

The stage is their world

Home stagers can make the difference between 'for sale' and 'sold'

By **RUSS OLIVIO**

WOONSOCKET – It's easy to trumpet the upside of the 'buyer's market,' but these can be challenging times if you're on the other end of the home-selling equation. Prices are at historic lows and the glut of inventory means houses generally go wanting for a buyer far longer than they used to in the glory days.

Nowadays, sellers need every conceivable advantage to beat back the competition, draw in buyers and get the full worth of their house. The question is, how?

One strategy more and more sellers are turning to is home staging. It might sound like some sort of sophisticated real estate phrase, but home staging is essentially nothing more than making your house look as good as it possibly can, inside and out, before a buyer sees it.

The home staging concept sounds like common sense, but sellers and the realtors working on their behalf are increasingly turning to home staging professionals trained to make the best choices. Homes that are professionally staged, they say, spend less time on the market and fetch higher prices than their unstaged competitors.

Susan Martin, president of the Rhode Island Chapter of the International Association of Home Staging Professionals, says dozens of homes she's staged recently have changed hands within 39 days, on average. That's half the average for all homes sold in the third quarter of the year, according to the statewide Multiple Listing service.

"The number one thing a person can do to sell their home is to stage it," says Martin, who runs a Wakefield-based home staging company called Stage It Design "And for every \$100 a seller spends on staging, the selling price increases \$586. That's a 586 percent return on investment. That's incredible."

Martin's home-staging mantra is "declutter, clean, depersonalize." But she says that's just the beginning of home-staging, skills anyone who is serious about selling a home should have enough common sense to tackle from the get-go.

"Anyone can clean, anyone can declutter, anyone can depersonalize," she says.

But to reap the big dividends of home staging requires someone with "a talent, a visual gift," who knows how to make a home feel warm and inviting. Ultimately, it's just as important not alienate potential buyers with loud, gaudy accessories or bold colors as it is to draw them in, she says.

Martin warehouses an assortment of sofas, beds, tables, wall hangings, and other accessories that she leases to sellers in order to dress up their homes for the big going-up-for-sale party. She acquired some of the furniture over three years in business, some of which her husband, a skilled furniture maker, built for her.

A master gardener with a background in marketing, Martin says it's also important to enhance the curb appeal of a home before it is sold. That means her arsenal of home-decorating gear often includes potted plants, evergreens or other landscaping accents that will grab the attention of buyers from the moment they set eyes on the property.

Increasingly, said Martin, that first look is not of the bricks-and-mortar variety, but an online visual of the façade, which makes exterior staging just as important as anything else that takes place inside a home.

"Eighty-eight percent of people do their shopping online now, so those pictures really have to sing," says Martin. "That's another reason why homes have to be staged now."

Yet only six percent of Rhode Islanders are staged for sale, which suggests there's plenty of room for growth in the home staging market, says Martin.

Home stager Sandy Hakala agrees.

"It's a growing trend," says Hakala, who launched her business, The Next Stage, in Upton, Mass. in 2005. "Absolutely people know they have to do more to sell their home."

Home staging is all about first impressions, which are more important than ever in today's tough real estate economy, says Hakala.

"If it's unappealing people are turned off," she says. "Things are really competitive right now. The market is weak. The first

impression for the buyer should be inviting and warm."

Hakala says she often tries to use the accessories a homeowner has on hand to bring out the best in a house – after decluttering. One of the most common mistakes sellers make is leaving their beloved, personal trinkets and other bric-a-brac on display when potential buyers are on tour. Those sea-captain mugs and sailboat clocks crowding the corner hutch might harbor some symbolic value of a cherished memory from vacationland or some other sentimental value for the owner, but for someone thinking about buying your house, they're just a distracting turnoff.

Sellers can spend anywhere from \$500 to \$4,500 on home staging. But, like Martin says, sellers invariably end up recouping their investment – and then some.