

Staging Your Home

Five million homes are sold every year in the United States, 100,000 each week. Thousands of homes come on the market every day. What can you do to make yours stand out from the crowd?

It helps to think of your home as a “product.” Similar to a product on the shelf at your local store, your home has features and benefits as well as pluses and minuses, and competition. To compete with the competition in the marketplace you must be priced right and look better than the other products. Your home is no different.

That’s where the concept of “staging” comes in. First coined in 1972 by Barb Schwarz, a former realtor, staging has become one of the most important trends in real estate today. Studies show that homes which have been properly staged often sell faster and for more money than similar unstaged homes.

Just what is home staging and how can it help you sell your home? Staging is a process of cleaning, organizing, rearranging, updating, and preparing your home for sale.

At its most basic it may be as simple as performing some needed home repairs, pre-packing and removing unneeded items and accessories, and bringing in some fresh flowers and plants. In other cases it might be as complicated as repainting, re-carpeting, rearranging furniture, or replacing outdated light fixtures or window treatments.

But no matter how easy or complicated, the end result has only one goal: to show potential buyers the very best side of your home. After all, they’ll be able to concentrate on picturing themselves in the home when they’re not distracted by clutter, dirt, or home maintenance problems.

The following guide takes you through each step of staging your home and getting top dollar fast!



How Staging Works: Examples

Not convinced that staging really matters? Then consider the following examples.

Picture yourself shopping for a new home. The first home you visit is a brand new model home. The color scheme is coordinated and the furniture has been arranged to show off the size of the rooms. Kitchens and bathrooms are polished to a high sparkle and are artfully accessorized. Clutter is amazingly absent. The closets are organized and the garage is neat and looks spacious.

The next home you visit is only a year old and has a similar floor plan to the model you just saw. The owners, however, have moved from a larger home and their possessions are packed floor to ceiling in every closet, drawer, and shelf. The kitchen and bathroom haven't been scrubbed in days, and there's so much furniture in the dining room that you can hardly walk around the table. Several dead plants sit in the corner and the paint on the front door has been scratched incessantly by the owner's large dogs. The garage is filled with toys, boxes, and holiday decorations and a car can't be parked inside.

Get the picture? You've probably guessed that in most cases the model home would sell ten times faster than the similar but cluttered competing home. The model has been "staged" to show buyers the features of the home, the spaciousness of the floorplan, and the ample supply of storage.

"What most homeowners need to understand, is that the way a home should be presented for resale and the way you live in your home are two completely different things," offers Lori Matzke, a Professional Home Stager. "Most of us don't actually live our lives like a page torn out of *Metropolitan Home*."

According to Ms. Matzke, boxing up collections, freeing floors of throw rugs and area rugs, and editing a room's furnishings, can all attribute to making a home seem more spacious and airy. "Keep in mind that what you are selling is the house -- not its contents."

Sound kind of psychological? Well it is, but you can learn to use this to your advantage rather than your detriment. Homes can and do reveal subliminal messages of all kinds. Make sure your home delivers the "right" message!



From looking at literally thousands of homes during our careers, we have stumbled upon numerous “real” examples of staging mishaps and blunders ourselves. Here are a couple that stand out . . .

“Mickey Mouse” lives here . . .

I was excited when I got a call to list a home in a neighborhood that was selling quickly. When I arrived, my excitement turned to concern. The house was only two years old, but the walls were dirty and the carpets were stained. That wasn’t the worst of it though. The owner told me she thought decorating was over-rated and saw no need to spend money on things just to “look pretty.” The décor reflected her beliefs perfectly. The living room and dining room were empty except for piles of toys in the corners. The gorgeous two-story family room was furnished with a 15 year old, thread-barren sofa and a scratched table; a vinyl table cloth and a stack of papers covered her breakfast table. The master bedroom was bare except for a bed covered with a tired-looking spread. Draped over her spectacular Jacuzzi tub were several Mickey Mouse beach towels. And her children’s rooms were painted hot pink and sky blue, complete with their own crayon and marker “art.”

The home sat for six months unsold, until the owners decided to move into their new house and lease the old one until the following spring when the market picked up again. It’s the best decision they could have made. Not only did they get their unattractive things out of the way, they ended up renting to a couple who had gorgeous furnishings (she was a designer at a department store) and agreed to have the home put back on the market before they actually moved out. This time, with the tenants stylish décor in place, the owners received a contract in only a week.

The real “cat house” . . .

I’ll never forget the house I fondly refer to as “cat house.” My clients were excited at the prospect of looking at the basically charming house that seemed a little under priced for the exclusive neighborhood it was in. I made an appointment for the following day. The moment we opened the door, we could hardly breathe; the odor was overwhelming. We discovered why shortly - there were cats everywhere! The owners obviously bred Persian cats, but to an extreme. There was a Mama cat with a littler in every closet in the house, and the laundry room was filled with cages and snarling, miserable animals. Anyone would have a hard time looking past this sad state of affairs. Not surprisingly, the house sat for over a year before someone bought it way below even their reduced asking price.

Don’t let your house turn up on a realtor’s most memorable blunder list! It’s likely that staging your own home will require some work and might even be a little painful for some folks, but it will be well worth it when that “sold” sign goes up fast!

THINK TWICE

I once had a seller who insisted on being present for every showing so that she could meet the customers at the door and demand that they remove their shoes. She then followed them around the house and refused to let them enter the basement from inside the house – they might bring in dust, she said. Agents and clients had to go outside around the back of the house to view the basement. Many agents called to complain about her, and not surprisingly the house took six months to sell.

#1. Conduct a Pre-Inspection

The first step in staging is to make sure your house is in good working order. This means that everything from light bulbs to the heating system and everything in between should function properly. It's never advisable to stage a home simply to cover up problems!

It is smart to repair or replace things now, before a home inspector brings them to the buyer's attention. You might even consider having your home professionally inspected. By performing an inspection, you may avoid having the potential buyer raise undo concern and ask you to make costly repairs. Many items have very simple remedies, but your buyer's inspector may recommend much more elaborate and costly solutions. In typical sales offers, you are not forced contractually to correct most items, but the successful completion of your sales contract may depend on it. Your pre-inspection should include:



- ❑ **Plumbing:** Go over the plumbing system with specific emphasis on any leaks that may exist. Correct any situation that may indicate leaking, such as a discolored spot on the ceiling. Also, dripping faucets and running toilets should be fixed.
- ❑ **Electrical:** Although this is beyond the scope of many homeowners, it is simple to purchase a small device that you can use to check to be sure each outlet is grounded properly. It may involve only a simple adjustment to correct a grounding problem and is probably something you would like to take care of anyway.
- ❑ **Heating and AC:** You or your HVAC service company should examine the units for various safety concerns, rusting of any of the elements, and proper ductwork. Check that the units are clean, filters are new and that ducts are free of debris.
- ❑ **Roof, Attic, and Gutters:** Check these areas for signs of deterioration or leaking. Any roof leaks should be remedied. The gutters should be clean to insure that they are working properly and any loose gutters or downspouts should be tightened. Any skylights should be properly sealed.
- ❑ **Structure:** Check siding, exterior trim, windows, doors, and stoops for signs of deterioration, dry rot or termite damage. Although law requires a separate termite letter at time of closing stating that the property is free from current termite infestation, most inspectors will check for damage due to previous infestation. If there is damage (such as soft or crumbling wood, peeling paint, or extensive discoloration) in any of the areas listed above, it is highly advisable to make necessary repairs now, providing that the problem, which caused the damage, has been taken care of and that the disclosure statement indicates such. There are different ways to address many of these repairs, and if you wait, the buyer's inspector may suggest the most costly way. In addition, these areas are highly visible to potential buyers and make the best impression in top condition.

Basements: Check the basement for adequate ventilation, evidence of water entry, proper floor/wall framing and insect damage or dry rot. Any of these problems that exist should be corrected as directed above. If floor joists or other framing lumber shows discoloration from mildew or previous water damage, scrubbing the area with a bleach solution will improve the appearance.

- ❑ **Bathrooms, kitchen and appliances:** All appliances should be in working order. Plumbing fixtures and pipes should show no signs of leaking. Caulking or grouting between tiles should be in good shape and not allow water to penetrate beneath the tiles. Some simple re-caulking can often take care of any problem areas. Stains and discoloration can sometimes be removed with products like 'The Works' or 'Clorox Clean-up'. Black mildew on grout or tiles can often be addressed with products like 'Tilex'.
- ❑ **Interior elements:** Walls and ceilings should be in good condition with any previous water stains corrected. You may have gotten use to the old water mark and even think it looks like a portrait of your Uncle Frank, but buyers may not know that you've corrected the problem that caused it, and it will raise concern. Wallpaper should be in good condition, with any loose or peeling paper re-glued. Often times it becomes loose in bathroom areas because of the high humidity, but people always wonder if it's a leak that causing it to peel, so it's much better to get out a little glue and fix it! Handrails on stairs and balconies should be secure and doors and windows should function properly with no missing or loose hardware. Paint is usually considered a cosmetic item and is not addressed in an inspection. It's best to try and clean any scuff marks and touch up any cracks or major discolorations.
- ❑ **Exterior elements:** Inspect wood decks, stairs and porches for proper construction, damage or loose rails. A common problem often found is earth to wood contact. Many times this can be corrected by simply removing dirt from any wood that touches the ground until the concrete footing or pier is visible. Landscaping should not be touching the house or air conditioning units and water should drain away from the house.

Remember that the items listed above are only *some* of the areas that will probably be inspected. The list is not complete and certain problems would definitely have to be corrected professionally. In no way do we suggest that you cover up problems, however. You are opening yourself up to a possible lawsuit if you do and are discovered.

Taking the time to **make repairs** *before* buyers knock on the door will make you more money in the long run. So, put together a list of items that need fixing. Look for the obvious such as loose door handles, burned out light bulbs, leaking faucets, or stained carpeting as well as less noticeable features such as slippery area rugs, dangling and dangerous extension cords, or a non-functioning burner on the stove.

Don't Make This Mistake!!!

It's a comment we hear a lot. . . "Let's just put the house on the market for top dollar and see what happens. If it doesn't sell, then we'll start worrying about repairs, decorating and the like." Why doesn't this make sense? Because when your home is first listed, there's usually a flurry of activity and interest. Later, if it doesn't sell and you then decide to spruce things up, your house is "old news." You will never be able to recapture that initial activity. So do it BEFORE the first prospect looks at it!

#2. De-Clutter, Re-Arrange, Organize

The next step is to analyze the “surface” appeal of your home. Before you put your house on the market, assess its visual appeal and take the steps necessary to make it irresistible! Beyond doing any needed repairs, there are several things that help make sure you get top dollar...

- ❑ **Tour every room of your home and really “look” at each one.** There are undoubtedly things that make the room look smaller and don’t need to be there... That extra piece of furniture, the big ugly stereo speakers, the pile of magazines, the sad looking plant... get them out! Borrow a friend's garage or rent a storage area for a couple of months. Then begin to fill it with prepacked items, boxes of garage clutter, and items pulled from storage areas including the basement and attic. You're going to have to move it sometime, so get some of it out of the way before you begin showing your home.
- ❑ **Rearrange furniture to maximize flow and space.** Forget making sure everyone has a good view of the TV! Make everything seem spacious. This may be one key area where a friend or professional may need to be called in. After all, you've looked at your furnishings in a certain way for years. Someone else will have a fresh view of the situation and can rearrange and redesign your furniture for maximum impact during the time your home is listed for sale.
- ❑ **Don’t make the mistake of offering a “decorating allowance”.** Agents quickly see through this in the listing information... It means “this house needs work”. People want to look at a beautiful, clean, neutral home and envision themselves living there. No one wants to wonder about what that stain is on the bedroom carpet or try to envision that bright yellow room painted a soft beige. Instead of a “decorating allowance,” just do the decorating!!
- ❑ **Have your home as clean as possible.** If needed have it professionally cleaned and then plan on cleaning it *everyday* while it’s on the market.
- ❑ **Have someone other than a family member check the house for pet odor and other unpleasant smells.** It’s hard to “smell” your own house. Get an honest opinion from an outsider. An unpleasant scent is a big turn off psychologically.
- ❑ **Remove clutter from counters and tables.** It makes the space seem larger. Store as many items as possible in cabinets or out of sight. That stack of mail on the kitchen counter that keeps piling up is probably invisible to you, but buyers see everything.



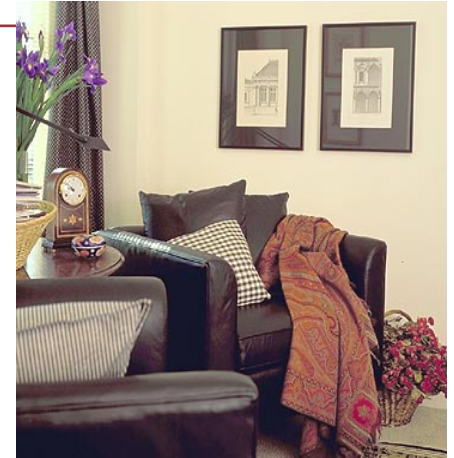
- ❑ **Take down your wedding photos, the kids' school pictures, and refrigerator art.** A buyer needs to picture himself living in the house. That will be more difficult if your personal photos and momentos are everywhere.
- ❑ **Don't forget closets and cabinets.** Try to make closets look as spacious as possible. If they are full, empty some things into boxes for storage out of sight. Potential buyers also like to look in kitchen cupboards, storage areas, and closets to see if their belongings will fit. If your closets are packed to the brim it's time to weed through things. Every storage area in your home should be neat, organized, and clutter-free.
- ❑ **Rethink accessories in every room.** Repeat the mantra -- uncluttered, elegant, color-coordinated, beautiful. Less is more, so pare down and box up anything "extra" or unneeded.
- ❑ **Make your foyer sparkle.** First impressions are priceless. Even if your home is lacking in other ways, the initial impression is crucial. No matter what you have to work with, use your best pieces and your most inspired imagination to create a light, spacious feeling in your foyer.
- ❑ **Make the front door and/or porch charming and inviting.** Generally, buyers will be waiting there for a couple of minutes while the realtor locates the key, so it makes sense to spend some time sprucing up this spot. Wash, scrub, or repaint the front door so that it shines. Replace the door handle if it is weathered and unsightly. A new doormat and a pot of flowers are great... and if space permits, a bench, lantern or wreath all say welcome.
- ❑ **Make the grounds and landscaping immaculate.** Buyers will be impressed from the moment they get out of the car. If weather permits, plant annuals, especially along the front walk. Keep the driveway, walks, patios and decks clean and free of debris at all times.
- ❑ **If the outside of your house needs painting, do it!** That fresh coat of paint will go a long way towards making your home look it's best.
- ❑ **Inside, paint the walls a neutral color.** If they already are, a single coat or just a touch up of the same color paint will make everything look fresh.
- ❑ **Clean or replace the carpet.** If the carpet shows any sign of wear, it needs to go! But, make sure you replace it with a neutral color.

To sum it all up, if you want to get top dollar, you should make your home look as much like a "model" home as possible! It should create the impression that it's so well planned and laid out that keeping it neat is easy!

#3. Staging Strategies for Showings

The staging continues even after your house goes on the market. There are certain “rules” that you should always follow:

- ❑ **Clean, clean, clean!** Now that you've got the clutter out of the way it's time to get down and dirty. Cleaning for home staging goes beyond a regular house cleaning routine. You'll want to really concentrate on bringing a sheen to every part of your home. Check every surface including windows (inside and out), ledges, door knobs, paddle fans, mini blinds, ceiling and floor corners -- and make sure they are clean.
- ❑ **Before showings, open all drapes and blinds** - except if they hide an unattractive view. Bring as much natural light into the house as possible.
- ❑ **Turn on strategic lights throughout the house.** Not all lights need to be on, but you can experiment with which ones create the most pleasing and bright atmosphere. Make sure all the switched light fixtures have working bulbs.
- ❑ **Make sure the house has a pleasing odor.** I've had success using light bulb rings and home sprays. Many realtors suggest baking bread or cookies to fill a home with a wonderful aroma. Practically speaking this may not be possible every day, but you might keep it in mind for open houses or repeat visits by potential buyers. Or buy some potpourri and refresher oil in a non-offending fragrance like cinnamon or vanilla.
- ❑ **Open doors to all rooms** so that people won't miss seeing any of them. I once showed a house that had “do not disturb” signs on two doors. *What was going on in there?*
- ❑ **Keep the thermostat at a comfortable level.** Now is not the time to try to economize on energy bills.
- ❑ **Keep your house in show condition at all times.** Yes, this IS hard to do, but it never fails that the buyers who drop in with their agent without making an appointment might just be the people who ultimately make an offer on your house.



continued

- ❑ **Think of each room as a "set"** that you can decorate any way you please to increase your home's sense of peace, warmth, and order. Consider some of these ideas:
 - Set up a tea service at a small table by a window overlooking a garden.
 - Place an open book and cozy throw on the upholstered chair in your bedroom.
 - Pile an attractive bowl with fresh fruit on the kitchen island.

- ❑ **Treat yourself to fresh plants and flowers.** They make a wonderful impression and won't hurt your mood either! Cast a critical eye on your houseplants. If they're leggy, dying, or otherwise scraggly, then it's time to give them a new home or pitch them. Start over with some new plants. There are some services in larger cities that will rent houseplants, so that may be an alternative to buying everything new. Be sure to place the plants in clean and attractive

- ❑ **Keep the grounds immaculate.** Buyers will be impressed from the moment they arrive. This might be the time to treat yourself to a professional lawn service.

- ❑ **Make yourself available, easy to reach, and pleasant to talk to.** There's nothing as frustrating as trying to reach an owner to make an appointment or to ask questions for a client and having the phone ring and ring. You don't have to provide 24-hour access, but in this day and age an answering machine or service is a must. You might miss a showing if an agent calls and gets no answer — he or she may be afraid to show the house without your permission. Also, brush up on your phone etiquette. Act pleasant and pleased that an agent or buyer wants to see your home! You might be surprised how many times I've called to schedule a showing and the owner acts put out by my request. It's human nature to want to cross that person's name off my showing list. Many, many sellers make the mistake of refusing to let potential buyers and agents have easy access to look at the property.

- ❑ **Secure pets in a confined area, preferably out of sight.** Even if your pet is friendly, many people are afraid of animals and will be put off by the fact that you even have an animal in your home. If you have animals that stay in cages or inside all the time, **STAY ON TOP OF THEIR MESS!**

- ❑ **Make yourself invisible during showings.** When an appointment has been made to show your home, it is best to leave prior to the appointment and allow the realtor to show it using the lockbox. People feel freer to look around when the owner is not there. If you must be home, let the potential buyers have as much privacy as possible. Try to stay in one room and not follow them around the house. We have had owners follow us around in order to point out what they think is special about their homes, but it almost always is disruptive and sometimes detrimental.

In reality, it's almost always an inconvenience to show your house. Get over it and get on with selling your home for top dollar!