

The Home-Staging Cheat Sheet

6 easy ways to make your property more appealing to buyers

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Faced with a massive glut of unsold homes, many would-be sellers are struggling to make their properties stand out in today's downtrodden real estate market. But while the economic head winds are beyond property owners' control, author Barb Schwarz says they can dramatically improve their chances of making a sale by devoting attention to an often-overlooked corner of real estate marketing: home staging.

Schwarz, the CEO of StagedHomes.com, was a pioneer in home staging back in the early 1970s and has used the techniques to sell properties ever since. "The goal [of home staging] is for the buyer to mentally move in," Schwarz says. "If they cannot mentally feel and see themselves living here, you've lost them." Schwarz offers six simple tips to help home sellers better position themselves in a sluggish market.

Get them inside. The first thing a prospective buyer notices about a home is not the living room but the front yard. "A lot of people think staging is the inside only," Schwarz says. "[But] we've got to stage the outside to get them inside." So cut the grass, trim the hedges, rake those leaves, sweep the sidewalks, and power-wash the driveway. And make sure you don't have too many potted plants scattered around the property. "Nothing dead," Schwarz says. "You'd be amazed how many people have dead plants in their yards."

Pretend you're camping. Schwarz says a cluttered room will appear too small to buyers. "Clutter eats equity," she says. Schwarz tells homeowners to go through each room of the house and divide their belongings into two piles: "keep" and "give up." Items in the "keep" pile will be used to stage the room, while those in the "give up" pile should be stored elsewhere. "Pretend you are camping," she says. "When you go camping, you are not taking all those books, right?"

The decluttered rooms may appear bare to the seller, but the buyer won't think so. "We are not selling your things.... We are selling the space," Schwarz says. "And buyers cannot visualize when there is too much [stuff] in the room." Decluttering a home's outdoor spaces is important, too, she says.

Balance hard and soft surfaces. When staging a particular room, it's essential to have a good balance of hard surfaces, such as a coffee-table top, and soft surfaces, like a carpet, Schwarz says. For example, a room with a cushy, 7-foot-long sofa, a love seat, and four La-Z-Boy recliners has too many soft surfaces and not enough hard surfaces.

"The room is sinking," she says. "It's all too heavy." Instead, consider getting rid of the La-Z-Boys and the love seat, replacing them with two wingback chairs. "If you have hardwood floors but no rugs, it's too hard," Schwarz says. "So you want to add a rug."

Work in ones or threes. Schwarz recommends arranging items on top of hard surfaces in ones or threes. You would place three items—say, a lamp, a plant, and a book—on top of a larger hard surface, like an end table. "You take away the plant and the book, it's too bare," she says. "[But if] you put 10 things on it, it's overdone." The three items should be closely grouped together in a triangle shape. "I draw a triangle for my clients," Schwarz says. "I say, 'Here is the end table—let's superimpose a triangle on top of it.' " For hard surfaces with less area, however, a single item will do.

Decide from the doorway. Since would-be buyers will get their first impression of each room from the doorway, homeowners should use that perspective to judge their staging work. "Do your work, go back to the doorway. Do some more, go back to the doorway," Schwarz says. That way, you'll be better able to ensure that each room appeals to buyers.

Make your place "Q-Tip clean." A properly staged home should be immaculate—"Q-Tip clean," as Schwarz puts it. "I mean Q-Tips getting dead flies out of your windowsill [and] going around the bottom of your toilet on the floor," she says. The purpose of ensuring the house is spotless is more than simply making it presentable. If a home is unkempt, a buyer will wonder what other, less visible problems may come with the property, Schwarz says. "They'll say, 'Gosh, if they live like this, what don't they take care of that I can't see?'"