

# Staging Can Make all the difference

## In the world!

### Get a sense of what professional stagers and realtors are saying!

#### Make an impression

Prospective buyers make up their minds about your house even before they get out of the car. To ensure they have the right idea, clean up your yard, rake the leaves, shovel the snow, and sweep driveways and porches. Get out the rags and cleanser and spend 30 minutes scouring your front door, porch, railings and steps. Then tuck away all your recycling cans and bins at the back of the house.

Debra Gould, who owns the Six Elements home-staging firm in Toronto, says it's important to avoid planting negative associations in buyers' minds. When attending an open house she had to climb several steps to get to the front door. "I couldn't help but think that this could be a nuisance with groceries," says Gould. "Then, when I finally got to the top, the recycling bins were sitting right there on the porch. I immediately told myself, 'Imagine carrying one of those bins full of newspapers, cans down several slippery steps.' I couldn't see myself doing that, so I left, knowing it wasn't the house for me."

#### Unclutter

Clutter eats equity, say stagers. So purge your closets, empty cupboards, box up small appliances. Rent a storage locker to keep what you want, then toss the rest. "I give storage boxes to my clients and tell them to edit, edit, edit," says a Toronto real estate agent with Royal LePage. "I suggest they take some of their books off the shelves, reduce the number of CDs or DVDs, pare everything down."

The stager's motto? Be ruthless. When Tamara R was selling her Vancouver condo last year, she paid \$150 for a one-hour consultation with home stager Carter, who gave her a detailed to-do list that included instructions to leave only one thing on the kitchen counter (a bowl of crisp green apples) and to remove fridge magnets and small area rugs. "Everyone knows to unclutter," says Roberts, "but John brought it down to specifics. He even had me keep a storage container under the bed so I could throw my pajamas and bedtime reading in there so buyers wouldn't see it." The payoff? Her condo sold in one day for \$6,000 more than her asking price of \$339,000.

#### Impersonal works

You want buyers to imagine themselves living in your home, not to feel like a guest in it. So stash anything connected to your family or personal interests. Hide your son's hockey trophies, store family photos, remove all traces of day-to-day life. "If someone goes into the bathroom," says home stager Gould, "and the rim of the tub is covered with shampoo bottles while people's toothbrushes are lying around the sink, it's hard for that person to imagine that this could be his or her bathroom. The buyer becomes very conscious of being in someone else's environment. That won't get you an offer."

#### Keep it fresh

Barb Schwarz, president of [StagedHomes.ca](http://StagedHomes.ca) of Concord, Calif., has been staging homes for 30 years and she says a disturbing number of home sellers don't realize that their home ... um, smells. "There's nothing worse than stepping into a house that smells of smoke and pet odors," says Schwarz. The easy solution is to keep your windows open for 10 minutes a day. This strategy works better than deodorizers, says Schwarz, since a lot of people have allergies to artificial room fresheners. The oldest trick of all? Leave chocolate chip cookies baking in the oven. Yes, it's hokey, but the smell does do wonders to help buyers bond with your home.

## **Declare war on grime**

Cleanliness helps put a buyer's mind at ease since it suggests that you've probably taken good care of your residence in other ways as well. So clean everything: walls, door handles, light fixtures and pantry cupboards. At Carter's suggestion, a Vancouver home seller, hired a professional cleaner to scour the inside of his home and a contractor to power wash windows, walkways, eave stroughs and pathways.

Toronto home stager Gould recommends you pay special attention to the furnace room since every home buyer wonders what shape the furnace is in. "If the furnace looks clean, it looks newer," says Gould. That goes for the fuse box and electrical panel, too.

## **Hire a handyman**

Dripping faucets, cracked tiles and moulded caulking around the bathtub can knock thousands of dollars off the price of your home. "I have a lot of clients who say, 'Well, that's a little problem, the buyer can deal with it,' says Gould, who makes a practice of walking through sellers' homes and compiling a list of what needs to be fixed. "And I say, 'No, if it's a little thing, then we should deal with it.' "

## **Color it up**

Your single best investment may be a fresh coat of paint in key areas of your home. "Paint your front door and put some urns with brightly colored flowers on your front step or just inside the entryway," says Jane Hall, a Toronto designer and owner of The Voice of Color in Toronto. "Those things make a house seem cared for, different and important."

## **Reduce furniture**

An easy way to create a sense of space is to get rid of some furniture. Moving a sofa and end tables into storage can give a small room some much-needed breathing space. So too can storing the table and chairs that normally sit in your kitchen, piled high with mail, magazines, books and groceries.

If your furniture dates from the Mulroney era, consider packing it away and renting a few modern, stylish pieces or borrowing a couple of well-chosen pieces of wall art. "Keep it clean and simple," says Carter, "like a hotel room or the show room for a new house."

## **Light me up**

The brighter and sunnier a space, the easier it is to sell. Start by investing in a good window-cleaning service. Stagers say clean windows let in as much as 30% more light than grimy ones. Then thoroughly clean the shades on your light fixtures, change light bulbs and add floor lamps if an area seems dim. Dump those energy-saving 60-watt bulbs and go with higher wattage lights for maximum illumination. Finally, when it comes time to show your home, make sure all the lights are on. "Hallways especially should be lit," says home stager Hall. "When those are dark, it gets depressing for buyers going from room to room."

## **Add a touch of humanity**

A couple of planters on your front porch, a vase of flowers on your dining room table, even a simple rose in a bud vase can warm up a room. This is where you can let some of your creativity show through. "You want to get away from making rooms feel dull and sterile," says the home stager Gould. "Flowers and plants are good for that." Candles help, too.

Apply all these tips and the final results can be stunning. "I could never have achieved anything as effective on my own," says Thompson, the Vancouver home seller. "The stagers helped me turn it into a show home. And even though this might sound silly, all the changes made it so attractive that it sort of made me want to stay."

Such feelings are common. Stagers say a few homeowners actually change their plans and take their residences off the market once they see how good their old places can look. Many decide to stage not just their old homes, but their new ones as well. "Home sellers will often ask me to come to their new home and work some of my magic there because they don't want to go back to their old way of living," says home stager Schwarz, who's prepped more than 2,000 homes in the U.S. and Canada. In fact, Schwarz notes that a lot of

home sellers don't even want to see any of the stuff they've put into storage because they discover they've never missed it. "They want to live fresh, clean and clutter-free. It's a wonderful thing. Because staging is, above all, a cleansing experience."

## **Calling their fluff: how to spot the stagers' tricks**

When Derek and Angela Chezzi go house hunting in downtown Toronto, they're struck by a disturbing similarity in what they see. The furniture at many resale homes looks suspiciously fresh and new, the art hanging on the walls seems all-too-familiar and the rooms are just sooooo squeaky clean. After looking at dozens of houses, the Chezzis recognize the signs that a home stager has been at work. "Let's face it, how many of us have furniture that matches perfectly?" asks Derek, 32, who works as a website manager. "You can tell as soon as you walk into a staged home that this is something that belongs in an interior design shop, not your average family's home."

Remember: no matter how beautifully decorated a home may be, its true value hinges on practical considerations — how much space it offers, the neighborhood it's in, how many bedrooms and bathrooms it has. Here's how to make sure you don't get taken in by a stager's tricks:

### **Beware of old panes**

The best tipoff that a home stager has been at work is a beautifully decorated home with old windows. Why? Because a complete set of new windows is expensive — think \$10,000 or so — and most stagers won't bother to put them in. But if the windows are old, you have to wonder what other secrets the house may be hiding.

### **Measure, measure**

Stagers are notorious for making small rooms look larger by renting undersized couches, tables and chairs. "I staged a house in Rosedale that had a great third-floor master bedroom," says Toronto home stager Debra Gould, "but it was awkward because the stairwell and entrance to the room were really small." She ended up renting dressers from a kids' furniture store because she couldn't get adult-sized dressers up the stairs. Imagine the shock the new owners must have felt when they tried to move in their own furniture. To make sure you don't have a nasty surprise, pack a tape measure and write down the dimensions of all key rooms.

### **Avoid showrooms**

The showrooms in many new condo developments use pint-sized furniture, large mirrors and other space-expanding tricks to make the units appear larger than they are. "If you're looking at something in a new complex, a senior mortgage consultant with Invis Inc. of Vancouver, "ask to look at another suite that hasn't been done up. You'll get a feel for what the home will look like with regular furniture and appliances."

### **View it live**

Most real estate agents insist that viewing the house when it's empty gives you time to examine it at leisure. But the Chezzis have found a better option is to view it around suppertime when the owners are present. "When someone's in the place," notes Derek Chezzi, "you get a better sense of the house. Is there enough counter space for the dinner dishes? Does the kitchen feel spacious with two or three people in it? You can imagine what it would be like to live there yourself."

### **Come out of the closet**

Stagers often empty out closets to make them look larger than they really are and give the illusion of plentiful storage space. Be aware of the trick and make sure you know exactly how much storage space you're getting. "I often wonder where all the jackets, shoes and coats are in the homes we see because they certainly aren't in the closets," says Derek Chezzi. "I always ask to see other storage areas."

### **Tune out the noise**

Any good stager tries to create a relaxed, elegant mood. Jazz on the stereo, a roaring fire in the hearth, fresh flowers and homey scents are just some of the tricks you'll encounter. The only defense? Close your eyes and imagine the same room with kids yelling and yesterday's newspaper spread out on the floor. Reality may not be as pretty as the staged version, but it's a much better guide to value.

