

Setting the stage for a home sale

When it comes to home staging, a few simple design tricks can help generate a buzz with buyers and speed up the sale of your home

BY ALISON APPELBE, VANCOUVER SUN

Presented By:



AFTER: Living room after it was staged by PRES Home Staging and Redesigns. A brighter, less cluttered living room makes the room look larger and more inviting to prospective buyers.

Photograph by: Handout photo, Vancouver Sun

When Dana Smithers was preparing a home for the real estate market, she told the owner that his valued collection of samurai swords must come down from the walls.

“That was gruelling for him,” says Smithers of the elegant, if lethal, weapons.

However, if a property is to appeal to as many potential buyers as possible, any item deemed personal — from family photos and memorabilia to political or religious art, meaning anything that might distract, offend or provoke — must go temporarily into storage, insists Smithers - founder of [PRES Home Staging and Redesign](#).

According to the North Vancouver-based pioneer of the relatively new home-staging business, the process of “depersonalizing” a home and “pre-packing” expressions of one’s personal life is key to selling the property for as much, and as quickly, as possible.

“Once you put your home up for sale, it’s a piece of merchandise,” says the staging teacher and author of books that include [Start & Run a Home Staging Business](#), from Self-Counsel Press. “The biggest mistake home-sellers make is that they’re not able to look at their property objectively.”

Taking a no-nonsense look at your well lived-in home and then giving it an unemotional makeover — whether by doing it yourself or by paying a stager to provide part of all of the services — is what home staging is all about.

Susan Evans of [Home Suite Home Staging](#) in downtown Vancouver says: “A lot of people think it’s just a fun job, but there’s a big business component, too.”

Evans charges \$225 for an initial consultation of a standard-sized house. That will include a room-by-room assessment, measurements and photos, followed by a proposal and cost estimate for a full staging.

In Smithers’ experience, consultation for a one-bedroom apartment (excluding furniture or fixture rentals) will cost \$500, while a day in a house would be about \$1,000.

Some realtors include a basic \$100 staging consultation fee in their service package.

It’s then up to the homeowner to decide if he or she wants to hire a stager. In the end, reports Smithers, staged homes sell 50 per cent faster, and for six to 13 per cent more than those that have not been prepared for the market.

In starting the process, Smithers asks: “Who is most likely to buy? A couple with children, or pets, a senior, or a young corporate person? Or someone who wants to flip the property?”

“Look at what’s being sold in your neighbourhood, who’s bought, and for how much,” she advises. By understanding the potential buyer, you’re in a better position to decide how much time and money to spend on staging, and what’s required.

Professional stagers — experts in home-design trends — will tell you to make it as simple, uncluttered and open-spaced as possible.

The next step, says Smithers, is determining the primary function of each room. In one home Smithers staged, the room designed as a den had come to house a pet rabbit and lots of junk. She restored it to its primary purpose. In the same home, a computer and related paraphernalia were removed from the space intended for dining.

“Function is first,” says Smithers. “And then find a focal point — maybe a fireplace or a great view. The focal point is the first thing you want people to see when they walk in. You want them to say, ‘Wow, I love it.’”

The next step is to “de-clutter” and “depersonalize.” As a professional stager, says Smithers, “you have to be a psychologist — you have to be tactful. And the seller has to be on board (the process). Ninety-five per cent of sellers are. The other five per cent are not ready to detach (from their home).”

Almost all homes, and definitely those 10 years or older, must be repainted. “It’s about refreshing the home — and painting is the No. 1 thing that people can do,” Smithers says. Neutral colours are strongly recommended. Expect to pay three to five per cent of the asking price on improvements, she adds.

When a Kitsilano homeowner asked Susan Evans how best to stage his long-neglected heritage property on a limited budget, she advised him to paint the entire four-bedroom house. “This was what was going to give him the biggest impact,” she says.

Many homes need new flooring, with hardwood being the preferred option. And for every major purchase or service, says Smithers, get more than one quote. Check out several home-stagers before shelling out for an entire package. “Have them make a presentation. Get references. That’s really important.”

“Furniture placement is key,” Smithers continues. “We usually take out about half of the [owner’s] furniture — you only want the essential pieces in each room. The further the eye can travel the bigger the room looks. Most people like a modern, clean look.”

Often it’s necessary to rent basic, neutral furnishings. Fluff Design in East Vancouver is among local firms that rent everything you need to temporarily furnish a home — from fashionable couches and tables to colourful bedding and lighting.

Flattering lighting then “sets the ambience — it’s where the emotions are,” Smithers says, pointing out that you can buy all types of lighting relatively inexpensively at home-décor and big-box outlets. “Look for what’s trendy and modern.”

Finally, the accenting accessories are added: the universally acceptable art, colourful cushions and maybe a handsome plant or vases with flowers.

When Evans was asked to stage a small mill-house in Coquitlam, again on as little money as possible, she and her designer exposed several antique sconce lamps that had been hidden by furniture or overlooked.

By removing about half the furniture, including the TV, taking down the window coverings (a trademark action of Canadian Staging Professionals, with whom she trained), and uncoupling an antique

cupboard (or hutch) from the chest of drawers on which it sat, then repositioning the lower piece, the house acquired a new charm and spaciousness.

Sometimes, a stager will create a small “setting” or vignette, Smithers says. For example, in a master bedroom they’ll cluster a table with a lamp and book, and a comfortable chair. “It makes you want to sit and read and snuggle up. It’s the power of suggestion.”

Similarly, Evans demonstrates that by placing a small antique table in an otherwise empty hallway and adding a few accessories, an overlooked niche can be brought to life.

In fact, a byproduct of home staging is counselling homeowners on how to live well, Smithers says. “I’ve had women walk into the homes that we’ve done and cry. They wonder why they didn’t do it themselves. It’s all about the transformation.”

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