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15 Secrets of Home Staging

Highlight your home's strengths, downplay its weaknesses and appeal to the greatest possible pool of prospective buyers with these home-staging tips.

Bye, Bye Clutter

The most important thing you can do to prepare your home for sale is to get rid of clutter. Make a house rule that for every new item that comes in, an old one has to leave. One of the major contributors to a cluttered look is having too much furniture. When professional stagers descend on a home being prepped for market, they often whisk away as much as half the owner's furnishings, and the house looks much bigger for it. You don't have to whittle that drastically, but take a hard look at what you have and ask yourself what you can live without.

Furniture Groupings

There's a common belief that rooms will feel larger and be easier to use if all the furniture is pushed against the walls, but that isn't the case. Instead, furnish your space by floating furniture away from walls. Reposition sofas and chairs into cozy conversational groups, and place pieces so that the traffic flow in a room is obvious. Not only will this make the space more user-friendly, but it will open up the room and make it seem larger.

Musical Furniture

Give yourself permission to move furniture, artwork and accessories among rooms on a whim. Just because you bought that armchair for the living room doesn't mean it won't look great anchoring a sitting area in your bedroom. And try perching a little-used dining-room table in front of a pretty window, top it with buffet lamps and other accessories, and press it into service as a beautiful writing desk or library table.

Room Transformations

If you have a room that serves only to gather junk, repurpose it into something that will add to the value of your home. The simple addition of a comfortable armchair, a small table and a lamp in a stairwell nook will transform it into a cozy reading spot. Or drape fabric on the walls of your basement, lay inexpensive rubber padding or a carpet remnant on the floor and toss in a few cushy pillows. Voila - a new meditation room or yoga studio.

Home Lighting

One of the things that make staged homes look so warm and welcoming is great lighting. As it turns out, many of our homes are improperly lighted. To remedy the problem, increase the wattage in your lamps and fixtures. Aim for a total of 100 watts for each 50 square feet. Don't depend on just one or two fixtures per room, either. Make sure you have three types of lighting: ambient (general or overhead), task (pendant, under-cabinet or reading) and accent (table and wall).

Make It Bigger

To make a room appear to be bigger than it is, paint it the same color as the adjacent room. If you have a small kitchen and dining room, a seamless look will make both rooms feel like one big space. And make a sunporch look bigger and more inviting by painting it green to reflect the color of nature. Another design trick: If you want to create the illusion of more space, paint the walls the same color as your drapery. It will give you a seamless and sophisticated look.

Neutral and Appealing

Painting a living room a fresh neutral color helps tone down any dated finishes in the space. Even if you were weaned on off-white walls, take a chance and test a quart of paint in a warm, neutral hue. These days, the definition of neutral extends way beyond beige, from warm tans and honeys to soft blue-greens. As for bold wall colors, they have a way of reducing offers, so go with neutrals in large spaces.

Color Experiment

Don't be afraid to use dark paint in a powder room, dining room or bedroom. A deep tone on the walls can make the space more intimate, dramatic and cozy. And you don't have to go whole hog - you can paint just an accent wall to draw attention to a dramatic fireplace or a lovely set of windows. If you have built-in bookcases or niches, experiment with painting the insides a color that will make them pop — say, a soft sage green to set off the white pottery displayed within.

Vary Wall Hangings

If your home is like most, the art is hung in a high line encircling each room. Big mistake. Placing your pictures, paintings and prints in such stereotypical spots can render them almost invisible. Art displayed creatively makes it stand out and shows off your space. So break up that line and vary the patterning and grouping.

Three's Company

Mixing the right accessories can make a room more inviting. When it comes to eye-pleasing accessorizing, odd numbers are preferable, especially three. Rather than lining up a trio of accessories in a row, imagine a triangle and place one object at each point. Scale is important, too, so in your group of three be sure to vary height and width, with the largest item at the back and the smallest in front. For maximum effect, group accessories by color, shape, texture or some other unifying element, stagers suggest.

Raid Your Yard

Staged homes are almost always graced with fresh flowers and pricey orchid arrangements, but you can get a similar effect simply by raiding your yard. Budding magnolia clippings or unfurling fern fronds herald the arrival of spring, summer blooms add splashes of cheerful color, blazing fall foliage warms up your decor on chilly autumn days and holly branches heavy with berries look smashing in winter.

Serene and Inviting

Create a relaxing bedroom setting with luxurious linens and soft colors that will make a potential home buyer want to hang out. Bedroom staging trick: If you don't have the money to buy a new bed, just get the frame, buy an inexpensive air mattress and dress it up with neutral-patterned bedding. And remember to declutter. By cleaning out your closets, you're showing off your storage space, which sells houses - it always ranks high on buyers' priority list.

New Faces

If you can't afford new cabinets, just get new doors and drawer fronts. Then paint everything to match and add new hardware. And instead of replacing the entire dishwasher, you may be able to get a new front panel. Check with the manufacturer to see if replacements are available for your model. If not, laminate paper, which goes on like contact paper, can be used to re-cover the existing panel.

Repaired Wood

Unfinished projects can scare off potential buyers, so finish them. Missing floorboards and large cracks in the sidewalk on the way to your door tend to be a red flag, for example, and they cost you less to fix than buyers might deduct from the asking price.

Prim and Polished

Having tile professionally painted can make a bathroom look brand new. And accessorizing can make buyers feel like they're in a spa. Put out items like rolled-up towels, decorative baskets and candles. It's a great way to create a polished look, and it doesn't cost much to do.
