

GlobeReal Estate

Setting the stage for a home sale

Vancouver company focus of new TV series that goes behind the scenes in home staging.

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One of Ron Sowden's Vancouver customers spent just over \$20,000 to have their home professionally prepped for sale — and sold it for \$112,000 more than the asking price.

Mr. Sowden says that result wasn't even a record for his firm, Dekora Staging Inc., which bills itself as Canada's leading home staging company. But it was a great way to showcase the company's talents on the first episode of an upcoming new series on HGTV, *The Stagers*.

"The record for us is \$260,000 over list," says Mr. Sowden, a co-owner of the Vancouver company. He says Dekora aims to help residential sellers get the most bang for their buck.

"Home staging is the art of professionally preparing a home for sale to maximize value and speed of the sale," says Matthew Finlason, who works for Dekora as a designer and home stager.



Matthew Finlason, a designer for Dekora Staging Inc., helps a crew member, top, hang a lamp.
(*PAPERNY FILMS/HGTV*)

"It is also an investment in your greatest asset and gives you an advantage in an extremely competitive real estate market," he says.

Staged homes sell better

According to the U.S. National Association of Realtors, staged homes in that country sell 49 per cent more quickly than non-staged homes, and sell for 7 per cent to 11 per cent more.

Home stagers say they "merchandise" homes to make them as appealing as possible to a wide range of buyers. Their job is to make people fall in love with your home — and bring you as much money as possible on its sale.

"Stagers aren't decorating a property for the individual taste of a homeowner, but rather transforming the home into a space that makes a great first impression and appeals to the widest audience," says Mr. Finlason.

To do this, they may suggest the removal of furniture and art, the substitution of rental furniture and other artworks, minor renovations, fresh paint and even landscaping changes. "It all begins with curb appeal," says Mr. Sowden.

Mr. Finlason agrees: "You need people to fall in love with your house from the street or they won't even ask for a viewing — and I can't just place a cushion out on your sidewalk."

Staging a home is about more than interior design, he emphasizes: "It is about selling real estate."

In the first episode of *The Stagers*, which is produced by Vancouver-based Paperny Films, Mr. Finlason takes on a bungalow in Vancouver's Dunbar neighbourhood which is listed for sale at \$2,188,000. His preparations help the owners draw multiple offers — resulting in a final sale price of \$2.3-million.

The owners were committed to improving the home's potential for sale and drew up a budget of \$20,255 with Dekora to do so.

"This was a 50-year-old home that was quite dated," Mr. Sowden explains. "We put together a proposal that included removing wallpaper, painting the entire interior, cleaning services, landscape services, minor renovations and woodwork. We even painted the front door," he says.

"It was a considerable investment that really paid off."

Top tip: clean

Dekora can tailor a budget to any home, from a 500-square-foot bachelor pad to a \$10-million estate. The company's staging fees can range from a \$150 consultation, which includes a suggested "to do" list, to a \$50,000 proposal that includes renovations, cleaning services and furniture rental.

Of course, there are things ordinary sellers can do themselves to prepare their home for sale. Dekora's top 10 tips include "clean, clean, clean," declutter and depersonalize. The company also recommends making minor repairs, painting with neutral colours and reducing the amount of furnishings.

"Most people tend to have too much stuff — it's a universal situation and I'll be the first to plead guilty," Mr. Sowden says.

"We usually suggest that clients edit down the excess and make sure the contents are adding to the room, not detracting from it. If it is detracting, take it out."

For Mr. Finlason, a self-proclaimed "contemporary loft guy," the 1950s Dunbar bungalow proved to be a challenge, but a rewarding one. After a one-hour visit to the home — where he collected measurements, created a design concept, determined the furniture arrangement, and decided which walls needed art — he set off to Dekora's warehouse to select the needed materials.

"There isn't usually the time to deliberate and plan and get into a lot of analysis," Mr. Sowden says.

Jobs done on a dime

"Most of the time we only have four to five days so there is no buffer for error," Mr. Finlason says. Dekora's Vancouver warehouse measures more than 10,000 sq. ft. and is packed with furniture, rugs and accessories. It is here that the action begins, with up to 17 designers tagging objects for staging jobs on any given day.

"It's an arm wrestle for the best light, paper-rock-scissors for the shag, and 'I'll trade you my master bedroom lamps for your six gold chargers,'" Mr. Finlason jokes. "Sometimes I'm pulling peoples' hair out for area rugs to sell real estate."

"If the furniture we need can't be found there, then we rent it like we did for this [Dunbar] home," he adds.

For this project, Mr. Finlason's furniture choices made him re-evaluate his original design and come up with a plan B that turned the living room focus from the window to the fireplace, and led his supervisors to agree with him about painting some wood panelling that he said gave the room a "17-year-old rocker's basement" look.

Another obstacle for this staging effort was the removal of large pieces of office furniture. "The original master suite was turned into an office with a large desk that entered the house through the window," Mr. Sowden explains. This meant that the window had to be broken, the desk removed with the help of specialty movers, and the glass replaced.

"Suddenly, 'co-ordinate glass company' was added to my list," Mr. Finlason laughs. Number of beds is key

With the office furniture gone, Mr. Finlason converted the room back to a bedroom. "There is more value to a listing that says three bedrooms, than one that looks like two bedrooms and a den," he says. "People walk through a home and count the beds. They say, 'Oh I can fit my whole family here. I can raise my children here.' If they only count two beds, it doesn't feel like a \$2-million home. A \$2-million home needs three beds."

Not surprisingly, first impressions are the key to success. "People will carry their first impression through an entire house," Mr. Finlason says. "If they have a bad first impression, it won't matter how amazing the bedrooms are."

The ultimate goal for a stager is to create the image of a lifestyle that will appeal to a wide range of buyers. "When people are looking to purchase a home, they are buying a new lifestyle," Mr. Finlason says. "They don't have the answer on how to define that lifestyle, so we do it for them."

The first episode of *The Stagers* will air at 10 p.m. ET/PT on July 1 on HGTV.

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