

REAL ESTATE

January 2008

THE REAL DEAL

Real Estate News You Can Use

BY EVI COGHLAN



Stage Presence: Does Your House Have It?

Imagine for a moment that you've just been set up on a date with an attractive, eligible person whom you very much want to get to know. Or that you just scored an interview with the company you've always wanted to work for. How would you plan to look for that meeting?

The same question applies when you list your house for sale.

This column is about home "staging," the practice of making a house look its absolute best – inside and out – so that it is most appealing to potential buyers...sells in the shortest amount of time...and nets you the highest possible sale price.

Although sprucing a house up before putting it on the market is not a novel idea, formal staging is a relatively new phenomenon which originated in California and has become more commonplace in our area in recent years. And a powerful phenomenon it is. In general, well-staged houses sell for a higher price and in a shorter time than the average property on the market. I see it happen every week. In today's higher-inventory market, staging is a powerful tool that the most successful sellers and listing agents are using to their advantage.

What exactly is staging? There are various degrees of it, which can range from a simple uncluttering to an extreme makeover done by an accredited staging professional. In between those two extremes is adding or subtracting furniture and decorative accents...changing a color scheme...updating a look...and/or replacing old or worn-out appliances, carpeting, wallpaper or light fixtures.

Some home sellers doubt the power of home staging, reasoning that "it's just decorating." While this is certainly true, what they fail to understand is that decorating is one of the leading things that sells houses. It's all about vision. This is an ability that most buyers don't have – and that most buyer agents can't give them despite their best efforts. The fact is, a lesser quality house that's perfectly staged will beat out the house with great bones whose decorating is old and tired every time. First impressions are lasting.

In general, the goal is for the look and feel of your home to be consistent with the preferences of the person who is most likely to buy it. If this is not clear, rest assured that you cannot go wrong with neutral tones...light, bright rooms with minimal window treatments...gleaming wood floors (so take up those carpets!)...stainless steel appliances...gas stoves...live plants...and slipcovered furniture if what you have is outdated or showing its age.

There are a number of ways to accomplish that well-staged look. Your first step is to ask your listing agent for an assessment of your home's staging needs. You can buy needed items yourself, or borrow them from friends. Some agents have their own staging closets and will lend you some or all items while your house is on the market. In some instances it may be necessary to hire an accredited staging professional. This last option has several variations. In the extreme – or in the case of a vacant house – the staging consultant will outfit your entire house while your furnishings are placed in storage or moved to your new home. Or, he or she may work with some of your existing possessions – placing them in different groupings and locations within the house – while adding other items from their own inventory.

It's also important to note that your house needs to be "toothbrush clean" before listing – especially your kitchen, baths and windows. Also, religious articles such as crucifixes and Judaica should

be removed and safely packed away before showings begin.

Staging also applies to the outside of your home – and may include power washing...painting (full or touch-up)...general cleanup and/or mulching and landscaping plus seasonal plantings. This is the true first impression that your home makes, and is the inspiration for the term "curb appeal." A well-staged exterior also includes containers of colorful flowers on each side of the front door.

Keeping your house in this perfect, staged condition until it is sold is the real challenge. One of my clients put down an elaborate array of drop cloths every night after showing hours to preserve the pristine look of her new beige berber carpet. Others get up at 6 a.m. and start cleaning. Still others make everyone in the family use just one bathroom so the others will always look perfect and only one will have to be tended to each day. I've even heard of families who send their children to live with local relatives during the first two weeks after listing when showings are at their peak level, in order to keep their home in show-ready condition.

Learning that your house needs some staging before putting it on the market may be a difficult message for you to hear. Rest assured that almost everyone's home can use some, because the way you live in your home is different from the way it needs to look to sell it. Please...do not take it personally if your listing agent recommends staging. Yes, it will cost you some money. But it is always money well spent, since your return on investment will be a shorter time on the market and a higher sale price.

Evi Coghlan is a licensed real estate agent with Coldwell Banker/Riverside-Shavell and a former marketing consultant who advised Fortune 100 companies. To contact Evi, call 203-247-6691, e-mail her at evi@evicoghlan.com or visit www.evicoghlan.com