



Coach Your Clients: Preparing a House for Market

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When the real estate market is good, sellers don't have to work as hard at preparing their homes for sale. In a hot market, simply having a home for sale in the right location often means multiple offers and bids higher than the asking price. But as the economy continues to slow, real estate agents may find themselves spending more time coaching their clients on the best ways to get their homes ready to sell.

Time vs. Money

Preparing a house for market is most often a matter of time and energy—not money. A common mistake many sellers make is to invest in renovations, a new roof, remodeling, etc. While buyers will be impressed with these things, spending \$5000 on a remodeling project will not add \$5000 to the sales price. It's best for a seller to spend as little money as possible—and spend it on cosmetic, readily-seen features like interior painting. The time to remodel is when a homeowner plans to stay in the house, not when he or she is going to sell.

Where to Start

Since it's easy to get overwhelmed when getting a home ready for market, tackling a few basics first can make it easier to get started:

First, encourage sellers to have a garage sale. Whatever doesn't sell can be set out for a DAV or ARC pickup. Once the clutter is cleared away, it will be easier to see what needs to be done.

Then, have your sellers look at the house through the buyer's eyes. It's often a good idea to "shop the competition"; looking at other homes for sale in the area will allow buyers to pinpoint areas for improvement in their own homes. Viewing a few model homes can also be a good investment of time; homeowners will notice design elements, lack of clutter, placement of furniture, etc. that is attractive to a prospective buyer.

The two biggest improvements a homeowner should think about completing before a home hits the market are painting and carpeting (if the carpet is more than 5 years old or especially worn). Not only will they improve the appearance dramatically, but a fresh coat of paint and new carpet will give the whole house a fresh, clean scent. Neutral colors are a good way to attract as many qualified buyers as possible, and these two improvements can add tremendous perceived value at comparatively minimal cost. The before-and-after difference after painting and recarpeting is often night and day.

The Exterior: "Curb Appeal"

The exterior of the home makes that all-important first impression. In today's market, buyers might drive by a dozen or more houses and, based on the home's appearance, narrow their search to five or six they want to walk through. To get as many buyers past the front door as possible, sellers will want to clean the yard, sweep the entryway, and paint the front door. In warmer months, the lawn should be freshly cut, flowerbeds well maintained, and hedges trimmed.

The following tips for home sellers can go a long way toward making a good first impression:

- Put a bright coat of paint on the mailbox and buy a new welcome mat.
- Edge, mow, and fertilize the lawn regularly. Make sure it's well watered and reseed any sparse areas.
- Trim hedges, weed lawns and flowerbeds, and prune trees regularly. Cut back overgrown shrubbery that looks scraggly or keeps light out of the house.
- If landscaping seems sparse compared to other homes in the area, buy a few bushes or shrubs and plant them. Don't invest in trees, though—larger trees are costly and sellers probably won't regain their investment, and the smaller trees that are usually chosen for planting don't add much visually.
- Check the foundation, steps, walkways, walls, and patios for cracks and crumbling and reseal if possible. Repair broken outdoor steps.
- Powerwash siding or brick. Consider repainting siding and/or trim in neutral shades; this is especially important if there is any peeling. Repair and repaint loose siding and caulking.
- Make sure all outdoor lights work. Clean and polish lights and any door brass—or consider purchasing shiny new fixtures if the old ones are extremely worn.
- Clean and align gutters and downspouts. Inspect and clean the chimney. Repair and replace loose or damaged roof shingles.
- Repair or replace a doorbell that doesn't work.
- Remove oil stains from driveway and garage. Reseal an asphalt driveway.
- If selling in the winter, keep walks neatly cleared of snow and ice. Otherwise, keep the walks and driveway swept.

- Spring for some brightly colored potted outdoor flower arrangements for the front yard near the entrance.
- Wash the windows inside and out. Repair or replace torn or bent screens. As a last resort, remove screens entirely; having no screens is better than having unsightly ones. Clean out all window tracks and check that all windows open and close.
- Store RVs, boats, and extra vehicles (anything that can't be parked in the garage) elsewhere while the house is on the market. Keep the garage door closed, but make sure any automatic garage door opener is in working order.

The Interior

- Depersonalize! A prospective buyer wants to imagine the home as his or her own—difficult to do when Aunt Mary's photo is hanging in every corner or Dad's "one that didn't get away" beckons from the mantle. Even if Junior was the Gerber baby at a year old, removing family pictures allows buyers to more easily see themselves living in the home.
- If prospective buyers walk into a house greeted by the smell of cat litter, cigarette smoke, mildew, or pet accidents, there is little chance that even a reduced sales price will persuade them to buy. Since homeowners are used to their home's scent, have them ask a trusted friend or neighbor to be brutally honest about the way the house smells when someone first walks in.
- Clean, clean, clean. This includes walls, floors, baseboards, inside closets, and cabinets—everything. Clear all cobwebs from corners and doorways. Wash all light switches, hand rails, and doorknobs. Many cleaning services can come in and do a "deep clean" for a reasonable fee.
- Spend extra time on the bathrooms. Few things will "unsell" a house as fast as a dirty bathroom. Pay attention to the vanity, sink, faucet hardware, and mirror. Don't neglect other potential eyesores: soap residue in the shower, moldy shower curtains, accumulated dirt in the track of a sliding shower door, unsightly toilet bowls, soiled or missing grout, dirty or battered bath mats. Replace old toilet seats and shower curtains.
- Most buyers will inspect the kitchen carefully, so time invested here can really pay off. Clean everything, including the oven and refrigerator. Put away all appliances normally left on the counter—even the ones used every day. Clean out the cabinets, keeping only what is necessary; seldom-used items can be boxed up and placed in storage to make cabinets appear larger and more roomy. Buy new cabinet knobs and curtains for the kitchen.
- Get rid of clutter. This alone will make a house appear bigger and brighter. Clean out closets, garage, basement, and attic. Box up all unneeded items and place them in a rented storage space until moving day. Freeing up space in closets and storage spaces gives buyers the illusion of more

space—and more storage space is usually on every buyer's wish list.

- Repair cracks, holes and damage to plaster, wall-board, wallpaper, paint, and tiles. Paint the walls and ceilings a neutral color—off white or beige.
- Replace broken or cracked windowpanes, moldings, and other woodwork.
- Repair dripping faucets and showerheads. Unclog slowly draining sinks and tubs.
- Shampoo all carpets, scrub and wax linoleum, wash and wax wood floors. Handwashing the floors usually makes it easier to reach corners and edges where dirt accumulates.
- Clean out the fireplace and place some logs in it. Glass fireplace doors should shine.
- Replace burned-out light bulbs and make sure every lightswitch works. Using higher wattage light bulbs than normal can brighten a house.
- Nail down any creaking boards or stair treads (drive two long finishing nails at opposing angles through the floor and sub-floor into the joist). Lubricate any squeaking doors.
- Remove excess, worn, or unattractive furniture. Less furniture—well placed—can make a room appear larger.

On Showing Days

- Keep draperies and shades open to let in the light. Turn on all lights inside the house, even during the day. At night, turn on the porch light and any other outdoor lights.
- Avoid having dirty dishes in the sink or on counters. Keep any toys in the children's rooms, and make sure bikes, wagons, and skateboards are neatly stored in the garage.
- Leave pets outdoors, no matter how well behaved.
- Place fresh flowers throughout the house. Set out colorful, luxurious towels in the bathroom.
- Play pleasant music at low volume. Consider baking bread or cookies earlier in the day; the scent will linger and make a house smell like a home.
- Spend the day of an open house away from home, and take a walk or run errands to avoid being home during a showing.

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