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Dressing your house for success

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Richard and Terry Prescott, sitting, with REMAX Realtor Dan Marantz and Diane Bretanha, from Home Appeal, in the master bedroom in Richmond. A professional home stager can provide guidance.

THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL / Steve Szydowski



The dining room table is set, scented candles are burning, and walls have been repaired and painted. All this is part of home staging, which can make your home more attractive to home buyers.

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Properties in “turnkey” condition — in top shape, ready to be lived in, with no need for cosmetic updates or more serious overhauls — are the most likely to sell at the highest possible price in the shortest possible time.

And in today’s sluggish market, with high inventory and long selling times, many sellers and agents are turning to home stagers to help them present their houses and condominiums in the best possible light.

Home staging is not a licensed profession, and home stagers have different backgrounds. Some interior designers offer staging services, and some real estate agents who have a knack for design stage the homes of their clients as part of their service.

Your turn

[Did staging make a difference in the sale of your home?](#)

Others, including Diane Bretanha, of Chepachet, and Laurie Pavao, of Warren, run their own home-staging businesses. They say the idea of home staging is new to Rhode Island, and can be a hard sell to flinty, do-it-yourself New Englanders, but is quite common in other areas of the country.

“On the West Coast, most people do stage their homes,” Pavao said.

“If you spend \$500 to stage your home, you really will get it back,” Bretanha said. “By spending a little, you’re helping to support the asking price.”

Bretanha and Pavao said one of the principal concepts behind staging is that how a home usually looks when people live there — having personal artifacts on display and frequently used items out and handy — is quite different from how it should be presented when it is time to sell.

Most important are a clean, uncluttered look and a neutral décor — although limited amounts of strong color can be effective, they said. Personal photos, collections and knickknacks need to be out of sight. “These are the things sellers tend to overload on,” Bretanha said.

Another crucial element is “flow” — the placement of furniture so that it does not block doorways, walkways or windows. Good flow will enhance the feeling of airiness, light and space.

“Clutter is a big part of it,” said Pavao, who started her own home-staging business, Spruce to Sell (www.sprucetosell.com), a little over a year ago. “We try to pare back to the point where the house’s features stand out, rather than the belongings.”

“I’m trying to look at things through the eyes of a buyer,” she said. “A lot of people can see potential in a home. Some can’t look past the plaid sofa.”

Bretanha, whose business is called Home Appeal (www.homeappealstaging.com), charges \$150 for a consultation in which she will tour a house, then write a report with recommendations on exactly what to do to put the house in its most marketable condition.

Bretanha said she's sensitive to the fact that clients don't want to put a lot of money into a house they're planning to sell, so she sticks to low-cost changes that deliver a lot of impact, such as painting and de-cluttering.

For clients who don't have the time, ability or inclination to do the work themselves, she will roll up her sleeves, "put on my sweatpants" and do the work herself, at a fee of \$35 an hour. Bretanha will do everything that needs to be done, from painting rooms and rearranging furniture, to storing or disposing of clutter, up to and including the final "pillow fluffing."

Pavao offers the same type of services, but she said her charges vary. Agents who provide her with a lot of repeat business get a lower rate than one-time clients.

Dan Marantz, a Realtor with Remax Flagship in Narragansett, pays Bretanha to do the initial consultations on all the houses he lists. He said the idea of home staging "just makes sense to me. It always did."

He met Bretanha at the South County Home Show last year and was impressed with her presentation and her personality. He hired her to stage the house of one of his clients, a bachelor who lives near the beach in Misquamicut. They worked together at the house for 6 ½ hours, moving and rearranging furniture, cleaning and de-cluttering. "I'm a really hard worker," said Marantz, who is also a builder. "She was step-for-step with me."

For an agent, Marantz said, it's helpful to have a third party deliver the sometimes unwelcome news that beloved objects should be taken out of view, or that the plaid sofa should be slipcovered in a neutral hue.

"It's not going to threaten my relationship with the client," he said. And he said Bretanha's communication style is compatible with the sometimes emotional state of home sellers.

Earlier this year, Bretanha staged the Cape-style home of Richard and Teresa Prescott at 5 Crestmont Drive in rural Richmond. "Before" pictures of the house show a large, cluttered table taking up a lot of space in the kitchen and blocking the path to the dining room. That table is gone. Now, a smaller table, set in the corner of the kitchen, and topped with linens and a glass bowl filled with apples, looks serene and sophisticated, and makes the kitchen appear larger.

In the dining room, Bretanha replaced a dated window treatment with new curtains pulled back to let in more light. The muted plum color of the curtains is picked up in the linens on the dining room table.

At Bretanha's suggestion, the Prescotts had the entire interior of the house painted a cream color. Dark-stained wood floors were refinished in a lighter color. In the master bedroom, the bed was moved to the opposite wall to make the large room look even larger.

But most important, the bags and boxes and loads of "stuff" that once filled the house have been carted away.

"Our house was overloaded with stuff," Teresa Prescott said. "We rented a storage facility. Diane helped us to edit our stuff.... It gave me a whole new view on my belongings."

At an open house last Sunday, the results of Bretanha's work were evident in every room of the Prescott house. In addition to the neutral colors and thoughtful arrangement of furniture and accessories, floral displays, scented candles and freshly baked cookies filled the house with attractive scents.

Another tenet of home staging: No pets, or any evidence of their existence, should ever be in a house or condominium when a prospective buyer is there, Bretanha said.

“You should not be able to tell a pet lives in the house,” she said.

“Cigarette and pet odors can be the kiss of death in the sale of a home,” Pavao agreed.

The Prescotts are planning to move to a new/old house on Woodville Road in neighboring Hopkinton. The historic house, also a Cape, is a family property. The Prescotts hired an architect to design a significant expansion of the house, which they believe was built as a blacksmith shop. They hope to be living there by Thanksgiving.

Teresa Prescott was so happy with Bretanha’s work at her old house that she asked her to help in the planning of her new house.

The creamy yellow paint on the walls of her new bedroom, which looks out onto the Wood River, “was Diane’s idea,” she said.