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Staging Makes Houses 'Stand Apart'

Paint, landscaping or different furniture can give tired properties the fresh look they need to sell for more, faster



Suzanne Morrison, owner of Joyful Surroundings Home Staging and Design showcases the best character in a property, resulting in more offers and higher sale prices.

The phrase "home staging" is becoming commonplace in the real estate industry where consultants have emerged to switch out furniture, plant new landscaping and put up fresh paint to boost the chances of selling a house. When Suzanne Morrison of Petaluma started Joyful Surroundings Home Staging and Design in 1991, the discipline was in its infancy.

But boosted by TV programs like "Flip That House," the art of renewal for tired properties has caught on big time. "When houses look their best, they sell more quickly and for more money," Morrison said. "Houses need to stand apart."

Real estate broker Barb Schwarz, who lives in Concord, invented staging in 1972. Her philosophy of packaging of a home to be appealing to as many buyers as possible has spread and may become more common with sales slowing. Even a \$700 paint job can result in 200 percent recovery of the cost upon sale of a house, according to a study by the National Association of Remodeling.

On her Web site, Schwarz says homes that have been on the market for 4½ months have sold, on average, 7.6 days after being staged, and for prices averaging \$26,000 more than the asking price.

In staging homes, Morrison focuses on curb appeal and landscaping, cleaning and odor removal, removing clutter and personalized accessories, painting and flooring. Her marketing materials say homes staged by her company historically have sold in less than a month and for as much as 20 percent over asking price. She said "people are more familiar with how easily and cost effective it can become through HGTV," a home and garden network on cable TV.

Neutralizing homes that are painted odd colors, removing family portraits and getting rid of odors that families often don't notice because they are used to them are some of the techniques Morrison uses. "They don't smell the litter box," she said, "or the teenage boy's sneakers in the closet."

Enhancing landscape also is a quick fix that brings potential customers into the house. Rearranging furniture can help. If a house is empty or has hammered furniture, Morrison shows up with a truckload of temporary household items. She has a warehouse of furniture, artwork and decorating tools, such as candles and table linens, to help show a home at its best. Morrison takes into consideration the income levels of a home's likely buyers. For example, a \$400,000 condominium would be decorated differently than a \$1 million property.

Morrison, 47, decided to open her business after 25 years in marketing and sales. A divorce

prompted her to re-evaluate her life, and love of interior design led her to the new profession. She took some classes and became an accredited staging professional and a member of the International Association of Home Staging Professionals.

Getting that first client was her first challenge. She went on a multiple-listing service tour of Petaluma and came upon a house that had been on the market for a long time, she said. She approached the Realtor who agreed to give her a chance to clean up the property

It was the home of an elderly man whose wife had passed away. He had been feeding 35 feral cats, and the house had become his bachelor pad.

Morrison's restaging worked. Soon word of mouth spread and now she's busy all over the Bay Area, staging homes for sale and providing interior design ideas for sellers who wanted her advice on their new homes as well. She utilizes contractors to help her paint and take care of many of the details. Price varies based on the size of the property and the amount of work that needs to be done.