

Your home: dressed to sell

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Latest real-estate wrinkle "Staging®" employs brutal truths ("the clutter has to go") to get buyers to bite

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In a competitive buyer's market, before even thinking about planting that For Sale sign, homeowners need to remember the new three little words of real estate:

Get Over Yourself.

On a recent Thursday morning, Denver real estate agent Suzie Campbell sweeps through a suburban three-bedroom with brutal objectivity. The standard-issue, beige offering is about to go on the market for \$310,000.

With eyes narrowed and a to-do list forming in her head, Campbell mentally strips the house of its overflowing bookcases, framed family photos, personal knickknacks and all the other normal, threatening-to-overtake array of clutter that comes with married-with-children living.

And that's not even counting some of the questionable decorating decisions.

"Gotta go, gotta go," she mutters as she picks through a nearly impassable maze of children's toys, games and clothes piled in the upstairs bedrooms.

In addition to selling houses these days, Campbell also transforms them.

She is part of a growing industry called home Staging®, where, as the name implies, real estate becomes theater.

Campbell insists that any house, be it a starter condo or a mansion, can benefit from Staging®. She will repaint, remake and restyle if necessary, all in an effort to turn what was once an owner's vision of homeiness into a buyer fantasy of neutral minimalism.

"Your home becomes a house. It becomes a product like bread on a shelf. It's all about presentation," Campbell says. "People love their stuff, but you have to disengage from your house if you want to sell it. If they're not ready to do that, they're not ready to sell."

Sound harsh? Absolutely. No room for thin skin here. Sellers don't always respond well in the beginning, Campbell says, "but usually when they hear 'top dollar' or 'highest price,' that gets their attention and then they come onboard."

The basic strategy is to keep a buyer from getting distracted - either for good or for bad -

when they go through your house.

"You have to Stage® your house so buyers are not looking at your stuff," says Campbell. "You want them to be placing their own furniture."

"People buy on emotion, a gut feeling they have the moment they walk in a house," she adds.

But c'mon. Do buyers really have so little imagination they can't see past a triple-digit Hummel collection or crushed velvet love pit?

Some can, some can't. But plenty of today's buyers simply don't want to work that hard. Which is why Campbell counsels her clients to pare and pack, leaving rooms sparsely furnished with virtually no ornamentation.

And if Campbell isn't crazy about what is left after the purge, she will bring in her own throw pillows, bedding ensembles, window treatments, occasionally even whole rooms of furniture for a more classic, pulled-together effect. Think Pottery Barn catalog.

"Selling your home and living in it are two entirely different things," she says.

Staging® is nothing new. Real estate brokers have been doing it informally for as long as there have been contracts to sign.

But the concept has recently hit its stride, booming into an industry complete with certification classes and two reality television shows devoted to the concept. *Sell This House* airs on A&E television network while *Designed to Sell* is offered on the Home and Garden network.

While statistics are hard to come by, Joy Valentine, a Los Altos, Calif., real estate broker, may have compiled the only statistics studying house Staging®.

In 1999 and then again in 2002, she surveyed about 3,000 homes in all price ranges. Both times her analysis found, on average a Staged® home sold in about half the time as its nonstaged counterpart.

In addition, she found in both surveys the Staged® homes fetched more money, often tens of thousands of dollars more than those not Staged®.

Gary Bauer, an independent real estate broker in Denver, says the concept behind Staging® is sound but using a professional is not always necessary. It is most useful, he says, in higher-end listings.

"In the \$250,000 and under market people are usually only interested in the basics, like how many bedrooms or bathrooms a house has," he says.

Bauer, who does not use Stagers® for his listings, says he instead counsels his clients on what to do to get their house ready for public consumption. "I believe you can do a lot of this yourself."

Campbell's clients sign contracts promising they will not alter the decor after she is is

done. Raffia-wrapped hand towels are not to be used for dirty hands.

Her Stagings® do not come cheaply, though. Campbell will provide consultation and some Staging® for free if she is the listing agent.

Otherwise, it can run from several hundred to several thousand dollars, depending on how extensive the makeover. If clients decide not to sell, they must still pay for the Staging®.

It took two days and three people to completely transform the Littleton house.

In the end, the owners barely recognized their own home.

"My mouth is still on the floor," says Brandi Hamrock.

She and her husband paid to have all of their white carpets cleaned. They were closer to tan. Now they are white again.

Other than that, they left it up to Campbell. Furniture, toys, toiletries, kitchen gadgets, refrigerator art, exercise equipment and family photos were all stashed into storage. The rest was just rearranged.

Some of the art that now hangs on the wall was rescued from the garage and basement. "People don't realize what they have," says Campbell.

"Who knew my stuff could look this good?" Hamrock replies. There is, however, a catch.

Hamrock and her husband, Brian Campbell (no relation), like their newly Staged® house so much they reconsidered selling: "Maybe we should just stay here."

Campbell shrugs. It happens sometimes. Occupational hazard.

PARE DOWN, PACK UP

A few tips for homeowners

Hiring a professional to Stage® your home before you sell can be worth it if your house sells quickly and fetches a higher price.

However, doing some basic things can get your house ready for the market:

Adjust your attitude. Remember, it is no longer your home. It is a commodity. Disengaging your emotions will make the process easier.

Clean, clean, clean. And then clean some more. Sound basic? You'd be surprised how homeowners confuse "lived-in" with grungy. A real estate adage is: If you can smell it, you can't sell it. Floors should be spotless. So should bathrooms. Take out the trash every day, and, for goodness sakes, clean that litter box! Carpets also should be cleaned before showing a house. If they are too dirty to clean, consider replacing.

Arrange and conquer. Now you have the open space; use it wisely. Create intimate

conversation areas by grouping furniture, or consider angling a larger piece. Don't line furniture against the walls.

Hide throw rugs. Often they are dingy and make buyers wonder what you're hiding. If you must use one, make sure it is clean - or consider buying a new one.

Pack away family photos and collectibles. The goal is to make a buyer picture their family in the house, not yours. Also, buyers can get distracted if they concentrate too much on your family. The exception to this rule is if the photos are professional portraits in nice frames. Then they cross the line into art. Just keep it to a minimum. Ditto for the collectibles. Be it your grandmother's collection of antique spoons or your own private stash of teddy bears, put them away. Again, they are distracting and sometimes vaguely frightening to buyers.

Choose neutral colors. The old rule of white, off-white or beige on walls is over. Today's soft neutrals include sage, light gold, pale yellows and gray can give a house more drama and make it seem more "decorated."

Rearrange artwork. One big piece is better than a collection of smaller pictures. Even a blank wall is preferable to an out-of-place or out-of-scale wall hanging. Hang pictures at eye level.

Create light. Clean windows and screens inside and out.

Replace bedroom and bathroom linens. Consider replacing bedding and towels for a fresh look. Also, it is a relatively inexpensive way to add color to a drab room, especially now it has been decluttered. Towels look best when new. Display a coordinated set and use your old ones for everyday.

Showcase the outside of the house. Staging is not limited to the indoors. Overgrown shrubs or trees must be trimmed or cut down to maximize curb appeal. Consider painting your front door or trim work. Mow the lawn and edge the sidewalks. Replace the mailbox. A few well-placed pots of flowers on the patio or porch make a nice welcoming statement.

Check out the competition. One of the best ways to see your house objectively is to look at others. Spend some time going to open houses in your neighborhood and price range. That will give you a good idea of what works and what doesn't.

Remember, it's not forever. The more you do up front, the quicker the house will sell. Then you can really mess it up when you start packing.