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Firms make a good impression 'Staging' a home can speed up sales

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Sure signs of spring, "For Sale" signs are sprouting on residential lawns. In a slowing real estate market, sellers are looking for competitive advantage.

A growing number of them will turn to "stagers," specialists in preparing homes for the market.

When that market is slow, a good first impression is critical to captivating a buyer, said Jo Potvin of Wyoming, owner of Design to Market.

"But when the market is strong, staging can impact your sales price," she says. "In Manhattan, people don't even think about putting an apartment or condo on the market without staging it."

Potvin, a former marketing professional, watched the staging trend move from California and New York to metropolitan areas in the nation's heartland.

She launched her business nearly two years ago, teaming up with a designer friend and adding other staffing as her business grew.

Some sellers or real estate agents involve a stager before listing a home for sale. Others bring in the specialist when the home doesn't move after weeks or months.

Sometimes the homes are overstuffed reflections of their owners' busy lives: Sometimes their décor or furnishings are tired or dated; sometimes the owner has already moved on and the house is vacant. Regardless, the basic principles of staging apply.

"I talk about the 'three Cs': clutter, color, cleanliness," said Nancy Buck, whose 3-year-old Florence-based company, It Pays to Stage, has handled nearly 100 homes in Greater Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky. "The purpose of staging is to really showcase the features of a home, the home, rather than the stuff."

That is the key difference between decorating a home and staging it, they say.

"With interior decorating, you're focusing on the people who live in the home - their tastes and interests; with staging, you focus on the home so the prospective buyers can see themselves in it," Buck said.

Shifting that focus means packing up and storing many personal items, family photos, books, CDs and toys, and any furniture that does not show off a room to best advantage. It may mean making a few repairs or cosmetic changes, such as removing dated wallpaper, painting over those colorful but quirky sponged walls, or ditching the overgrown rubber plant. Remaining furnishings - sometimes enhanced with rental items from the stager - are then rearranged to create inviting rooms.

"So many times, when we come in, the arrangement is just walls lined with furniture," Potvin said.

"We want buyers to see and feel the size and tone of a room," added Tom Tobias, an agent with Re/Max Unlimited Realtors in Wyoming, who has used stagers. "Staging is taking the seller's signature off the house. The idea is not only to neutralize the colors, but to neutralize the tone."

Ron Newcomer, an agent with Century 21 Home Team in Greendale, recently staged one of his listings.

"The house was on the market for six months last year, priced in the mid-\$140s," he said. "The sellers were frustrated because they were getting no offers. We staged it and made some minor adjustments, such as changing the pulls on the kitchen cabinets. It looked warm and inviting."

"We put it back on the market in the upper \$150s, and it sold within one week."

DEMAND GROWS

Both Buck and Potvin say demand for their services is growing and, gradually, sellers are starting to think of staging before listing their homes.

Buck, trained as an interior decorator, started out as a traditional interior decorator, offering real estate redesign as an adjunct service. The volume of requests to prep homes for the market led her to spin off that function into its own company. Now she and her two assistants are trained stagers. Her sales in 2006 are running 39 percent above those in 2005, she says.

Potvin says her sales increase each month and that Design to Market revenues for the first quarter of 2006 are more than double the company's total revenues for 2005.

Some real estate agents, such as Tobias and Newcomer, believe staging is an effective marketing strategy across all price ranges and that it can pay for itself in speedier sales and higher sales prices.

Others, like Jenni McCauley of Sibcy Cline Realtors in Hyde Park, see it as a sometimes pricey strategy to be used in specific, competitive market situations. For instance, she said, it may be advisable to stage an existing home when it is vying to be noticed amid surrounding new construction.

Buck and Potvin, however, have staged modest homes all the way up to those with six- and seven-figure price tags. A consultation can run from less than \$200 to several hundred dollars. So International Association of Home Staging Professionals statistics indicate that the cost of staging a home generally runs less than the amount of the typical first price reduction when a home isn't moving.

Cindy Brouillette, owner of Cindy B! Realtors in Fort Wright, says staging is part of the service Realtors should provide. She has developed a list of more than 50 tips to help sellers declutter, depersonalize and otherwise increase the appeal of their homes.

"I compete with agents every day that have stagers coming in, and I've seen staged homes that definitely looked better than they did before," she said. "But they shouldn't look as if they have been staged, because that could create a credibility issue. So take the breakfast tray off the ottoman."

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