

# Preparing to Sell:

*Pull out all the stops to get top dollar for your home*



Photo by Kevin May.

**T**he thought of getting your home ready to sell can be daunting. What needs to be fixed? Should that be changed? What will people think when they step inside? Whether you've lived in your house for one year or thirty, it's time to look at the place through a different pair of eyes – a prospective homebuyer's eyes.

Most REALTORS® agree: marketing a home is not the same as living in one. Your house hunting hopefuls are not interested in seeing YOUR house. They want to be able to walk in and immediately picture themselves living there. It's up to you to make them feel like it's a place they could call home.

## Appeal to All

One of the first steps in getting ready to sell is to “depersonalize” your home, which essentially means taking the personal elements out in order to enable someone else to picture moving theirs in. J P Finley, a REALTOR® and Accredited Buyers Representative® with Prudential Snyder Real Estate in Bloomington, Illinois says depersonalization is vital to the selling

process. “Many sellers don't realize it but when you have your family photos sitting out, people always look at them. As a REALTOR®, I want buyers to analyze the house and not your family. By removing personal items, buyers can more easily begin to envision themselves in the home.” J P also recommends repainting any “themed” rooms in a neutral color. “Themed rooms are great if you live in the home. But having them when you're selling a home greatly reduces the audience of people who like or need them.”

## Clear the Clutter

Clearing the clutter does mean just that – getting rid of the knickknacks, remotes and coasters from the coffee table; removing mail, school papers and keys from kitchen counters and toys from kids' bedrooms or playrooms. What it doesn't mean is throwing them all in a closet or cupboard. J P says one of the most overlooked aspects of getting a home ready to sell is often cluttered closets and cabinets. Now is a great time to go through those packed cubbies and purge items you haven't used in years.

Put essentials in a bin or box to store away neatly. Better yet, rent a storage facility and cart all the stuff you want to keep but don't use on a daily basis to give your home a clean, organized interior.

### Keep it Clean

Whether your house is constantly cluttered or consistently clean, now is the time to pull out all the stops to make it really sparkle. If you're not up for the challenge, hire a cleaning service to do the dirty work for you. This pre-sale cleaning goes above and beyond just vacuuming and dusting, though, and should include:

- Washing all windows, inside and out
- Dusting cobwebs from corners and ceilings
- Bleaching any dingy grout
- Re-caulking tubs, showers and sinks; polishing chrome faucets
- Shampooing carpets and waxing floors
- Dusting furniture, light fixtures and ceiling fans
- Cleaning out the refrigerator and stove

- Emptying wastebaskets and trashcans
- Cleaning out showers, tubs and toilets, and hanging fresh towels in bathrooms
- Wiping dirt and scuff marks from walls and ceilings

A prospective buyer may not perform the white glove test on your mantle, but having a meticulously clean home also gives the appearance of a well cared for home, an important selling point.

### Set the Stage



One way to ensure that your home will appeal to the broadest range of buyers is to enlist the services of a staging professional. A staging professional prepares your home for showings by removing clutter, rearranging rooms and fine-tuning your home. Colleen McLinden, an Accredited Staging Professional™ and owner of IMPACT! Home Staging explains the concept. "Staging® is not interior design, it is marketing. Interior designers bring the home owner's personality into a space to fulfill the family's concept of 'home'. Stagers

remove the family personalities to allow prospective buyers to see themselves living in the space." According to the International Association of Home Staging Professionals, staged homes are on the market for a shorter amount of time and often sell for a better price than non-staged homes.

The first "stage" in home staging, Colleen says, is to find the focal point of the room. From there, she devises a plan that includes removing clutter, dividing items into "keep" and "discard" piles, and editing furniture. "By editing furniture, we remove the pieces that are making the room look too crowded," says Colleen. "Then we arrange the remaining furniture to optimize the space and rebuild the room using accessories." The result is a polished, clean house that leaves the prospective buyer saying, "I could live here" rather than "They have a lovely home."

The concept of home staging is a growing trend and there are a number of Accredited Staging Professionals™ in the Central Illinois area. Some real estate agents can assist you in staging your home,

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*The first “stage” in home staging is to find the focal point of the room.*



and if the home you're selling is vacant, enlisting the services of a professional home stager is recommended. Before you hire a home stager, check to see if he or she is accredited and ask for references as well as how much experience the person has in home staging.

If you've managed to turn the interior of your home into a prospective homebuyer's dream come true, don't rest easy yet. It's time to head outside.

## First Impressions

The old adage, “Don't judge a book by its cover” doesn't apply when it comes to prospective homebuyers pulling in your driveway for the first time. Maximizing your home's outside appearance, or “curb appeal”, will create a positive first impression and draw in the buyer.

It's not necessary to spend enormous amounts of money and re-landscape your entire yard. There are easy, inexpensive ways to maximize the look of your home's exterior:

- Make sure the grass is neatly trimmed and edged, and that you keep it watered and weed-free.
- Trim hedges, weed flowerbeds and prune trees, especially those that may obscure windows or touch your home's roof.
- If you are marketing your home in the spring or summer, consider planting a few flowers either in bare spots around hedges, in window boxes or in pots near the front entrance. In the fall, keep leaves raked and gutters debris-free. In the winter, make sure the driveway and sidewalk are free of snow and ice.
- Inspect doors, windows, and the molding around them, including the garage, for peeling paint or caulk. Polish or replace old or rusted front door hardware.
- Repair any loose or missing siding or roof shingles.
- Repair and repaint fencing.
- Power-wash dingy siding or decks.
- Clean outdoor lighting fixtures and consider replacing any that are rusted or broken.
- Re-seal an asphalt driveway.
- Keep your garage door closed and store any extra cars or other machinery elsewhere.

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home staging

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If the rear of your house is visible upon first glance (due to a corner lot or driveway), make sure your efforts include the back yard. Give the deck a new coat of stain or paint, clean patio furniture and keep kids toys picked up and out of the yard.

## Repairs vs. Renovations

There's a big difference between polishing the knobs on your kitchen cabinets and overhauling your kitchen. In certain cases, you can see a good return on investment on a renovated kitchen or bath; other times, a few minor fixes might just do the trick. J P cautions sellers considering drastic renovations. "Many homeowners who opt for a renovation project pour their feelings and tastes into it. If you decide to renovate, solicit input from a REALTOR® or a designer in order to make the best choices. That cute butterfly tile may appeal to you, but not to the future homeowner!" He also cautions making improvements to a house that could "overprice" it out of the neighborhood. "You want to be able to recoup your money on a renovation, but you also don't want to have to price your home for J P believes that part of the appreciation of a property is based on how it's maintained. "Research shows that prospective homebuyers think a repair that may only cost you a few hundred dollars will cost them thousands. Making some repairs here and there could save yourself from a low offer down the road." The following is a short list of some of the more common repairs to consider:

- Paint kitchen cabinets that are showing their age, or have them resurfaced.
- Replace any leaky faucets or stained sinks.
- Replace any outdated fixtures in the kitchen or bath.
- If your living room still sports shag carpeting, replacing it with a nice neutral makes sense.
- Repair cracked or chipped tile is a good idea; replacing the entire floor with ceramic tile is not.
- Old wallpaper should be steamed off and the wall repainted in a neutral color.
- Dated paneling can be primed and painted, or removed completely.

- A fresh coat of paint goes a long way to cover various wall imperfections, or stains due to smoke, food or grease. If you see water stains in the ceiling, make sure you have a qualified professional check for past or present roof leaks before masking the stain with paint.

## Inspect the Best

A growing trend in the home selling industry today is prelisting inspections. Prelisting inspections are examinations paid for by the seller before a house is put on the market, and can give both the buyer and the seller peace of mind. Scott Dalbey of MasterSpec Home Inspection Service, Inc., located in Champaign, IL, says that prelisting inspections can remove the fear of the unknown. "For years, buyers and sellers have negotiated a selling price contingent on the home inspection, causing anxiety for both parties. A prelisting inspection eliminates that anxiety, allowing them to enter into a sales contract with confidence."

Prelisting inspections can be especially beneficial for older homes, says Scott. "The

seller can use the inspection as their "honey-do" list, and fix the necessary items or discount the price of the home to compensate for the items they may not be able to repair." According to a study conducted by the American Society of Home Inspectors (ACHI), the percentage of prelisting inspections has risen significantly and accounts for more of an inspector's business. ASHI attribute the rise to an increase in knowledgeable buyers, due in part to the abundance of information and research available over the Internet. If you do decide to have a prelisting inspection, make sure you use a licensed home inspector who is a member of the ASHI.

## Before You Leave

Finally, before you walk out that door, take some small steps to ensure that prospective homebuyers have a comfortable experience when seeing your home for the first time:

- Make sure the temperature is comfortable, and open the windows in appropriate weather unless there is an abundance of outdoor noise such as traffic. ▼

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