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Stagers help buyers envision themselves in a home

By Beth Young



The art and science of staging a home for sale has been around for only about five years, but in the downturn of the real estate market, home sellers must be able to stand above the fray when they market and position their properties for sale.

Enter Donna Dazzo, a Hamptons and Manhattan-based home stager who takes marketing very seriously. Ms. Dazzo started her company, Designed To Appeal, in 2007. She entered the field after a long career in finance, where she developed and marketed investment products. According to Ms. Dazzo, the skills she learned in product development are a vital help when educating homeowners about how to see their home as a product to be sold.

"It's all about packaging," she said at a forum on home staging at the Hampton Library in Bridgehampton last Saturday, October 17. "Staging is positioning and packaging a house as a product on the market. People are more likely to have their car detailed before they sell it than to fix up their houses."

The most important lesson she said that homeowners should learn when trying to sell their house is to make sure that prospective buyers don't start profiling them. For instance, she said, a young couple might be turned off if they thought "old people" lived in a house, or if it was obviously owned by a bachelor.

"It's not about your taste anymore," she said of those trying to sell their houses. "People start shopping with logic, but they buy homes based on emotion. You want buyers to fall in love."

She added that only 10 percent of home buyers are capable of visualizing what a house could become if it needs work, and that potential buyers usually make their mind up about a house within 10 seconds. Because 80 to 90 percent of buyers start shopping online, she said it is crucial to provide Realtors with good staged photographs of the home that can be used on their company websites.

The next most important way to draw people into a home, she said, is to increase the house's curb appeal by paying attention to landscaping, outdoor maintenance and paint, and the all-important entryway to the home. Though she recommends neutral colors—not white, but light beiges, blues and greens—inside the house, Ms. Dazzo said that a brightly colored front door can often make a lasting impression on buyers.

The presence of pets in the house is also a turn-off to buyers, she said, recommending that during open houses, sellers should remove

“all traces of their pets and the pet.”

“Two thirds of the population does not own a cat or a dog, so if you have one, you are already turning off two-thirds of potential buyers,” she said, adding that large numbers of people have pet allergies that might make them wary of buying a home that had a pet in it.

Another big no-no is what Ms. Dazzo called “personalized decor,” which includes photographs, “trophies, deer heads, moose heads,” refrigerators covered in magnets and school papers, children’s drawings and bulletin boards.

The stager said she also strives to make the most private rooms in the house—the bathrooms and the master bedroom—feel as if they are newly-cleaned hotel rooms.

“A buyer shouldn’t feel as if they’re intruding on someone’s personal space,” she said.

Ms. Dazzo said that even though people’s clutter is a turn-off to potential buyers, the opposite problem, of a vacant home, is one that really keeps houses on the market longer. If there is nothing left in the house, buyers sense desperation and begin trying to whittle down prices, and as the listing gets more stale, the house becomes even harder to sell.

“If it doesn’t have furniture, people notice cracks in the walls, scuffs in the floor,” she said.

Ms. Dazzo’s own basement is full of inexpensive but attractive throw pillows, bed covers, tchotchkes, candles and designer soaps for display in the homes she stages. She said that she also works with furniture rental companies to help fill empty houses just enough so that prospective buyers can envision themselves living there.

During her talk, Ms. Dazzo pointed out that staging moves up sell dates and adds more money to seller’s pockets. She noted a recent study performed by The Real Estate Staging Association, which showed that, after they’d been on the market for quite some time, occupied homes that were staged sold on average within six days, while unoccupied homes sold within 28 days after staging.

“Home staging results in a higher price, all other things being equal,” she said, adding that the money that clients invest in staging usually results in a 350-percent return on investment in terms of getting a number closer to their sale price. “An investment in staging will always be less than the first price reduction,” she said.

Ms. Dazzo’s rates vary based on the size of a home, but they begin in the hundreds of dollars for an initial consultation, and go up to several thousand dollars once she’s contracted. She said that sometimes real estate agents will pay for the initial consultation, but that depends on the seller’s arrangements with their brokers.

Though she said many of the suggestions that she makes in the initial consultation can be implemented by the homeowners, working through the entire process of selling a home with a stager can help them benefit from an unbiased view of their home and the stager’s referrals to painters and other contractors. She recommended that anyone using a stager get references and testimonials before beginning work.

Most important, stagers add perspective that might often be overlooked by the homeowner, according to Ms. Dazzo.

“There are things you can’t see because you’re so used to living there,” she said.

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