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THE FIX

## **All Their World's a Staging**

By **JAY ROMANO**

WHILE the Internet has changed the way people buy and sell homes — it's a lot easier to tour a house on your computer, in your pajamas, than it is to see it in person — one thing hasn't changed: houses sell faster when they stand out from the competition. And one of the best ways to set your house apart, real estate experts say, is to borrow a trick from professional set designers and stage your home.

“Staging is preparing a home for sale so the buyer can mentally move in,” said Barb Schwarz, a Concord, Calif., real estate broker and president of the International Association of Home Staging Professionals, a trade organization. “Decorating a home is personalizing it,” she said. “Staging a home is depersonalizing it.”

With the market slowing down in many areas, an increasing number of brokers and agents are recommending staging to their clients. Ms. Schwarz said the average cost of a stager nationwide is about \$2,800, not including the cost of renting furniture. On the East Coast, a stager costs about \$3,800.

Deanna Kory, a sales agent and senior vice president for the Corcoran Group, a Manhattan real estate company, said she finds that staged homes sell faster and for more money than comparable homes in the same area.

Matthew Finlason, a home stager for HGTV's new weekly program “The Stagers,” which had its premiere on July 20, said a successful stager will view the home “through the buyer's eye.” “When a buyer walks into a place, you have to show him the optimal furniture arrangement, the optimal placement of wall hangings, lighting and art,” Mr. Finlason said. “So once I get the keys to the place, the homeowner's tastes are completely removed from the process.”

Donna M. Dazzo, president of Designed to Appeal, a home staging specialist in New York, said the most important thing a seller can do is to declutter the home. Remove knickknacks, trophies, plaques and family pictures.

Earlier this year Ms. Dazzo helped Richard and Mary Lou Manfredi change the look of their 17-room house in Muttontown, N.Y., on the North Shore of Long Island, which had been on the market for three years. She first removed the clutter and then rearranged the furniture. A sofa crowding the living room was moved to the master bedroom in front of the fireplace. Two empty bedrooms were converted into offices, and the space between their two bathrooms, once an office, became a walk-in closet.

The Manfredis returned the house to the market a month ago. “We're sure we're going to get an offer,” Mr. Manfredi said. “It's a different home.”

If the color scheme in the house isn't neutral — blue walls in the boy's room, pink walls for the girls and foil and bamboo wallpaper in the bathroom — it may be necessary to repaint with neutral colors. If lighting doesn't

complement the rest of the new neutral décor, fixtures may have to be changed or repositioned.

Homeowners thinking about hiring a stager should look at before-and-after pictures in the person's portfolio and should visit a home on the market that the stager has handled.

Generally, Ms. Dazzo said, the homeowner should hire a stager, trained ideally in interior or set design, before hiring the broker.

"It's hard for a broker who wants you to sign a listing agreement to say: 'Those pictures of your parents and grandparents have to go,' or 'There's an odd smell in this house.'"

It's also helpful to hire a stager who has been taught the art of staging. "We train people to be professional stagers," said Audra Slinkey, president of Home Staging Resource in Vista, Calif. "We train them to transform the home so that it can be marketed to the broadest array of buyers." Ms. Slinkey said most buyers want a home that is "move in ready" and often cannot see potential if the owner's furnishings and artwork obscure the view. Yet, leaving the house totally empty isn't a great idea. "Vacant homes take longer to sell," she said. "And in this market, we're seeing an increase in vacant homes."

Ms. Dazzo of Designed to Appeal said that when a house needs to be fully furnished, she recommends renting furnishings for at least six months, which could cost \$1,000 to \$2,500 a month or even more.

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