

ARTICLE: DO-IT-YOURSELF HOME STAGING

BY: Lynn Tribbling, Award-Winning Realtor

WHY BOTHER TO STAGE YOUR HOME FOR RESALE?

A Coldwell Banker study of 2772 resale homes in the U.S.A., found that staged properties sold twice as fast and for 5% more than unstaged homes. Other, anecdotal evidence suggests that listings that are polished and primed sell for 10%-20% more than their plain-Jane cohorts. No matter which statistics you choose, homes that show well, sell well, fetching tens of thousands of dollars more for their owners.

Home staging works. It accelerates the time it takes to sell your home and increases the bottom-line. As a seasoned realtor, it would be equivalent to professional malpractice if I did not advise my clients to tidy, refresh and style their homes before listing. Buyers look at some 20 properties before signing, so that it is imperative that your home be a sparkling showcase which stands out from the competition. Home staging is not rocket science. Sometimes, it is just a matter of editing and re-arranging what you already have according to a few basic rules. For a small investment, and a few days of intensive effort, you can give your home star-quality. Little improvements can yield big dividends. So, roll up your sleeves Mr. and Mrs. Seller, let's get started!

WHAT EXACTLY IS HOME STAGING?

By definition, home staging is a marketing strategy that transforms the condition, contents, and appearance of your home in order to appeal to the widest number of prospective buyers. It is a merchandizing process aimed at emphasizing the positive elements of your home, diminishing the negatives, with the single purpose of captivating buyers.

It should be noted that home staging and home decorating are entirely different processes. Decorating focuses on the needs, tastes and preferences of the owner, so that the result is often individualistic, unique, and distinctive. Staging, on the other hand, is guided by knowledge of what most purchasers like, and the end product is typically neutral, restrained and harmonious. Staged properties often look like chic, 5-star hotel rooms, devoid of clutter and extraneous content, with a serene Zen-like ambiance. The goal of staging is to create a blank slate where buyers can project their own tastes.

Sometimes even fancy homes have to be undecorated in to widen their appeal. As a realtor specializing in luxury property, I often list fabulously decorated in the style of Tuscan villas, French country homes and gorgeous museum-quality Art Deco palaces. The marketing problem with these designer masterpieces is that they only appeal to buyers with exactly the same taste. In staging, simplicity prevails. The basic design rule is "less is more." The underpinning philosophy behind staging is that some people like pistachio ice cream, but most people like vanilla.

HOW TO STAGE YOUR HOME YOURSELF: 3 STEPS

Home staging involves 3 steps: Planning, Preparing and Priming.

- 1) **PLANNING** : Before putting your home on the market, some preliminary market analysis is required. In consultation with an experienced local realtor who really knows the neighbourhood, owners should decide what type of buyer the home will attract. For example, will the prospective purchaser be a young first-time buyer, a couple with children, or an empty-nester, or someone about to retire? Each of these 4 basic categories of buyers: *hatched, matched, detached or dispatched*, will have different design priorities. Formal dining rooms do not matter much to singles, whereas bar stools and breakfast counters do. Similarly, couples with children want eat-in kitchens and family rooms. Empty-nesters often want a guest bedroom and a formal dining area for holiday entertaining. Retirees look for homes with no stairs and low maintenance, but a spot for a little garden would be nice.

The first step in staging your home for sale is to define clearly the function of each room according to the preferences of the target demographic. The objective is to highlight the features that would appeal to prospects and downplay any deficits. The goal is to hit the buyer's hot-buttons.

Also, the preliminary phase of planning involves answering questions such as when should the staging process begin in order to capture market peaks, how much time can you commit to the project and how much can you expect to spend on rehabilitating your home for market? A good rule of thumb is to budget up to 1% of the value of your home for a dramatic revamping. This may sound like a lot of money, but remember the cost of staging is never as much as your first major price reduction. Home staging is not rocket science, and if you are prepared to do some of the work yourself, and follow a few simple design rules, you can minimize the costs.

- 2) **PREPARING YOUR HOME** : The second step in home staging involves the most elbow-grease and grunt-work. You must: SANITIZE every visible surface, MINIMIZE clutter and contents, MAXIMIZE space and light, NEUTRALIZE collections, odors, and noise, and FINALIZE outstanding repairs. Edit your furniture eliminating at least 25% of your contents. Dump the junk. Purchasers like free-flowing space which allows them to see the architectural bones of the home. They want to see lots of room for their belongings. Pitch, pack or pass-on items you do not actually use, remove personal collections, tidy closets, basements, balconies, yards and garages. When it comes to home staging, minimalism is in. Hoarding is out. Remember, buyers are purchasing your space not your contents. Also, if they see neglected broken items they assume there may be other hidden problems with your home and will dismiss your property. Hire a professional cleaner, painter or handy man to do the work and the few hundred dollars spent will have huge rewards.
- 3) **PRIMING YOUR HOME:** The really creative part of home staging happens in this priming stage. After you have cleaned, de-cluttered, freshened up your home, in essence, created a blank canvas, you now can use some classic staging tricks to transform your residence into a showcase with wide appeal. Priming is the lipstick and mascara of home staging that can turn average into stunning. Here are five guidelines used by professional stagers:

Modern Updates: Buyers like new, especially modern kitchens and bathrooms. For a few hundred dollars, you can update hardware and give your space a brand new look. Buy a snazzy new goose-neck tap, some stainless steel cabinet pulls, perhaps a glass exhaust hood, or a new glass mosaic back splash. A new towel rack or a rain shower will not break the bank, but can add huge appeal. A new bedspread and crisp new linens help too. Read the design magazines, watch HGTV, and visit model suites for inspiration.

Accessories: A general rule in home staging is that the furniture should be neutral and the accessories add the splash of colour. New cushions, in muted designer colours, work wonders. Add candles, art prints, and modern light fixtures. If the budget is limited, flowers, fruit, even a bowl of popcorn make attractive embellishments. Remember not to overdo the knickknacks, keep the number of items limited to 3 per surface, use groupings in 1, 3 or, at most, 5 items. Size matters. One large accessory generally has a better design impact than several small items.

Good Design Principles: When creating conversational groupings, keep in mind three decorating rules : scale, balance and harmony. If the room is small, use downsized pieces, and do not overwhelm the space with large, overstuffed furniture. Conversely, large rooms need a focal point and furniture that is generously proportioned. Symmetry is the safest design concept to use in staging so that the left and right hand sides of the room are balanced. Continuity of style and colour throughout a home create a calm mood and generally appeals to most buyers.

Illusions : Home staging uses props to convey emotional and visual illusion. Using simple items, sellers can create pleasant little vignettes that imply the happy relaxed lifestyle that transpires in your home. For example, 2 crystal glasses and a vintage bottle of wine sends a message to viewers that if you live in this home, you will enjoy the good life. A brandy glass and a good book beside the bed say that there is time to relax in this house. An ordinary bathroom can be transformed in a posh spa by adding plump white towels, a new terry towel robe, a few glass bottles of special potions, and a candle or two. Your kitchen can become a warm and inviting hub for gourmet entertainment with the addition of a few staging props like an scrumptious cook book, wafting apple-cinnamon scent, a dining table beautifully set awaiting the arrival of phantom guests. Sellers can create a picture of family fun by staging a teddy bear picnic in a child's room, or even building a real backyard snowman in winter. The trick in marketing is to appeal to the senses and emotions. You sell the sizzle not the steak. You want the buyers to see themselves living, happily ever after, in your home. Skilled staging communicates messages and creates pleasant visceral connections. Simply stated, you want buyer to fall in love.

Conservative Use of Colour: One of the least expensive staging tools is paint. Think builder's beige, eggshell white or cloud gray. Light colours expand space, amplify light and make a room appear larger. The most important reason for using neutral shades is that they go with almost any style of furniture and a buyer can imagine their own contents in your home. My favorite "go-to" colour, which never fails, is Martha Stewart's "**Fledgling**," a soft, warm taupe that matches everything. One of the few times time a dark colour is recommended is to hide an imperfection. For example, unsightly TV and audio components can be made to disappear if the wall behind is painted dark charcoal or medium gray. It is generally best to use the same colour through the home. Avoid bright crayon colours when staging as they can be jarring and have limited appeal to most buyers. Remember you are transforming your home to meet your potential buyer's taste not your own.

WHY STAGING WORKS?

Home staging beguiles with pure fantasy. Skilled home staging creates a magnetic first impression that promises untold delights. It hints at a perfect lifestyle of beauty, luxury, comfort and order. Buyers do not want clutter, repairs, inconvenience, out-dated décor, and stress. They already have this at home! These may be exactly the reasons they want to move! The acclaimed psychologist, Maslow, said the "it is an unsatisfied need that acts a motivation." Buyers want the magic they do not have in their own homes. Yes, people know when they walk into an exquisitely staged model suite, they are being tricked and enchanted by artifice and illusion, but they are willingly seduced. The promise of bliss is irresistible. The psychology of staging is simple and compelling. Staging creates desire. Desire triggers action. Presto! Your home is sold.

***LYNN TRIBBLING** is an award-winning realtor with Royal LePage Terrequity Realty, Brokerage and often took home top prize as Number 1 agent in Toronto during her 17-year career with Coldwell Banker.. She has a passion for design and a cultivated talent for showcasing homes, having staged hundreds of properties for her clients. Lynn is an accomplished writer, educator and key-note presenter and has earned such accolades as Speaker of the Year and was twice nominated Woman of Distinction. Lynn has an amazing depth of knowledge with respect to luxury real estate and is always ready to share her insights. Lynn can be reached at ltribbling@sympatico.ca*