

Staging

In a tough market, staging
might seem like an
added expense, but it can
make all the difference.

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By Gwen Moran

Kim Ward, CRS, had a challenge on her hands. The home she had listed in El Cajon, Calif., was stuffed with wreaths, duck photos and older décor. Ward, a broker with Horizon Real Estate in San Diego, knew she had to give the outdated home a makeover to make it look more contemporary. As an accredited home stager, she's amassed a collection of furniture and accessories — all purchased at thrift stores, yard sales and discount retailers — that could help her meet the challenge.

"I recommended that we remove many things. I took pictures, created a plan and brought my team in to go to work," she recalls. Bedding was replaced. Photographs, wreaths and artwork removed. Clutter was stowed. Curtains were replaced with new ones from Ward's stash. All of this was completed within a few days. After sitting on the market for less than 30 days after staging, the property sold for \$290,000, just \$5,000 less than the list price. Ward estimates that's \$20,000 more than if it hadn't been staged, based on her knowledge of the market.

Home staging has been gaining in popularity for a while now — just tune in to any number of cable channels for a host of TV shows that highlight staging tips and strategies — and it has become an important part of the sales process for many REALTORS®. But in challenging market conditions, many agents (and their clients) might wonder if staging is worth the time, effort and money. Barb Schwarz, founder of the International Association of Home Staging Professionals, says most basic home staging costs little or nothing, and it can make a big difference in how quickly a home moves off the market. "Longevity on the market means one thing: reduction in price," Schwarz says. "Some simple staging can make the difference between a home that moves quickly and one that sits and falls in price."

Many CRSs say staging services are a relatively simple way to make homes more appealing and reduce their time-on-market — all while helping them stand

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out from the competition. Those who are offering staging as part of their service package — and who have found ways to do it inexpensively — are seeing results.

Investment Strategy

Recent research has shown that home staging pays off. A 2010 study by HomeGain.com found that staged homes spend 83 percent less time on the market than unstaged homes, and 95.6 percent of staged homes sell in an average of 37 days or less, compared to 212 days for homes that are not staged. The report also found that home staging delivers a strong return-on-investment, and 86 percent of REALTORS® say they recommend home staging to their clients.

Most agents would agree that, at a minimum, staging includes cleaning and decluttering. But for many industry professionals those are just the first steps in a larger staging process that involves rearranging and removing furniture and personal items to make the home look more spacious, as well as changing paint colors, deep-cleaning carpets and drapes, and adding furnishings to vacant homes. It also includes cleaning

up the outdoor area of the home to enhance curb appeal.

The one thing everyone seems to agree on, however, is the purpose of staging. The goal, Schwarz says, is to make the home as attractive to buyers as possible so that it will sell as quickly as possible for the best possible price.

Who Pays?

Some REALTORS® may look at staging as yet another added expense that hurts their bottom line while adding work to the listing process. But the costs associated with staging can range from free — by conducting a clean sweep of dirt and clutter and moving or removing furniture and possessions, for example — to several thousand dollars, which might include making more significant repairs and replacing items such as carpeting and wall coverings.

The question of who executes the staging and pays for the improvements varies depending on the situation. Schwarz says homeowners typically pay for staging, but points out that since the recession, it's been harder for REALTORS® to persuade homeowners to spend the average of \$250

to \$550 for a home staging consultation. As a result, more agents are absorbing the cost and writing it off as a marketing expense.

Mike Jones, CRS, broker/associate with RE/MAX Austin Skyline in Austin, Texas, approached a local professional home stager to work with him at the beginning of 2009. He provided her with an estimate of the amount of work he would bring to her over the course of the year; she returned with a bid of \$100 per client, which includes two hours of evaluation and a written report. Jones says that bringing her multiple clients figured into her bid and cut his per-client cost down.

When Jones receives the stager's report on a given listing, he reviews and shares it with homeowners and makes recommendations about various staging strategies they should implement. If the home looks good and doesn't need more than a basic decluttering, Jones advises accordingly. But whether the changes are large or small, the homeowner absorbs all other costs, such as hiring professional help to clean, declutter and move furniture; renting storage space for items moved out of the home; painting; deep-cleaning carpets; and window treatments; and so on.

Center Stage

Want to step up your staging efforts? Consider these tried-and-true strategies.

Take a buyer's point of view.

Try to look at each home as a buyer would, says Barb Schwarz, founder of the International Association of Home Staging Professionals. That means looking at the room from the doorway and using that as a frame to show off the most appealing parts of the room. Many times, prospective buyers won't venture beyond the doorway, she says, so it's important to entice them to enter the room. Take steps to make the room look as clean, neat and spacious as possible. Remove excess furniture and keep floors free of any stacks or clutter.

Declutter.

It sounds obvious, says Dianne Rath, CRS, with ERA Eagle Estates Realty in San Diego, but decluttering is the single

biggest aspect of staging — and one that is free of charge. Every surface, including countertops in kitchens and bathrooms, should be as clear as possible. Stow toiletries under the sink, and pack up personal photographs so buyers don't get distracted by looking at your pictures, Rath says.

Get rid of the ugly.

If furniture, fixture and appliance colors or window treatments are outdated, threadbare or otherwise unappealing, consider replacing them with low-cost temporary fixes, says Kim Ward, CRS, with Horizon Real Estate in San Diego.

Empty the garage.

Large houses often have spacious garages that are filled with boxes, tools

and other items that can make them look cluttered and smaller than they really are — especially when homeowners stow stuff from the rest of the house there after they've decluttered and removed furniture, Schwarz says. But buyers might be turned off when they leave an impeccable home only to find a garage heaped with boxes, tools and other items. Purge the junk and move the rest to a borrowed or rented storage space, she says.

Clean.

Schwarz says that clean is not enough. She wants to see a home "Q-tip clean." That means using a Q-tip to clean around sinks, in corners and in other hard-to-reach places. Surface cleaning alone can leave the home looking dingy, she says. Marcia Layton Turner, co-author of

But some agents offer their clients a bit more service. Ward, who is a certified staging professional, has a stash of nearly \$4,000 worth of accessories and staging items she has purchased over the past four years, ranging from inflatable beds to window dressings. She and her team do the heavy lifting themselves, except for extensive repairs or improvements, such as installing new carpeting. She provides this service, which is included in her commission fee, because, she says, that in her experience, it routinely increases the sales price and decreases the time necessary to sell the property. When a property needs significant repairs that require professional painters, landscapers or carpeting professionals, she provides a referral, and the owner pays for those services directly.

Inexpensive DIY

Jim Basquette, CRS, with Huff Realty in Cincinnati, says “staging hasn’t really caught on yet [in his area],” which gives him a distinct advantage in the marketplace. He’s found that many of his staged listings — he stages everything except homes in very bad condition, where small

touches won’t matter — sell in less than 30 days, and about 25 percent sell for full price or more.

For example, Basquette recently landed a listing that had been on the market for 164 days, and he promptly went to work staging. “They didn’t have any furniture on their enclosed porch, so I brought some from my own home to make it look more inviting. I had them move an extra refrigerator they were keeping in the dining room. And I brought in a few pieces of art I had collected and hung them, because they didn’t have enough art on the walls,” he recalls. The home sold in 17 days for 95.5 percent of the original listing price.

Ward, who does a great deal of probate work in older homes that haven’t been redecorated in years, scours discount stores, thrift shops and yard sales to find neutral, attractive accessories that she can bring into the home. She also pitches in by doing a good bit of the legwork as part of her service — painting, moving furniture and hanging curtains. If a bathroom has fixtures in an outdated color, she might recommend lightening the walls with paint and bringing in accessories and a shower curtain

that tie the colors together in a simple, inexpensive way that updates the look without going to the expense of replacing the bathtub or toilet.

Staging professionals also work to depersonalize the home, which means packing up collections of baseball cards or stuffed animals, for example, which take up space and might be unappealing to prospective buyers. Ward tells sellers that they’re going to be moving soon anyway, so they might as well get started by packing up their collectibles. Basquette agrees. “If the homeowner has photographs or a Precious Moments collection, prospective buyers spend time looking at those when they should be focusing on the home. Depersonalizing the home makes them better able to see themselves in it,” he says.

Marketing a home for top dollar continues to be a challenge in many markets. And while a staging consultation can be an added expense, it’s an investment many agents are still willing to make. 📌

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The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Staging Your Home to Sell, says that deep-cleaning carpets, upholstery and window treatments is important to both improve the home’s appearance and remove lingering odors.

Lighten up.

Each room should be light and bright, Schwarz says. Clean windows and tie curtains back to let the light shine into the room. Lighten dark colors on the walls with inexpensive paint in neutral, light colors like white, off-white or light taupe. Paint can also be used to cover worn or outdated cabinets, Turner says. Add some inexpensive new drawer pulls and cabinet handles from your local hardware or home supply store for a fresh new look for less than \$30.

Go shopping in the home.

Rath says she’s not afraid to move items from one room to another. One room may be stuffed with furniture, while another

room could benefit from a great piece that can be a focal point. This is something Schwarz teaches in her classes. She has seen an extra mirror make one room look bigger while an armoire from a too-crowded bedroom can be used to store the television in a family room, for example.

Accessorize.

All-neutral rooms can be a bit boring, so Schwarz pulls in “movable color” with throw pillows and small accents like candles. Green is a favorite, as it coordinates with most other colors without clashing.

Look for curb appeal.

The outside of the home is just as important as the inside, Schwarz says. Clean up the yard. Trim hedges and weed flowerbeds. Remove dead plants. Repair cracks in cement or asphalt, and power-wash driveways and sidewalks. “I always take buyers across the street to give them a new perspective when they look at their house. Who ever looks at their

house from across the street? You can see things that need to be improved that way,” Schwarz says.

Most of these activities take some effort on the part of the staging professional and homeowner, but most require very little money and often make a big difference when it comes to the length of time the home sits on the market. “The investment of staging in your home is far less than a price reduction on your home,” Schwarz says.

