

Staging a Home for Sale

If you are an HGTV fan like we are, you're probably familiar with the term "staging". If you don't know what it is, and you're considering selling your home, now would be an excellent time to find out!

You don't need to worry about staging your home if:

- it's a sellers' market and buyers are lined up at your door, or
- your house is in move-in condition with tasteful, neutral décor, and is well priced, or
- you are willing to keep dropping your price until a buyer is found, or
- you know of a buyer out there with exactly the same taste as you have who has the money to meet your price.

Give serious consideration to staging your home if you want:

- a faster sale
- a higher selling price, possibly even multiple offers (a "good thing", as Martha would say).

What is Staging?

Staging is the process of turning **your home** into a **house that has instant appeal for a wide variety of buyers**. It takes time, talent, work, and some dollars, but it pays off hugely!

In the real estate business, first impressions are everything. Buyers usually have a shopping list of what they want in a house, yet time and time again, realtors find their clients fall in love with a house that features very few of the criteria on their list, but aren't at all interested in a property that on paper, has everything they want.

Obviously a property for sale should be clean inside and out, attractive, well maintained and well priced, and all those factors are part of staging. But sometimes realtors have clients with just such a property that, despite everyone's best efforts, still doesn't sell.

A critical part of staging called "**depersonalizing**" can make that difference between buyers stepping inside the front door and lighting up with excitement about finding just the right house (the former situation), and wandering through the entire home and then deciding it isn't quite what they want (the latter situation). Depersonalizing refers to the process of taking yourself – your tastes, your personality, all the things you added to make this house into your home – back out of the house to leave a blank canvas. It can be a difficult thing to do, but you have to keep reminding yourself that you are not selling yourself or your taste, you are selling a building that other people will make into their own home. If you were selling your car, or a desk, you would take all your belongings out of it, make it immaculate inside and out, polish it up and show it off as best you can. The same concept applies to selling a house. You need to detach yourself emotionally from it and regard it as just another item you are trying to sell for the best price possible.

An underlying principle in staging is what we call “**Buyers’ Math**”, a type of math that has nothing to do with the price of the property. Like children starting school, buyers find it much easier to add than to subtract. They can walk into an attractive but neutral room and add themselves to the picture. They can mentally add their furniture, their artwork, their favourite colours and their prized family possessions. They say things like, “My loveseat can go here, I’ll paint the fireplace wall aubergine and put Aunt Sonya’s candlesticks on the mantle!” They cannot, however, mentally subtract owners’ artwork, collections, family photos or favourite colours from the picture. Instead they are left with the impression of either a room they don’t like or a room that is okay but not for them.

Significant turn-offs for buyers include:

- collections on display (usually narrows the pool of potential buyers to those who share your passion for the items collected);
- large groupings of family photos (buyers see the home then as the place for your family, not theirs);
- bold wall colours (see collections above);
- a lot of artwork (see collections), the exceptions being pieces of art that draw attention to a positive feature of the house;
- religious artwork or artifacts (which has nothing to do with tolerance or intolerance, but just leaves the buyer with the impression that this is not the house for them);
- rooms or spaces used for something other than what was originally intended (buyers are left with the impression that the house is odd or is missing something), the exception here being home offices, which just about everyone needs and can be acceptably squeezed in just about anywhere.

The Staging Process

As mentioned earlier, the staging process does take time, work and dollars. The sooner you start in advance of your property going on the market, the better, as you want to clean up, clear out (“declutter”), update the appearance (retro might work in fashion but usually doesn’t in real estate), depersonalize and decorate, replacing the distinctly “you” home with a fresh, neutral, ready-to-move-into house. Even for just a little sprucing up without major projects, you would do well to leave yourself a couple weeks.

While the thought of the work involved may be overwhelming, consider the compensations: you get a significantly better price for your home and it sells faster; moving always involves sorting through everything in the house anyway and packing it – this way half the work is done before you sell; the whole process is stressful no matter how you do it and this way, once your house is ready, you are living in peaceful, pleasant surroundings awaiting the sale. And, just for emphasis, once again you make more money. Staging costs can range from a few hundred dollars to several thousand, depending on whether you are just doing a little clearing, painting, furniture rearranging and adding some throw pillows, or something more major like replacing flooring and bathroom

fixtures. You typically make back several thousand dollars more than what you put into the staging process, and it is not unusual to get as much as a 10% higher selling price.

There are two major psychological hurdles to get past in successfully staging your house. The first is the question of why you would put money into a house when you are selling. You lived with that ugly old countertop, so why should you change it for someone else? The answer of course is the sell-faster/better-price thing again. The second issue deals with the time, effort and personality you put into making this property become something that is uniquely you, and your feeling that it's so much better because of what you have done. While that may be true for you, **you** aren't buying the house; you're trying to sell it to someone else, and you want the house to appeal to as many buyers as possible, not just those who share your taste.

Staging typically involves the following steps:

- **Clear out clutter.** Every room, every space, every closet should be neat and tidy and have open space - basement, garage and yard included. This means getting rid of all that "stuff" that you never use, and packing up a lot of what you do use but can do without temporarily. Renting a storage locker until after the move is an excellent idea. Kitchen and bath countertops should be clear. There should be nothing stuck on the fridge. Organized closets with extra space give the impression of plenty of storage; overly full ones tell buyers that storage space is a problem in the house. Even extra pieces of furniture should be removed, again giving the impression of open space, and leaving room for the buyer to picture his or her own pieces there.
- **Clean, clean, clean!** Inside and out. Kitchens and baths especially should be spotless.
- **Depersonalize.** Clear out things that make this distinctly your home, and leave it a space that almost anyone could make into their home.
- **Update anything that looks tired, worn, or dated.** Kitchens and baths are again critical. Money spent here doing things such as replacing old countertops, painting cabinets and putting on new hardware, and replacing old bathroom fixtures more than pays off. Old wooden veneer doors look dramatically better with fresh white paint and matching white baseboards.
- **Decorate.** Paint should be fresh in neutral tones (but not white except for trim). A few carefully chosen accessories make rooms pop. Less furniture is better than more, and if yours is terribly dated (as opposed to classic), consider renting or borrowing some newer pieces for the duration. In bedrooms, bed linens should match. Bath towels, shower curtain and accessories should match. Highlight positive features of the house (a fireplace wall) and minimize negative ones (if your eating space is small, use a cute bistro set in the space instead of crowding it with a more normal sized kitchen set).
- **Keep it light!** Allow as much natural light as possible into the house. Window coverings should be minimal, and have them closed only to hide a poor view, in which case some type of translucent window treatment could work. Make sure every room has adequate lighting from built-in fixtures or floor and table lamps.

Replace dated fixtures. While your house is on the market, use higher wattage bulbs with natural light colour.

- **Try to have rooms used for their original intent** or buyers can become confused and see the house as odd and not having the layout they need. For example, don't have a dining room used as a bedroom, or a living room used as a dining room. Keep children's toys and equipment in their own rooms and spaces, and out of living room, dining room, kitchen and master bedroom. Home offices are a bit of an exception to this rule, as most people need one these days, and bedrooms or corners of other rooms can be creatively turned into office space.
- **Make sure you have curb appeal.** Your house should look attractive from the outside with an inviting entrance. If you don't have much in the way of landscaping, use container plantings that you can move with you.

You can see now why we suggest starting this process long before your house goes on the market. It is a lot of work! However, for most people, selling a house is a huge thing financially, and getting more for your house gives you more purchasing power for your next house or more money to spend on something else, so it is well worth the extra effort. Although we don't have any of our own statistics, one company from Atlanta that flips homes on an HGTV show found that staged homes sold in 40% less time than homes that were not staged.

How We Can Help

We can help you with many of the aspects of staging your home and preparing it for the market. The task seems less daunting when we work as a team, and while it is always a lot of work, it is usually fun too. We will go through your house with an objective and critical eye, looking to see how it can be made more appealing to a wider pool of buyers. We will provide you with suggestions that will give you the most return on your work and money. Sometimes it can be as simple as rearranging the furniture and adding a potted plant! We'll give you lots of moral support, and while we won't do all the work for you, we have been known to wield a paintbrush at times. We have an ever-expanding supply of furniture and decorating items that we are happy to lend you for staging, and lots of ideas for making a room pop without making your wallet explode! All of these services we provide at no extra cost to you when you list with Gary.

We hope you'll consider staging your home and we look forward to working with you.

Gary Bowen

Realtor

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