

Get Your Home Ready to Sell

(First Peak)

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Flowers and House For Sale signs bloom every year as a sign that spring is here.

The period from late January to early March marks the first peak of the home-selling season. This is most active period of the year for several reasons. School schedules, tax considerations, and vacations influence buyers and sellers' timing decisions. The usual flurry of activity in the spring market also draws lots of buyers and consequently, more sellers to marketplace.

The most buyers and most homes of the year make the first peak the best time to sell. Before you put up the "For Sale" sign, start your "Spring Cleaning." This is the perfect time to take inventory, and get rid of the things you don't want to move with you to the new house.

Get Rid of Clutter

Our biggest challenge is junk accumulation, an American tradition.

- Clean out the clutter in closets, cellars garages, and attics.
- Store unneeded items away from the house. You want to create a feeling of spaciousness and cleanliness.
- Take stock in what needs to be done to put your house in ship shape order.
- Don't ask friends and neighbors for advice. They may be used to the way the house looks or don't want to hurt your feelings. Ask real estate agents; they always look for flaws or show stoppers and can give you a premarketing analysis.
- If you plan to do a For Sale By Owner, make a videotape of your house and watch it. Look for the clutter that's "gotta go". Check out your television listings to see if there are homes for sales programs and take note of how the houses look. "Staging" your house includes the clean, clutter-free look we all love but rarely get to experience in our real life.

Most buyers, particularly "first time buyers", want a house they can move into without spending money on repairs. Having your house in good working order will bring a higher price than one in need of repair.

Take Out the Tools: Fix It Up

Make a "to-do" list of repairs, from the ubiquitous drippy faucets to more serious problems that you know won't pass muster.

- Ceiling stains present special problems because buyers worry that a roof is still leaking. They don't know that it is from the horrible ice dams experienced during a particularly bad winter four years ago.
- Dirty or mildewed grout in the bathroom tile may give the impression that you haven't maintained your home even though we all know how hard it is to keep tile grout sparkling white.
- Get outside help for problems that need the professional's touch.
- Consider getting a premarketing home inspection done so you won't have any unpleasant surprises.
- Be prepared to give a credit or make repairs after the inevitable home inspection. Some of the annoyances homeowners get used to are unacceptable to home buyers who want their new home in good, working order.

- Seller property disclosures are common today and most buyers have a home inspection so be ready to deal with problems. Do not lie on a property disclosure form. You could end up in a lawsuit charging you with misrepresentation.

Visit a builder's model home and think about why the decorating appeals to you.

Make It Home for Them

To help home buyers move in mentally, depersonalize the house.

It's time to pack the collections, photographs, trophies, stuffed animals, or whatever. Make it easy for them to place their personal touches in the home. It's hard for many of us to accept that our treasures wouldn't be their treasures.

Imagine buying a used car with belongings of the previous owner: a well-worn map, coffee mug, CDs and Lego blocks.

Now you know why used car dealers have those cars totally empty and sparkling clean.

The quick judgment people make from driving by your house is critical to their decision to make an appointment to see the inside.

Curb Appeal: Get Them Inside

- Painting will give you the biggest bang for the buck. Keep the color in line with the neighborhood look. White and neutral colors like tan, beige and gray are safest.
- Consider yourself lucky if you don't need to paint the house but think about freshening the paint on the shutters, window frames or gutters. Paint and decorate the front door and put down a new welcome mat.
- Plants and sparkling clean windows add to the overall impression of a well maintained home. If you have vinyl siding that needs cleaning, clean it or call the professionals.
- Keep the lawn freshly mowed and bushes trimmed.
- Get rid of all distractions from the small ones like garden hoses, toys and sports equipment to the big ones like campers and boats in the driveway.
- Do you have a big front porch? Make it inviting with a rocker, wicker furniture, or a porch swing.

So many of us never use the front door when coming into our own homes. Walk into your house from the front door, and see what others see.

First Impressions: Make Them Want to Stay

- Find your focal point as you walk in the front door.
- Use a mirror to brighten up a dark corner.
- Put high wattage bulbs in lamps to add warmth and light.
- Check the floor -- while wiping their feet, the buyers will be taking a real close look at the floor to see the material and what shape it is in.
- Clean out the hall closet, leave some empty hangers for coats and put in a nice aromatic sachet.

"Open, light and bright" is a common request from home buyers, so do what you can to make your house fit their criteria. Even if your house is small, you can make your house seem spacious - without adding on.

Look at the traffic patterns in your home.

Make the rooms easy to navigate as there are usually at least three people touring the house at showings.

- Get rid of any extra furniture not needed. Maybe that big, comfy ottoman that goes with the overstuffed chair should go into storage.
- Box or bag all the loose stuff like videos near the VCR, craft items, and all the extras on the kitchen counter.
- Clean off that dining room table, polish it and set it with beautiful table settings.

Now that you have gotten rid of clutter, how crisp and clean does the inside look?

Remember the effect of fresh paint. Stick to neutral colors. Put the color into rugs, drapes, wall hangings, bedspreads, tablecloths and flower arrangements. Use fresh flowers for a nice touch.

Let the buyers envision their colorful belongings with your tastefully chosen neutral colors.

You can't please all the people all the time. Every house, even brand new ones, have positive and negative features. Drawing attention to the best features of the house will increase your chances of selling quickly

Emphasize the Positive

What made you fall in love with your house when you bought it? The fireplace, modern kitchen, wonderful family room? Treat each of these plusses with extra attention.

Light a fire in the fireplace when you can or put logs in to help the buyer imagine the glow of a warm fire. Keep some quick start burning logs handy for last minute calls for showings. Take the personal touches like photographs off the fireplace mantel and replace them with a few tasteful items to highlight this wonderful asset.

Play up the assets of your modern kitchen by expanding the counter space, arranging the cupboards to give an impression of lots of space, and putting out some nice touches like a pot of herbs or a bowl of lemons or fresh fruit. If you have the time to fill the kitchen with wonderful aromas like fresh baked bread, freshly brewed coffee. Even cinnamon sprinkled on a sheet of aluminum foil, warmed in the oven will make the kitchen seem inviting.

Downplay the Negative

Kitchens are the heart of the home and important to most buyers.

If yours is small, think about white paint and getting rid of any extraneous items in view. Use light curtains to blend with the walls.

Consider replacing the flooring if it looks worn or outdated. The bright sparkle of new vinyl sheet flooring can give a fresh look.

If you have an eat-in kitchen, set the table for a meal with bright placemats and a centerpiece.

Do you have an ugly view?

Use some tricks of the trade to fool the eye. Shutters, sheers, glass shelves with colored bottles, or a piece of latticework painted white with a hanging plant can disguise the ugliest of views.

Older bathrooms can get a face lift with new shower curtains and coordinated window treatments and towels. Check out the flooring: it needs to shine. Make the bathroom sparkling clean and decorate it with a

few tasteful prints on the wall and plants like African violets or a Boston fern. And make sure that all the dripping faucets are fixed.

Man's Best Friend: Not When You Are Selling A House

Visit any pet store and you would never believe that an estimated 30-50% of people do not like pets. It seems hard to believe but how many of us love our own pets but not other people's pets?

With asthma and allergies at an all-time high, even buyers who love animals may be concerned about the presence of pets.

Rover and Fluffy can help you sell your house by performing magic. Ask them to do the disappearing act.

Since good real estate agents want you and your kids to do the same thing, think about taking a trip to the park with the dog. If you are at work and know that your dog will bark ferociously but would never hurt a flea, tell the agent that information before they visit.

Showing your home to buyers is like opening night of a new play. You know the critics are in the audience and you want everything to be just right. This is the beginning of the real stress of home selling.

Set the Stage in a Moment's Notice: It's "ShowTime!"

It is hard to change your family's lifestyle to accommodate these interruptions but there can be serious financial considerations if you don't.

You know your family best so think about a strategy that will work. Small children might see the last minute cleanup as a game. Older children may need an incentive to keep their beds made every day and put the dishes in the dishwasher instead of the sink.

Be willing to show your home almost anytime

Last minute appointments can be a nuisance, but the family relocating to the area may not get a second chance to see your home.

Stay calm when you get the call from an agent and buy a little extra time if you can.

Sometimes the agent may have another home to two to show and could do a little rescheduling to show a vacant or unoccupied home before yours. If it is near a mealtime or there's a great coffee shop near your home, suggest they have lunch or get a cup of coffee first. But some agents schedule their time like a five star general moving through the countryside with the infantry and your suggestion might be met with resistance.

Follow the Drill

Have a strategy for keeping the house in order in general and a special "SWAT team" plan for last-minute showings.

Get the whole family involved and have garbage bags ready to scoop up toys, dirty laundry or newspapers that you can sort out after the showing. Stow them in the garage, cellar or car trunk and don't forget to sort them out after the showing.

Keep a Low Profile

Take the family out for ice cream, run errands or take a drive during the showing and do a last minute drill as you head out the door.

Air out the house if you can before you go, set the thermostat to a comfortable temperature, make a nice aroma for the kitchen, put on some soft jazz or classical music, and turn on those bright lights everywhere.

If you can't go out while the house is being shown, let the agent do their job.

Stay in one area and give the buyers the space and privacy they need. Remember how important it is for home buyers to envision your home as their home. That is why you packed the wall of family photographs, stowed away the bowling trophies, and asked your teenager (nicely) to take down the hard rock band posters.

Selling it Yourself?

If you are selling the house yourself, provide a fact sheet about your home and perhaps some community and school information. Talk up the good points of your home and how much you have enjoyed it and living in the neighborhood but don't come on so strong that it sounds like a hard sell.

What if you can't meet a deadline for spring? Take heart, you can aim for the second peak this fall.

After we devote our summer months to outdoor fun and vacations, the second peak begins at Labor Day. Through November we can expect to see the marketplace strong when it then goes into hibernation for the holidays.

Use the same tips for the spring market but take advantage of the bounty of the fall season to dress up your home. Pumpkins, corn stalks, hardy Mums and Halloween decorations can be used in place of the beautiful spring and summer flowers for curb appeal.