



Setting the stage for a home sale

By Kimberly L. Jackson/The Star-Ledger

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In the staged nook, Gagauf updates the table and seating. Wall art is replaced to help refresh the setting.

Thanks to the abundance of home makeover shows, it's no longer a strange notion to put a lot of work into a house you plan to leave.

But not every home seller can get a spot on A&E's "Sell This House" or HGTV's "Designed to Sell." Nevertheless, if you've got a house to move, it's important that it make a good impression on potential buyers — even if you don't plan to drop a grand on pre-sale improvements.

The best approach is to think of your house like a product that's competing with lots of other products in the marketplace, suggests Angela Gagauf, a Montville home stager who "repackages" residential interiors and exteriors for maximum appeal. She considers staging an important marketing tool that can create a standout property in a crowded or challenging real estate market.

"The primary goal of home staging is to make the house attractive to potential buyers so that it sells quickly and for top dollar," says Gagauf, who owns NJ Home Staging and Redesign. "What I'm doing is bringing out the best that the home has to offer."

Getting a house ready for its close-up is a big part of the pre-sale process these days, since the majority of buyers will at some point tour its rooms with the help of a computer screen, Gagauf says. "It's especially important that the pictures properly showcase the property."

When there's no real estate agent to point out the elaborate crown molding and other sweet little details, those web images can mean the difference between a real-life visit and a virtual drive-by.

Admittedly, some components of the staging process are common-sense obvious: clean up, paint, fix what's broken. A professional home stager, however, can offer a detached and objective assessment that identifies and eliminates or minimizes a home's warts. Stagers also help sellers let go.

And sellers must separate their emotions from the house that has a for-sale sign out front, Gagauf says. "That includes disconnecting themselves from their favorite French wallpaper, their red walls, their decorator accessories, their treasured family possessions."

After the cleaning, uncluttering and depersonalization are done, the real job of home staging begins, says Gagauf. "It's creating an ambience that will entice potential buyers to want to live in that house," she says. "That's the magic of home staging."

Gagauf will be discussing the magic at 7 p.m. Wednesday during a seminar at the Randolph Public Library,



A breakfast nook in a Montclair home before being staged.

28 Calais Road. She answered a few questions for us in advance of her "Successful Home Staging" seminar and offered tips for home sellers.

Q: People often think of staging a home's interior, but you stage exteriors as well. Please tell us more about that.

A: If a house looks great on the outside, chances are it will look great on the inside, too. Curb appeal is a seller's No. 1 chance to make a great first impression on a potential buyer.

When I'm working with a homeowner, we list everything that needs to be fixed. Then we review what needs to be cleaned — windows, gutters, sidewalks. We declutter the outside just as we do the inside.

We review the landscaping. A buyer has to be able to see the house, so we make sure overgrown plants and trees are cut back. Leaves are raked, weeds pulled, grass cut. Depending on the season, pots are planted with either flowers or dwarf evergreens. If there's a front porch, I'll set up a cozy seating area and use appropriate accessories.

Q: What can someone typically expect to pay to have a home staged? How is the price determined?

With the work of Angela Gagauf, below, the focus shifts to a verdant exterior view and seating that encourages relaxation.

A: There is not a "typical" price, because every home requires something different. Fees are based on the size and condition of the home and how much work the owners are willing to do themselves. However, my property analysis consultation is the same for everyone. I charge \$250 for two hours and \$85 an hour should the consultation run longer. I then prepare a proposal for the client based on the work they'd like me to complete for them. An investment in staging can cost as little as a few hundred dollars to over \$3,000 for a major job. Vacant home staging requires a furniture and accessory rental fee in addition to the staging fee.



Q: In some of the photos on your website, the "before" rooms were colorful in a tasteful way, seemed well-designed and were quite attractive overall. The "after" photos literally neutralized the decor. Walls were painted in light, neutral tones and many of the accessories were removed. Isn't there a chance that a buyer might like the owner's decorating? Does every buyer go for neutral decor, which in some cases can look pretty boring?

A: Some people may love living in a home with dark or bright-colored walls, but these colors can turn buyers off. "Living" in a home is very different from "selling" a home. When staging, I tend to neutralize strong colors for the broadest appeal. Many times, dark or bright colors bring out a room's flaws. A neutral home will appear larger and brighter. "Neutral" doesn't always mean white or beige. A neutral color can be tan, sage green, gray, a soft yellow or aqua, to name a few.

The same rule holds true for accessories. Too many can make a room seem small and cramped. Personalized accessories draw attention to the owners, not the home's features.

Q: How did you start with home staging? What is your background?

A: Actually it was a bit by accident. A couple of years ago my husband and I decided to sell our home in spite of the bad real estate market. To the surprise of our listing Realtor, our

home sold in eight days and we had multiple offers. My husband and I tend to move fairly often, and in every case, our homes sold quickly and for top dollar. Our realtor agreed that our success was tied to how I staged the homes for sale.

On her urging, I staged one of the homes she had recently listed. That home sold in three days and for \$10,000 over the asking price and they had multiple offers. That success and a couple of subsequent successful home stagings resulted in other agents contacting me.

My love and talent for interior design, home improvement and art, along with my 20 years' experience as a buyer, designer and merchandiser in the fashion industry, helped me transition successfully into the home staging and redesign industry.

Q: What is involved in becoming certified as a home stager?

A: Currently there are many staging training programs available to individuals wishing to become a home stager. I was certified as a home stager and redesigner by the Home Staging Resource which is the first and only accredited staging training provider to be approved by the Real Estate Staging Association.

This is a 21-day online program (which actually takes a lot longer to complete because there is so much information to absorb).

Some training companies require their students to attend on-site classes, some require webinar attendance and some require passing a test. Any accreditation is only as good as the recognized standards of the group or institution giving it. RESA is attempting to provide a national standard through its accreditation program.



Q: What five suggestions would you offer a seller who wants to try staging on his own?

1. Concentrate on curb appeal. Paint the front door, cut the grass, rake the leaves, trim the shrubs, invest in a new doorknob and house numbers.
2. Paint dated or dark rooms. That will quickly refresh the look of your home, and you can do this yourself.
3. Brighten your home by updating old light fixtures in the kitchen, bath and hallways. Use the highest wattage bulbs allowed in the fixtures. Nothing is more depressing than a dark home.
4. Declutter, depersonalize and organize. The dollar cost is minimal. You're planning on moving, so start packing now. You want buyers to see themselves living in the house, and you want them to feel that there's plenty of storage space.
5. Thoroughly clean the house. You can hire a professional cleaning crew or do it yourself. This includes cleaning the windows (inside and out) and the carpets.

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