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Your home is the stage

Professionals arrange a house so buyer can see herself there

By C. W. CAMERON
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Real estate authorities say if 10 buyers have viewed your house and you haven't had an offer, then something is wrong. It might be the listing price, but it could be that you're just not turning heads when potential buyers show up at your door.

We've compiled a list of tips and tricks from real estate and staging experts to get your house on the road to sold.



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ng consultant **Pam Ferrere** works to
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en tip: Pack away your stuff so counter s
wn to best advantage.

The basics:

- Tempt buyers with well-kept landscaping and an inviting front door.
- Take down the family photos so the buyer can imagine her family in your house.
- Remove all the "extra" furniture. Empty out that room so it will look spacious.
- Get the garage spotless. And don't park your cars there on open house day.
- Before anyone comes in, make sure you pick up all the mess and make the beds.

Source: RealtyTimes.com

Getting a house ready to sell

Jenny Pruitt & Associates' Geri Deane brought in Pam Ferrere of A Home for Show in to stage a new listing in Suwanee, the home of a young family being transferred out -of -state. "In this market you have to give your sellers every advantage," Deane says, "I believe a stager is so valuable, I cover the cost. It sets my sellers apart from others."



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Ferrere staged the house using only the homeowners' things. She started in the living room, removing a side table and children's equipment. Rearranging the furniture, she created a grouping at the fireplace with the sofa and love seat and highlighted the mantelle with colorful accessories. "Since the fireplace stays with the house, it makes sense to show it off."

Then on to the kitchen, where she removed a microwave that took up 85 percent of the counter space to the left of the stove. She took away the items arrayed over the cabinets and displayed pieces of the homeowners' china on the counter instead. She recommends they keep the bowls filled with fresh fruit and use coordinating towels to continue the accents of color in the all-white kitchen.

A Jacuzzi full of children's toys marred the serenity of the master bath. Ferrere took away all the children's pieces and rugs and went for the spa look, adding fluffy towels and showcasing glass canisters of toiletries, candles and a wicker basket for storage.

At the end of her morning's work, the house had a spacious and warm feel, and with a little polishing, would be ready for those buyers to come through the front door.

Curb appeal

- People want "new," even in an older house, so a coat of paint and simple, healthy landscaping will give your house a fresh feeling. If the house and yard need work, the buyer thinks your house will be a hassle to deal with, and you'll only attract folks looking for a bargain.
- You might need a new front door in a handsome wood, or maybe just a shiny brass door knocker will do the trick. Are your house numbers bright and visible? Clean the windows, put out some well-tended container plants and stand back to let the buyers in.

Lighting

• Ferrere says lighting is key. "You'll notice when Realtors conduct an open house, they turn on all the lights. I suggest replacing all the bulbs with the highest wattage the fixture or lamp will take, and add lights to showcase features that stay with the house like mantels and built-in bookcases."

Family spaces

• Sharon Lantis of Innovative Home Staging reminds her clients, "The way you live and the way you market are totally different." She tells her clients to de-personalize, removing collections and family photos. "I tell them to start packing up the things they can live without while their house is on the market. That way, when they get that offer, they're even closer to getting moved out."

If clients are reluctant to depersonalize, she suggests, "Take photographs from doorways. Look through the eyes of a potential buyer." She finds that usually convinces them to get rid of that pile of toys in the corner, the stack of magazines that will never be read and the houseplants on their last legs. "Clutter eats equity," she says.

Kitchens

Everyone's looking for a large kitchen, so the key is to show off counter space. Lantis says, "Pack up all that stuff that's sitting out. You're not selling your things, you're selling the space, so make it appear as spacious as possible." Ferrere echoes, "When buyers see so many things on the counter they think, 'These people are busting at the seams. There's not enough storage.'"

Bathrooms

"Crisp and clean" is the byword for bathrooms; baseboards, fixtures, floors — everything needs to be sparkling. And space is important here, too. "Potential buyers think there's not enough room in the cabinets if all your toiletries are on the counter. Put them away," Lantis says.

Hiring a professional:

Overwhelmed at the idea of doing it yourself? You're not alone. A whole industry has been built around the concept of staging homes for maximum impact. Lantis says "I wouldn't even stage my own property. You need that objective eye. Staging is much more than decorating and de-cluttering. Staging is marketing a home's best features, down playing any challenging areas and understanding what makes a person fall in love with a home."

She's recently back from the national convention of Accredited Staging Professionals where she learned that a home will stay on the market an average of 176.5 days if it's not staged vs. 23.4 days if it is. "Staging doesn't cost; it pays. It's an investment that will get you closer to your asking price," she says.

Ferrere says hourly rates vary from \$75 to \$125 and clients should count on about 3 hours of work. She, like many staging professionals, also provides a list of recommendations like areas that need special attention so the homeowner can complete the make-over. She says if you're not going to hire a professional, "have someone who has never been in your home come in and give their fresh perspective. They'll see things you never even notice."

A major make-over:

J.J. Brown of Keller Williams Premier Atlanta tells her clients, "I can sell your property in a month if it is in tip-top shape. With the freedom and financial support to stage your property correctly, it will sell, but even an 8eight-year-old house needs to be brought up-to-date."

She demonstrated her skill recently with a property on Ashton Bluff Drive off N. Druid Hills Road in

DeKalb County. Two other houses in the subdivision had been on the market for over a year. With BrownJJ's changes, this house went under contract in only 22 days and sold for \$55,000 over the most recent sale in the subdivision.

She and her team painted the interior in colors to complement the fireplace's marble surround. The 8-foot doors were painted black, and dark antique bronze hardware was added throughout the house. The kitchen cabinets were painted and distressed and the fixtures were changed in the kitchen and baths. She had the brick house pressure-washed and the trim painted. Outside, she staged the porch with rocking chairs and hanging ferns.

"I even painted the garage floor so everything would look sparkling and clean. It made the garage look like a million dollars," said Brown. laughs JJ. The transformation took four weeks and cost the seller almost \$40,000.

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"It's really the difference between selling it tomorrow or next month and having it sit on the market for five or six months," says Sal Alfano, editorial director of Remodeling Magazine. Buyers' expectations are simply higher today, and certain upgrades are essential to sell.