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Staging a Home Boosts Sale Price

Fixing Up and Decorating Your House Can Increase the Selling Price Considerably

By KEITH ROCKMAEL

SAN FRANCISCO, March 21, 2006 — - When it comes to staging a home, the beauty lies not only in the art but in the numbers. For those who haven't seen a home-staging TV show or sold a house recently, staging can transform a home from ugly duckling to swan.

Many people are under the misconception that staging is a pricey option for rich homeowners. Not true: Staging is about the creativity, not the money. What some people don't realize when they sell their house "as is" or don't stage is that it can actually cost them money.

Because the air seems to be seeping out of the real estate bubble, staging should be on the minds of more home sellers. In the real estate game, time is as important as money. Unstaged homes spent an average of 22 days on the market. Those staged by a professional spent an average of 11 days on the market, according to statistics compiled by Stagedhomes.com.

The industry makes impressive claims for staging: Unstaged home prices averaged \$518,820, while a comparable staged home sold for \$557,271, a 7.4 percent difference. Barb Schwartz, founder of Associated Staging Professionals and author of "Home Staging: The Winning Way to Sell Your House for More Money," makes an even loftier claim. According to her recent figures, staged homes priced under \$1 million sell for 10 percent more than comparable unstaged homes. Staged homes listed for \$1 million-plus sell for a 20 percent premium, she says.

Comparisons are difficult, since no home is sold both with the staging add-ons and without them. A more down-to-earth appraisal of staging's effect is offered by HomeGain, an online resource for homebuyers and sellers: Their 2003 poll of 2,000 real-estate agents found that staging typically costs from \$212 to \$1,089 and adds from \$2,275 to \$2,841 to a home's selling price - a "return" of from two to 13 times the cost of staging.

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Schwartz points to some impressive successes: A Philadelphia house sat on the market for a year priced at \$1.195 million. After Schwartz's stagers did some work, the home received a \$1.395 million offer the next day.

But it's not just about million-dollar houses. The owners of an Oak Grove, Calif., home originally listed it at \$369,000 prior to staging. The house eventually sold for \$390,000, a tidy \$21,000 over the original asking price.

San Francisco seller Nathaniel Robinson spent nearly \$4,000 on staging. "I absolutely feel like it was worth it," he said after the sale. "The vendor transformed my place from my daily living place to a showcase for lofts in general." He was "thrilled." "The negative aspects are that it's not cheap," he says.

Staging is not necessarily pricey. In fact, a high price tag -- say, \$5,000 for staging an entire house -- may indicate low creativity on the stager's part. Anyone can fill a house with costly furniture, artwork, and table settings. Top stagers may charge as little as \$300 by swapping items from other rooms. "We make things out of nothing, like on 'Gilligan's Island,'" Schwartz says. "It cuts down on the cost." If a client does more, a stager can do less, and the cost goes down. "Sometimes the owners run and buy new dishes ... but there's nothing that I can't make work," says Peggy Selinger-Eaton. She has a new book and DVD titled, "Stage Your Home for Profit."

Deborah Chapman who recently sold her home in Kirkland, Wash., says she was a staging skeptic. But after the recent sale, "it totally changed my mind," she says. As someone who has sold her house a few times before, she notes, "The dealmaker or -breaker is 'How fast do you want to sell?'"

When Selinger-Eaton enters clients' homes, she hands them her wish list. "In this market, I'm pretty tough with my wish list. It's their 'profit list,'" she says.

Staging is designed to differentiate a house, to create emotion, which translates into more offers and more money. Selinger-Eaton says that she creates an illusion. "Even if there's a grungy couch, we can update it by buying pillows and throws at Target." (Both Schwartz and Selinger-Eaton often use or recommend Target for what they consider its low prices and high style.)

Sellers shouldn't look at staging by seeing how much it will cost but how much it could make. Even sellers with limited financial resources can find ways to use a stager's expertise. Some stagers will do a consultation for about \$250, which can include a written report that details what owners can do to stage a home themselves.

How to 'Stage' a Home

Staging expert Peggy Selinger-Eaton offers these tips to do-it-yourself stagers:

Less is more: Remove clutter and use a few wisely chosen accessories (candles, fresh flowers, crystal) to beautify your home.

Bedrooms should have beds: If you're a bed short, use an inflatable mattress and some boxes to create a faux bed.

Light and more light: Raise window blinds and remove screens from windows to let in as much natural light as possible.

Modernize fixtures: Brass and glass light fixtures are dull and should be hidden or replaced. Affordable new lampshades will minimize their appearance. Chrome, iron, or brushed-nickel fixtures give a modern look.

Disguise furniture: If your couch looks shabby, disguise it with decorative attention-grabbing pillows and throws.

Create life: Dining-room and kitchen tables should look as though you're ready for guests to arrive. Set out your favorite dishes and napkins to make it look inviting.

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