold for top dollar," said Hugh Kelly, an agent with Coldwell Banker Residential Brokerage-Pardoe on Capitol Hill. "People don't want to hear it."

But the way you live in a home and the way you market a home are two different things, agents insist.

"If you went to Starbucks and your cup was dented and had lipstick on it, you'd either want to give it back or get a heck of a buy on it," Schwarz said. "Your house is like that Starbucks cup. You need to sterilize it, get the dent out and the lipstick off."

Melinda Estridge, an agent with Long & Foster in Bethesda,

said many people will put more energy into selling their used car than they will their home, which is unwise if "you're interested in getting the biggest bang for the buck from your biggest investment." She said 95 percent of the homes she looks at that are going up for sale need some work, even the ones in great condition.

Staging basically means de-personalizing a home so that a buyer's attention can gravitate to the house itself rather than to what's in it. For that reason, some agents also refer to it as "blanding."

Clutter, the sheer overabundance of stuff, is the No. 1 issue, agents and decorators said.

"Clutter is without a doubt the biggest problem," said Mary Sullivan, an interior decorator who stages properties for real estate agent Carol Greco of Long & Foster in Annandale. "It is just unbelievable how much stuff people have. I've been on projects where clothing took up a whole bedroom of the house. I saw one house with racks of new clothes in the bedroom with the tags still on them. What that says to a buyer is, 'I don't have enough closet space in this house.'"

Sullivan said homeowners with children often have the most clutter. "The houses with kids will be completely covered with toys," she said. "It's a phenomenon. The stuff is everywhere. There won't be a room in the house that's not full of toys."

Besides toys and clothes, agents say homeowners also often have too much furniture, picture frames, knick-knacks and collections.

"I like to use the 50 percent rule," said Becky Vogel, a marketing professional who recently started staging properties for real estate agent Sitrin. "Remove 50 percent of the stuff in your house. That means extra furniture, toys, photos, collections, stuff off the kitchen counters, magazines, newspapers, books lying around, pictures on the fridge. You want a crisp, clean look."

Schwarz said she likes to de-clutter in odd, low numbers. "Instead of 50 things on an end table," she said, "let's reduce it to three, or maybe five. On a fireplace mantel, let's have two candlesticks and one little ivy plant. On a coffee table, let's put only three pieces."

Lisa Baker, who recently sold her three-bedroom home in Gaithersburg, said she "de-cluttered in a major way" on the advice of her agent before putting her home on the market in August. "We gave a lot of stuff to Goodwill. We threw a lot of stuff away. And we put a lot of stuff into storage. Storage isn't that expensive for a couple of months."

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Sometimes furniture should be added to make a large room cozier, or nicer furniture put in to replace worn, dated pieces. Many agents keep a small stock of furniture, lamps, shower curtains, and other pieces that can be added to homes if needed -- and they work with retailers who do short-term furniture rentals.

The next step is taking a cold hard look at the floors in your home. Carpeting, at the least, should be professionally cleaned, agents advise. If the carpet is old, worn or soiled, it's worth it to have it replaced, they said.

Agents also advise re-finishing hardwood floors that need it, or at least having them cleaned and re-waxed. Because hardwood floors are so popular with buyers these days, agents say it may be worth it to pull up any old carpeting that is covering hardwood and to use an area rug instead.

Baker re-carpeted her house, because the carpet was old and worn, and also replaced her vinyl kitchen floor with a new laminate floor. She advises home sellers on a budget who are contemplating replacing flooring to shop for bargains.

"We saved 10 to 20 percent on the cost by buying stuff that was going out of stock," she said.

Baker suggested that sellers also tell the retailers they are working with that they are selling their home, because many stores "know the neutral color palettes needed to show a home for sale."

She said, "That way, you won't be overwhelmed by choices, because they narrow it down for you."

A neutral color scheme, for both floors and walls, is important, agents said, because the goal is to appeal to as many different tastes as possible. Buyers need to be able to imagine their belongings in the house. A dark red wall or purple shag carpeting may turn people off because they think it would clash with their belongings.

"You have to make it acceptable to a wide range of people who can visualize their stuff in that space," Kelly said. "People cannot imagine putting their idiosyncratic stuff in with your idiosyncratic stuff."

Neutral often means an off-white, but not always.

"Several years ago, a soft yellow might not have been a pleasing color," agent Sitrin said. "Now, it's neutral. If you have a white chair molding, for example, a soft warm color on the wall can help frame the room. You don't ever want to pick a color that's extreme, though."

Small purchases can make a big difference. For example, Baker bought inexpensive new slip-covers for her sofas, as well as new throw pillows. Agents also said new fluffy towels can be a way to make bathrooms look better. Getting rid of any dated window treatments, like dusty valances or old shades, can make windows brighter.

Paint is often the best investment a seller can make, agents say. And it's not necessary to put two or three coats of paint on the wall as you might if you were painting it for yourself. A single coat of paint, as long as it adequately covers the old paint and any problem areas, can go a long way towards making a home appear fresh and clean, agents said. Painting your front door can also make the entrance into your home more welcoming.

The cleanliness of the house is paramount, stagers and agents say. And clean doesn't mean just a little dusting here and there. Agents advise buyers to get their homes professionally cleaned. If they want to do it themselves, they need to start at

the ceiling and work their way down to the baseboards and the floors, leaving no surface untouched. Windows need to gleam, as does the inside of the oven.

Agents also suggest organizing closets, refrigerators, medicine cabinets, laundry room shelves, bathroom vanities, garages and any other storage areas. That's because a tidy closet gives a buyer the impression that a home has been well-maintained, they say. If these people keep their closets this neat, the thinking goes, they must have kept up with the maintenance of the house. Conversely, if the closets are chaotic, the house could prove to be a disaster too, a buyer might reason.

With clean, comes a pleasant odor, a must for a home on the market. Pets are better housed elsewhere when selling. Scented candles can be lighted before an open house, but don't use too many. Freshly baked cookies leave a pleasant aroma.

But does all of this work -- and money -- really translate into a higher sales price? And is it even necessary in a market where fairly-priced homes can sell in a matter of days?

There are no data that compare what a house sold for when it was painted and when it wasn't, so it's largely a matter of opinion whether to bother. Local agents certainly think a seller should.

"It's absolutely worth it," said agent Greco, who for several years has employed designer Sullivan to advise sellers on staging their homes.

"It's a product you're selling," she said. "The better the product looks, the higher you'll get." Greco estimates that for every \$1 sellers spend on cosmetic upgrades, such as painting, carpeting, de-cluttering and sprucing up landscaping, they will get \$1.50 back.

"Young buyers now are completely different than when I bought a home," she said. "When I bought, you'd buy a place with green shag carpeting and purple walls. You worked like a dog for a week or two and had instant equity. Today, prices are so high, people are cashed out. And they're both working. They'd rather just spend more and have a turnkey operation. They're tired."

Greco says staging a home is a win-win situation for her and the clients because the house sells more quickly and for more money. Home sellers seem convinced, too.

Barbara Dunn, who sold her four-bedroom house in Annandale at the beginning of October, is sure she got back the \$10,000 she spent getting it ready to sell. Dunn re-carpeted three rooms and some stairs; put in new laminate flooring in the family room; got rid of her heavy drapes and bought new wooden shades for the family room; bought new vanities for the three bathrooms; painted the garage and the basement; and got rid of boxes and boxes of stuff.

She received four offers on her house in the one day it was on the market. It was listed at \$550,000; it sold for \$579,000.

"I don't think I would've gotten four contracts if I hadn't made all those changes," Dunn said. "I think the house would've sold readily, but people wouldn't have been clamoring for it like they were. It was Grand Central Station in here. And people were mentioning that the house was so well-maintained. It made an impression."

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Pre-Sale Priorities to Show Your House in its Best Light

Here are some tips on how to stage your house.

Big Things

- **De-Clutter.** Throw away, give to charity or store half your stuff. Store excess furniture, pack away your Hummel collection and knick-knacks, clear your kitchen countertops, prune your bookshelves, take photos off the refrigerator door, put away all your framed photographs. Leave only three items on your coffee table. If by chance your rooms are empty rent a few tasteful pieces.
- **Clean.** Your house should be cleaned from top to bottom. Windows should sparkle and so should the inside of the oven. Power-wash areas outside.
- **Organize.** Neaten the garage, closets, medicine cabinets, vanities, laundry room shelves, any storage areas. Organized shelves give buyers the impression you have maintained your home,
- **Carpets.** Have them professionally cleaned. If they're too worn and soiled, replace them. Pick a neutral color.
- **Floors.** Have hardwood floors re-finished and waxed. Consider pulling up old carpet over hardwood floors. If any other floors are dated and tired, replace.
- **Paint.** Apply a coat of fresh paint to walls that need it. Clean other

walls that are still acceptable. Pick a neutral color - off-white or a soft yellow - nothing extreme. Paint your front door if it needs it.

- **Windows.** Take down and replace dated, dusty or broken window treatments such as old drapes, valances and blinds. Be sure the light is streaming in through gleaming windows.
- **Appliances.** Replace old, dated appliances and those that aren't working.
- **Hardware.** Replace dated knobs on your kitchen cabinets. Replace old switch plates,
- **Facelift.** Buy new towels for the bathrooms, new slip-covers for your old sofa and new throw pillows for the family room.

Little Things

- Turn on all the lights.
- Put oranges or green apples in a stylish bowl on your kitchen table.
- Be sure all plants are healthy, with no dead leaves.
- Play a soft jazz CD when agents or would be buyers are due to visit.
- Put flowers in your living room and kitchen. Be sure they're really fresh, or use new silk ones.
- Light scented candles.
- Bake cookies so the smell of baking permeates the kitchen.
- Keep it up - your home should be clean, uncluttered and fresh smelling every day until it is sold.