

Prepping Your Home for Sale

WHEN YOU DECIDE TO SELL YOUR HOME, YOU NEED TO RESET YOUR relationship with your house. Be objective about its strengths and weaknesses. It's not your house anymore. As an exercise, consider walking out the door and coming back in, pretending to be a buyer. What do you see from this new point of view? Is the house a little overstuffed with junk? Are the windowsills dirty? Is that a worn area on the carpet? All of these are issues you'll need to address as you get your home ready for sale.

Preparing your home for sale is a multistep process. It's not unusual for people to pay decluttering experts anywhere from \$200 to \$3,000 to do the work for them, but if you are disciplined, you can do it yourself for little money. You start by inspecting and repairing your home. Next, you clear out the clutter and conduct an extensive cleaning. Then you'll arrange your furniture for the most impact. This is the time to neutralize the colors in your home. Adding luxurious-looking accessories with a strong visual impact can make a difference, too. And don't forget, you'll have to repeat many of these steps outside your home. Because the changes can take time and money, you'll want to give yourself a month

to two months to get them done. This means that you should be getting your preparations under way in February in order to hit the busiest home selling time of the year, which is April, May, and June. That's when the most buyers are out and about. And don't be surprised if when you get done you decide you'd rather not sell.

THE INSPECTION

Just as you inspected the home when you bought it (at least I hope you did), you'll also want to have a professional inspector give your house a once-over before buyers cross the threshold. The reasons are twofold. First off, you're required by law to alert buyers to potential problems, and second, getting in front of real problems can keep you from having to negotiate away any profit you hope to earn on your home. Remember, serious buyers will hire their own inspector and if they find a problem that hasn't been disclosed to them, they are likely to walk away.

Your inspector will go through all of your home's major systems. That means an inspection of the home's heating and air-conditioning, plumbing, electric, roof, attic, walls, ceiling, floor, windows, doors, foundation, basement, and structural components. Keep in mind that no home—not even brand-new ones—typically emerges from an inspection with flying colors. Don't be surprised to find out some issues that you might not have known about. On the other hand, if you do get a decent inspection and you correct any problems mentioned, you can use the inspection report as a sales tool. What's more, an inspector will be able to put to rest concerns you may have had and give you answers to questions that buyers might have.

Hiring an inspector will cost you between \$200 and \$500. Check out the American Society of Home Inspectors at www.ashi.org to find an experienced inspector in your area, or ask friends and neighbors for recommendations.

REPAIRING YOUR HOME

One critical step in getting your home ready for sale is making sure all of its parts are in good working order. Your inspector will make certain there are no big problems, but it's the little things that belie your attentiveness (or lack of it) over the years to home buyers. One experienced handyman said the telltale signs in any home are the condition of closets, particularly the closet ceiling. He looked to see whether owners had ever bothered to paint them to match the rest of the room, and most important, where any water stains were visible. Small details matter and alert buyers to whether you've simply lived in your home while you've owned it or tried to keep it in good repair and condition.

Here is a list of items that you'll want to be sure to test because buyers may do it as well:

1. Make sure all doors open and close without getting stuck in the frame or hitting the floor or ceiling. There's nothing more annoying than doors that stick.
2. Tighten knobs, handles, and pulls on all kitchen cabinets. Knobs tend to loosen over time.
3. Be sure that windows open with ease. Children should be able to open them with one hand in case of fire.
4. Look for leaks under kitchen sinks, in bathrooms, and around basement water sources. Make sure attic windows aren't leaking either. Home buyers are well informed about mold and its dangerous properties.
5. Replace burned-out lightbulbs.
6. Fix leaky faucets.
7. Replace any cracked floor tiles.
8. If your kitchen counters are tiled, regrout the tile and replace any broken tiles.

9. Patch any holes in Sheetrock. Doorknobs slamming against walls can create dents and holes. If that has happened, repair the problem and then put a doorstop behind the door.

10. Check bathroom tubs for cracks. If caulk is discolored or peeling, remove it with a flat-head screwdriver and reapply.

11. Clear slow-running drains.

CURB APPEAL

Most home buyers know whether they will take a house seriously as a candidate for purchase from the moment they drive up to it. What they see from the curb is critical. You need to present a fresh, clean, and bright home with everything in its place, or some buyers won't even make it over the threshold. For that reason, consider these moves:

1. If your home has siding rather than brick or shingles, power wash the exterior. It removes grime or dirt and can make the exterior look new.

2. Paint the door a bright color and make sure the storm door is in good working condition. The door is the first thing in your house that visitors will touch.

3. Make sure your deck has been recently resurfaced or at least power washed. If you have a patio, repair any cracks in the concrete. Crumbling grout in stone patios should be repaired.

4. Check the automatic garage door to be sure it operates properly, especially the emergency stop.

5. Remove dirt that may have blown against casement windows in the basement. Fix lawn dents that have emerged from gutter runoff.

6. Resurface driveways with large cracks.

7. Fix broken windowpanes.

8. Remove overgrown trees that block views of the home from the street. Trim back shrubs that are higher than four feet.

9. Plant annuals that play off the color of your front door.
10. Patch dead lawn areas.

CLEAN, PAINT, AND DECLUTTER

Now that you have the major repairs done and the exterior in tip-top shape, you'll want to paint any rooms that you feel need freshening, remove any extra furniture or sentimental items, and then give the whole house a serious cleaning. The best way to get started is to begin removing the clutter that has accumulated while you've lived there. Remember, the idea is to impress strangers and encourage them to imagine all their stuff where yours is now. If you're a true packrat, you may have to rent some off-site storage to put all the extra stuff in. Here's what to remove:

Living room

1. All family pictures
2. Collections of anything
3. Awards, trophies
4. Knickknacks on end tables
5. Magazines, newspapers

Kitchen

1. Refrigerator art
2. Anything on the kitchen counters—coffeemaker, other appliances, cookbooks
3. Any plants unless in perfect condition
4. Half-empty boxes and clutter in pantry and cabinets

Bath

1. All shampoos, conditioners, and bubble bath in tub area
2. Clutter in medicine cabinets
3. Old shower curtain (replace with a new one)

Now that you've gotten rid of much of the clutter, go into each room and remove at least one piece of furniture. If you've been in the

house longer than ten years, remove two pieces of furniture. Extra end tables, TV trays, and rockers are all good things to move out, if only temporarily, while the house is on the market. Eliminating extras can be especially important in the bedrooms, which tend to be smaller anyway. Lighten up those rooms by keeping window treatments to a minimum.

PAINT

Painting a room is one of the cheapest and most efficient ways of making a room feel new. If you've painted any of your rooms a dark color or something else unusual, such as red or ochre, now is the time to neutralize those colors. Not everything has to be hospital white, but you're much better off with neutral colors such as cream and beige rather than turquoise when it comes to selling your house. Not only will it make it easier for potential buyers to really see the house, but also you won't offend people who have conservative tastes. You should also consider painting if it's been a while since you have, or if family members were heavy smokers.

CLEAN

Two weeks before the property goes on the market, conduct a serious cleaning of your home. This will take some time—perhaps two weeks, maybe more, depending on your habits—so reserve time on the calendar to get it done. Remember, your goal isn't just to get rid of dirt and grime, although that is important; you'll also want to get rid of any odors. If you have pets, now is the time to board them with other family members.

1. Remove everything from every surface—kitchen countertops, coffee tables, dining room tables, end tables, bookshelves—and clean both the surface and anything that will remain on it. Lampshades and any attractive decorative elements should be dusted.
2. If you have carpeting, have it professionally cleaned, particularly if you have pets. Be sure to get stains removed.

3. Clean out the fireplace.
4. Remove any grime from walls with a dry, clean sponge.
5. Clean out the oven and microwave.
6. Clean kitchen cabinets with a grease cutter.
7. Clean windows.
8. Organize closets and vacuum their floors. Be sure any shoes are organized neatly.
9. Bathroom fixtures should be polished.
10. Clean out light fixtures.

If all this cleaning is too much for you, or if you have to move before you can get it all done, consider hiring a cleaning service that can do it for you. You'll need to tell them up front your purpose in hiring them and that you're looking for something more than just the usual dusting and vacuuming. Try to go with a service that you've used before or that a neighbor knows well. If you can't find anyone who fits the bill, check out candidates with your local Better Business Bureau.

RESTAGE AND RENEW

Now the whole house should smell good and feel open and uncluttered and fresh. Walk through its rooms once again and consider whether the furniture is arranged in the most attractive fashion possible. One common habit is to line furniture up against the walls to make the rooms feel as big as possible. Unfortunately, it can have the opposite impact, making the rooms feel cramped and overloaded with furniture. Now that you've decluttered, bring the furniture away from the walls, particularly in the living room. Twin sofas can face each other in front of a fireplace. Dining room tables should be pulled away from walls and leaves taken out.

A final step is to put into place one or two luxurious elements that will stand out to visitors. Some homes have such elements built in, such

as a stained-glass window in the front door or wainscoting in the kitchen. If you don't have a focal point, you may want to add some touches that will be memorable to visitors. Popular extras include:

1. Wine refrigerator. It can cost a few hundred dollars, but buyers often remember homes that have them, and they are in demand.
2. A new backsplash above your kitchen countertops. Tile can be cheap and liven up a kitchen that maybe hasn't been refurbished.
3. Ceiling fans in bedrooms.
4. Lighting installed around pathways outside your home. It adds warmth to your home's look at a low cost.

Once you finish all these steps, you may feel like your home is a brand-new house, one that you don't want to part with. You may fall in love all over again. If that's the case, you'll know you have done your work well, preparing your home for sale.