

The Theory Behind Staging

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Staging is the art of preparing and packaging a house to sell. In the current challenging market, staging has become an increasingly common way to distinguish your home from the competition.

Staging a house both decreases the number of days on the market and increases the selling price. The theory behind staging is counter-intuitive. You have to make your house almost generic, with a great deal of individual style and personality removed, when it would seem that those things would distinguish your property from others on the market, and would separate it from everybody else's house. Why in the world would you want to depersonalize your own house?

In point of fact, the very goal of professional Home Stagers is to prepare a house for market in order to give the best first impression to as many target buyers as possible. Their role is to create an inviting atmosphere and to show off the house's own innate features. The Home Stager does this by de-cluttering the space, rearranging the furnishings, adding a few well-placed pieces to accentuate the house's strongest aspects, and removing all personal memorabilia and photographs. Potential buyers don't want to see your son's soccer trophies or your wedding photograph! They don't want the house to look like yours!

Instead, the Home Stager removes certain furnishings, condenses or rearranges others, and brings in still others on loan in order to show off the house's strongest points and downplay the house's downfalls. The Home Stager reduces the personal so that the buyers can forget it's your home.

The goal is to create a space where potential buyers can more easily envision themselves in the home and where they can picture their own families living their own lives right in this space. You want to show a potential buyer what he wants to see. You want to show off not what a house is, but what it could be.

Barb Schwarz who claims to have invented staging in 1972, calls it "Staging" because of her interest in theater. In her book "Home Staging Business" p. 3, she says: "I realized that part of selling a property involves the same activity as putting on a play: you have to design the sets so that the audience is drawn into the drama."

This doesn't mean a home should be lifelessly bland or people wouldn't be "drawn into the drama." The idea is merely to de-personalize enough so that, as Barb says on p. 2 of her book, "You remove distractions so that potential buyers focus on the space, not what is in the space."

Unfortunately, that balance of 'just-enough' is not so easy to achieve. Many well-meaning Home Stagers religiously de-personalized in the aim of making the homes appeal to the widest possible number of buyers. This can result in a trend toward "over-blanding," as it has been referred to.

Staging is marketing. Like the marketing for other products, staging has become more sophisticated over time. Nowadays, the objective is to determine the most likely type of people to buy the specific house we are staging and focus on them as our target buyers. Good Home Stagers are no longer trying to appeal to everybody. They use lifestyle selling for the particular demographic/psychographic of target buyers.

Since it has been proven by brain research that humans are hard wired to make decisions based on emotions, Home Stagers can't make everything bland. There has to be elements which will trigger emotions, draw attention and create memory points. The Home Stager still has to draw viewers into the drama of the rooms. That's done by color, placement, and creating focal points – not by blandness.

The upshot? Home Stagers still remove the current owners' personality, but also add back the new owner's (i.e. target buyer's!) personality. The end result is definitely not bland.

Buying a house might seem like a grown-up decision, but really, despite starting out with a laundry list full of logical reasons and specific desired criteria, buying a home is essentially an emotional decision. When you find the "right" home, you know it ... and regardless of how many criteria on the list are checked off, once the buyers can picture their life lives in this space – once they've fallen in love – they're willing to overlook their must-have list. They are home.

The Statistics Behind Staging: Is It Worth It?

Professionally staging a house allows the maximum number of buyers to envision themselves living in that space, in the shortest amount of time.

Staging:

Pays for itself, and then some. The average staging investment is between 1 and 3 percent of the house's asking price. But it generates a return of between 8 and 10 percent!

Decreases the amount of time it spends on the market. According to a National Association of Realtors' 2008 Profile of Buyers and Sellers, the longer a house sits on the market, the further below asking price it drops. Homes that sold in the first 4 weeks averaged 1% more than asking price, but homes that sold in 4 to 12 weeks averaged 5% less. Homes that sold in 13 to 24 weeks averaged 6.4% less!

Increases the potential asking price. In 2004, Coldwell Banker Residential Brokerage looked at approximately 2,800 houses. They found that on average, the staged homes sold in half the time that non-staged homes did, and sellers of staged homes yielded 6.3% more than their asking price while sellers of the non-staged homes went for 1.6% below asking price.

Increases a home's curb appeal, and establishes its "move-in" condition.

Looks better in photographs, and so helps a house stand out from the competition. 85% of buyers search online first before they decide to visit a given house. Make sure your home is one they want to come see in person!

Broadens its market appeal. Currently, the number of houses on the market is at a record high. Buyers have many choices. Smart agents realize that professional staging differentiates their seller's house, creates a strong online presentation, and guides buyers to the house.

Before the Staging Process

But there are some basic considerations you can take into account with the staging process. Some you can do without a Home Stager, but others might be better executed with professional help:

Cleaning: It might seem obvious, but the entire house must be sparkling clean from floors to windows.

Clutter: All the school pictures and reports cards stuck to the refrigerator, all the stacks (however tidy the stacks) of bills and medicines and paperwork littering your counter-tops, and all the coats/scarves/hats strewn across your foyer must be removed. Hide your trashcans and dirty kitchen sponges, the laundry hamper and the dog food bowls, and empty the litter box. Look at your home with fresh eyes, and view every corner with an unforgiving examination.

Paint & light: Dark walls tend to make a room look smaller. While you may consider painting walls a neutral off-white, you want to be careful about “over blanding.” In some cases, the right color depends on the target buyer (to say nothing of the effects of light, creation of flow and enhancement of fixed elements which impact color choice.)

Some target buyers are put off by the off-white and are looking for a richer, although still neutral, backdrop. Pre-staging color selection might be best left to a professional Home Stager. Color suggestions are often given in consultation. Home owners don't have extra time or money to be painting rooms the wrong color for their market – especially just before listing when a do-over will be a real problem. Open all curtains and shades, put lamps or spotlights in darker corners.

Furnishings: Most rooms have too many things stuffed inside, which makes it look smaller. Consider removing any folded blankets, stuffed pillows on the sofa (or reduce them to an odd number such as three), books and magazines stacked in corners, and consider reducing the number of wall hangings.

Sometimes the trick is not to reduce wall hangings, but instead to reposition or group them. This is done only after the furnishings themselves have been properly located for flow and visual impact (including visual impact in photos for MLS). You can take down too much, leaving the place looking desperately bare and too bland and leaving pro Home Stagers little to work with.

Here are some practical tips concerning furnishings and clutter:

- ✓ Remove collections – i.e., anything you have more than 3 of.
- ✓ Remove items non-essential to the one main function of the room – i.e. exercise equipment from bedrooms, toys from formal living rooms. Remove any family portraits as well as religious or cultural pictures or other pieces.
- ✓ Remove small ornaments – i.e. smaller than a cantaloupe.
- ✓ Pick up any small scatter mats with perhaps the exception being those inside entrance doorways.
- ✓ Pre-pack any urns of ashes from cremations.
- ✓ Remove any potentially offensive art, posters or banners depicting subjects of sexual, religious, political, cult or gang significance.
- ✓ Remove distracting items such as signed pieces of popular memorabilia, weapons, ornamental weapons, taxidermy, and animal rugs with heads on them.
- ✓ Remove anything which will specifically identify occupants of the home such as diplomas, awards, signed children's drawings, children's name plaques, school pictures, etc.
- ✓ Pre-pack things from built in shelves and glass front cabinets so they are only 1/2 to 1/3 full and arrange the remaining items in a balanced, decorative manner.
- ✓ Pre-pack paperback books, and books with subjects or titles which may be controversial, offensive, or which too specifically identify characteristics of the home owner. For example, a quantity of medical books will start the viewer thinking about the present owner being a doctor rather than thinking about himself moving in and living there.

The Kitchen: Any appliances should be cleared off the counter tops. The surface of the frig should be bare, and wiped clean of fingerprints and food stains. The trash should be hidden under the sink, as well as any sponges or dishcloths. Hand soap should be liquid, and dish soap should be stored. Update the aesthetic appeal easily by replacing the knobs and drawer pulls.

The Dining Room: For most cases, remove extra leaves from the dining table and set it as if for a meal for four. However, if the home has 5+ bedrooms and/or a very large dining room, this could be a mistake. (Setting the table has become somewhat cliché for staged properties.) Unless the table is really hideous or if you do want the room to look smaller, it is preferable not to have a tablecloth. You may choose to add a pleasing centerpiece to the center of the table and reduce the number of plates and dishes in the hutch. Too many can appear cluttered.

The Bathrooms: All bar soap should be replaced with liquid. Towels should match (only one or two colors should be used), be folded into thirds, and hung neatly. Shampoo bottles and clutter in the shower should be hidden, as should the trash can. All the grout should be cleaned from the bath, and make sure the shower curtain is free of all mold and mildew.

The Master Bedroom: Clear the clutter (including jewelry, bills, etc.) from the tops of all chests of drawers, desktops, and vanities. Update the aesthetic appeal of the room by replacing your bedspread. Hide the alarm clock. Clean closets and hang up any unfolded clothes.

Outside: Mow the lawn and make sure all the hedges are trim and leaves are raked. Make sure any stains are cleaned and painted over, and the trim is fresh and tidy, and all matches. Clear or stow away any junk lying around the yard, i.e., old bicycles, gardening implements, wheel barrels, etc., and hide any outdoor furniture that's old, plastic, mildewed, or stained.

Entryway: This is one of the most important, and easiest, areas to make sparkle. Consider that the entryway to your house is the welcome to the entire property. Re-paint the front door, replace the doorknob and hinges, update any lighting fixtures, and make sure the street numbers are clean and easy to identify. Consider placing symmetrical plants potted with flowers to either side of the front door; this small detail adds a warmth and polish to your house well beyond the cost.

These things are mainly preparation for what Home Stagers will do. Even if homeowners have a flair for this type of thing, it's still risky to showcase their own homes. They should at least have home staging consultation from a professional.

For one thing, our brains filter out things which are non-threatening and unimportant to us when we experience them every day. The potential buyers will not have the same filter. They will notice things owners don't even think about anymore. An objective person with a fresh eye (and nose and ears!) is best.

Also, homeowners sometimes have a hard time grasping the fact that their target buyers are very different, have different lifestyles, tastes and values from themselves. This gets in the way of seeing what should be changed or updated. It's Home Stager's business to keep up with what these target buyers want and to explain that what's perfect for the home owner's life is not perfect for the target buyers and is, therefore, not the way they should set the house up for the market.

Furthermore, with 93% of home buyers starting their search on-line, their importance of the pictures on the MLS is key to getting on the must-see list vs. being passed by with a mouse click. Cameras are unforgiving. Home Stagers have to be constantly thinking not only about the feel of a house when you visit, but also with how that feel can best be translated into the photos to get visitors to come in the first place. Experience of a professional Home Stager can be extremely valuable on this aspect.

By staging, you force yourself to look at your home as a piece of property. You allow your home to be refurbished and packaged for broader appeal, so that you can detach and your former house can be prepared to become a beautiful piece of property for sale.

In the end, professional staging might seem unnecessary until you consider the considerable benefits – especially in a challenging market where you need to stand apart from all the other inventory. Turning your home into a house that sells itself is not easy – not if you intend to keep living in it for the duration. But it is a process that can help decrease the amount of total time your house spends on the market, increase the final asking price you receive, and also, help you say goodbye to your house sooner than later.