

Staging Your Home: Making Money Off the Little Things

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EAST BAY — They say married people begin to look alike after years of living together. Likewise, your home starts to reflect your own personality after years of accumulating furniture, books, photographs, cushions and more. All your creature comforts may mean home to you, but what about when you're selling that home?

Will prospective buyers be as enamored as you are with the living room featuring three recliners with TV trays, the dining room wall covered with family photos, or the two litter boxes in the bathroom?

If you want to make your home attractive to others, sometimes you need to let go of a few of your favorite things.

"You live differently in your home than you would when you're marketing your home," said Laurie Pavao, a professional stager in Warren. The founder and president of Spruce to Sell, a home staging company, she assists real estate agents and homeowners in preparing their homes for sale.

"Professional stagers have been around for years and years in California but are slowly becoming more popular in this area," she said.

Ms. Pavao, by the way, hates the term "staging," which she thinks sounds phony. "But that's the industry's term," she said.

In today's housing market, it's more important than ever to give your home any kind of edge when putting out the "For Sale" sign on the front lawn, she said. "We're trying to make it as marketable as possible to as large a number of buyers as possible," she said.

When showing a home, the most important thing is for potential buyers to focus on the home's positive qualities, she said. "We're trying to pull out the features of the house so people aren't overwhelmed by the belongings," Ms. Pavao said.

She'll do one of two things: Inspect the home inside and out and follow up with written suggestions, or a hands-on staging. Fees range anywhere from \$150 for a consultation to a couple of thousand dollars for a hands-on staging if furniture is rented.

Richard Chinigo hired Ms. Pavao to help him with a two-family Victorian-style house he bought and converted into two condominiums. "I sold the first one and had trouble selling the second," said Mr. Chinigo, adding it had been on the market for about seven months.

The biggest problem, he said, was that the unit was empty. "It seemed to lend itself to decorating," Mr. Chinigo said.

Ms. Pavao photographed the house, made suggestions and put Mr. Chinigo in touch with a furniture store. He rented furniture to fill the spaces and Ms. Pavao brought in paintings and other items to give the condo a friendlier and more lived-in look.

"She didn't over-decorate it," said Mr. Chinigo, noting that a simple couch placed in the living room made all the difference in the world.

The unit sold within 30 days. "It made me wish I had done it a long time ago. Without (Ms. Pavao), we'd still be sitting on it right now," he said.

Genny Croll, a Newport County Re/Max agent, said more and more Realtors are working with professionals who stage homes. "I use Jan Girouard (of All About Redecorating in Newport) quite a bit," she said.

Sometimes the simplest suggestions can make a big difference, she said, recalling the time Ms. Girouard looked over an old, empty house. "She noticed that all the light fixtures screamed that the house was built in the 1800s, so we got new light fixtures," said Ms. Croll.

Sensing how important it's become to their business, some Realtors are pursuing certification to become stagers themselves.

Mike Pickering, a Century 21 agent, is taking an online course to gain certification. "There's an exam and there are tests and a final exam you need to pass," he said. "My thinking is that it makes me a more valuable agent. In today's market, it's really important to make your house as special as possible.

Tips On Selling

So what can you do to make your house more appealing to buyers?

"Clutter is always number one," said Ms. Pavao. "The other thing is furniture layout. You have to expect a small degree of inconvenience. It may mean taking some items out of the room. If you're stumbling over furniture, you can really make a room feel small."

Ms. Croll agreed. "Sometimes you'll walk into a room and they've got a couch blocking your entry. You need to welcome people into your room," she said.

After de-cluttering, make sure you clean the house from top to bottom. "Clean, clean, clean until your fingers fall off and air out your house whenever possible," said Ms. Pavao. "My advice to smokers is to get their house professionally cleaned and to smoke outside when showing your home."

Pay special attention to the bathroom. "The tub has to be clean. It has to sparkle," said Ms. Croll, adding that windows need to be clean as well.

No detail is too small. "If I can convince them, I have them put a new door knob on. If it looks scrungy, (the potential buyers) already have that attitude about the house," said Ms. Croll.

And yes, the old standby about pleasant, homey smells is true, said Ms. Pavao. "There's nothing better than walking into a house smelling freshly cooked popcorn or cookies," she said.

However, don't overdo it with candles and air fresheners. "You don't want it to be like Glade heaven in there," she said.

You also don't want to overdo the lighting. "Some people feel that when they show their home, they should put on every light in the house. You don't want overkill in that area, either," said Ms. Pavao, pointing out that harsh lighting can actually accentuate some of the home's flaws.

Feel free to put on some music, but nix the Metallica. Ms. Pavao suggests some "light, low music like classical or jazz."

And don't forget the outside of your house, as curb appeal is important to getting buyers to the front door. Keep the grass cut and shrubs trimmed, said Ms. Pavao. "That also says a lot about your home," she said.

And as difficult as it may be, take down some of those favorite family photos. "You need to put lots of pictures away," said Ms. Croll. "It's all right to have a few pictures around, but it needs to look clean and neat and not cluttered."

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