

## Staging Your Home to Appeal to Buyers

By Jennifer Waters, McClatchy/Tribune News June 3, 2011

Craig and Amy Smith always felt quite confident, even cocky, in their ability to tastefully design the spacious interior of their steel-and-concrete loft in downtown Denver.

That was until they decided to sell it, and a consultant hired to help them "stage" their home told them to neutralize a dramatic accent wall, put away family photos and place most of their furniture and artwork in storage.

"The hardest part was not taking it personally," said Craig Smith, who as chief executive of ServiceMagic.com, an online business that connects homeowners with prescreened home-service professionals, decided to take his own advice. "When you think you're the best designers in the world and you have someone saying your taste in things might not be appreciated by others, that could be an ego hit."

In turn, that is the hardest part of the job for those offering the advice: Breaking it to sellers that their taste in decor and the lovingly acquired pieces and, well, clutter in their homes could be a huge turnoff to a prospective homebuyer.

Their job is to neuter the home before it goes on the market by getting rid of the chaos; opening up corridors, living spaces and walls; lightening bold colors; and exposing hidden pieces of charm and architecture.

A New York home that might heavily reflect a family's equestrian passions, with plaid wallpaper, dark paintings and horse bookends, could repel a single woman who loves theater, opera, art and bright, flowing rooms.

"What's fine for living is not always fine for selling," said Donna Dazzo, president of Designed to Appeal, a home-staging company that serves New York and the Hamptons. "You want to portray a lifestyle that people can relate to and aspire to. You have to have them fall in love as soon as they walk in the door."

Staging got its start a decade ago when the housing market was on fire and every seller wanted to up the value of his home emotionally and physically by making it more attractive and purchase-worthy than the house next door.

But as the market has switched directions, and the number of able and willing buyers has dropped like a wrecking ball, home sellers are again turning to staging consultants

to give their properties that extra oomph to impress and compete in the buyer's market. It's helped, too, that home-oriented lifestyle television channels show the before-and-after process of how a relatively inexpensive staging can turn the tables for homeowners itching to sell.

"The basic reality is that people buy on emotion," said Gina Ferraro, president of Cross Home Concepts in Chicago. "People always want to imagine having a grander lifestyle. We like to think that we're going to live in a beautiful, always-clean home, and that we're going to entertain a lot.

"The reality is that we don't, but the whole point of the staging is to work on the psychology of the client when they come in the door and have them be able to see themselves in that place."

You may need an expert to offer direction, but you don't need one to do the work if you're handy around the house.

Prices vary from city to city and home to home.

An oversize estate in the Hamptons could cost \$30,000 to stage properly, assuming it's not run-down. The consultation on the Smiths' Denver loft was about \$200.

The advice, however, is straightforward no matter what the size or value of the home: declutter, repaint in neutral colors, update when necessary, open the space by keeping furniture and trinkets to a minimum, take out family pictures and treasures and, by all means, make sure it's spotlessly clean.

Here's a list of some of the basics, with a few secrets:

Get rid of stuff. It can't be said enough how important it is to declutter. Most people accumulate furniture, pictures, vases, vacation mementos and other knickknacks, and then find places for them in the home, rather than taking things out. Most people don't notice how much clutter they have because they have learned to live with it. But, really, is there any better time to purge than when you move? Consider it a head start on packing.

Depersonalize. Put away family photos, education degrees, children's pictures, trophies, awards and collections.

"Don't mistake depersonalizing with removing personality," Ferraro said. "You still want the place to have style and personality. You have to know your environment and what people will be looking for."

Clean, clean, clean. If the three most important points to selling a home are location, location, location, the next three are sparkling, glittering clean.

"People don't want to walk into a dirty home that's for sale, in the same way that you don't want to check into a hotel and find a bathroom that's dirty with someone else's shampoo in it," Dazzo said.

Update old and deteriorating spaces. You might not have to totally redo a 1980s kitchen, but you will want to put new hardware on cabinet doors, replace countertops and appliances and fix what's broken, peeling or worn out.

The same is true in bathrooms, where tiles might have mildew, or light fixtures and cabinetry are outdated. Wallpaper is making a comeback in design books, but it's unlikely that the stuff you put up three decades ago is still in style.

Lighten up spaces. The most obvious way is by getting rid of heavy curtains, rugs and furniture, and painting the walls white or a light color.

But here are some other tricks: add new light fixtures; clean windows, remove screens and take down treatments to let in natural light; never hide good views or scenery behind window treatments; put cream-colored placemats on dark-wood dining tables; use fresh, white towels in bathrooms; and pull up carpets to expose hardwood floors.

Clean out closets and leave them one-third empty. Old houses can be problematic because of their limited closet space, but you can trick the eye by leaving plenty of space empty. Same's true for bigger homes and closets by keeping shoes and clothes neat, tidy and, yes, even color-coordinated.

Buyers will inspect your closets to see if there's enough room for all their things. If the closet looks overloaded with your stuff, then certainly they won't be able to imagine fitting their stuff in it.

Curb and hallway appeal really count. The buyers' first impressions are set as they approach the door. That's as true for apartments and condominiums as it is for homes and town houses.

If you're on the third floor of a walk-up, you must be sure that the hallway walls are clean, the moldings in place and the carpet not threadbare, which means you might have to address such things with a homeowners association long before you put the house on the market.

Be model-ready. Photo shoots of well-posed rooms are becoming a must in home selling because buyers get a first peek at your home on the Internet.

"The time that people actually have to spend physically looking at properties is very limited," Ferraro said. "You have to get them at 'hello.'"