

When It's Time to Sell -- Will Your House Act Like a . . . Frasier or a Kramer?

Owners Seeking Rave Reviews Are Hiring Outside 'Directors' For Their Homes

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Barbara Sullivan was in a panic. She had to sell her Winfield townhouse -- and fast -- because she'd just signed a contract to purchase a condo. But she knew the townhouse in the west suburb just wasn't ready to be shown to potential buyers.

So the night before she was to list it for sale, she went into a cleaning-and-organizing frenzy, staying up literally all night to make it "perfect."

"I was very proud of it," Sullivan recalls. "I thought it looked really good."

Then her agent, Sheryl Duncan from Realty Executives in Wheaton, arrived.

"Sheryl came over and said, 'Hmmm,'" Sullivan said. "She walked around and kept saying, 'Hmmm.'"

"Then she looked at me and said, 'Why don't you just go away for awhile.'"

"I trusted her," Sullivan says of Duncan, whom she had known slightly before the listing appointment. She obediently packed a bag and went off to her vacation home, awaiting further orders.

Then the agent went to work on "staging" the townhouse. In short order, Duncan removed a chair, a stool and several of Sullivan's lamps. She hauled in some of her own furniture, accessories and rugs. She removed lots of pictures from the walls, and banished every single object from the kitchen countertops.

To make the house seem more inviting to passersby at night, she hooked up more lamps to timers. She cleaned out the refrigerator to emphasize its large capacity.

Nine days later the townhouse had a contract.

"I looked at the listing figures for my townhouse development later on," Sullivan says. "If I had known it then, I would have been a wreck, but there were about 10 other similar townhouses -- identical, really -- on the market at the same time as mine, similarly priced, and their average listing time (prior to sale) was something like 60 days."

Sullivan is convinced that the difference was the staging, a practice that is to real estate marketing what pumpkins were to Cinderella. At least, that's the idea.

To an extent, the practice has always existed in residential real estate, where sellers and agents have striven to clean up and spiff up houses to make them more attractive. But in the last few years it has taken on a name -- and a life -- of its own.

Duncan's staging of the condo was mild, compared to the miracle makeovers that occur regularly in some other regions.

In New York, for instance, the interior-design industry has turned staging into a sub-specialty, where companies with whole warehouses of furniture sweep in and refurbish a room or an entire apartment in a day, aiming to inspire buyers to think of it as a place where a Frasier might live, as opposed to a Kramer.

In Northern California, the practice seems fairly entrenched. Sellers of higher-end homes may routinely pay \$3,500 to \$5,000 and up for staging advice and for goodies that they hope will give their homes a more glam look, and thus elevate the price.

Julea Joseph, who will be relocating her Bay Area interior-arrangement business, called Casa Jambalaya, to her home town of Palos Park in mid-June, says that staging for million-dollar homes there can run to the tens of thousands, usually paid by the seller. Stagers there sometimes charge 10 percent of the listing price, she said.

"A friend had stagers come in and choose which furniture stayed. The clients removed the rest," she explained, cautioning that she was about to tell a very California-esque real estate tale.

"They worked for two days, for approximately 12 hours, for a cost of \$2,000. They even redid her small linen closet to make it look more spacious. Her asking price for the remodeled World War II-era bungalow, with four bedrooms and two baths, was \$959,000. The house was purchased for \$1.1 million."

Meanwhile, back in Chicago -- well, in staging terms, the metropolitan area seems to have adopted the waiting-to-be-convinced attitude that it traditionally reserves for the fancies of the Left and Right Coasts. It's practiced less widely here, and usually more simply.

Here, agents who "stage" homes tend to eschew the guerrilla tactics of New York and California. Instead, an agent may invest several hours in rearranging, removing or supplementing the existing furnishings -- anything from end tables to entire bedroom sets. Or he or she may hire an interior designer as a consultant to handle it, perhaps paying a few hundred dollars or less.

Some local real agents scoff that "staging" is merely a show-off name for the streamlining and cleaning up that agents always have pushed their clients to do.

But its advocates say it's a good marketing tactic, a resale spin on the way builders lavishly furnish model homes in order to appeal to "target" buyers.

"The way you live in a house and the way you sell a house are different," says Honore Frumentino, a Deerfield agent with Koenig & Strey who estimates that one-third of her listings these days get some kind of staging treatment.

"I started doing it about three years ago when the market was soft," she says. "Sometimes staging would mean moving furniture, or going out to get some accessories or bath towels. I'd bring in flowers, maybe a new area rug or a new bedspread."

These days, she often hires a designer for several hours of consultation about what stays, what goes, what gets moved. (Some agents say the homeowners, instead, pay the designers' fees.)

Usually, Frumentino says, the transformation is achieved with items that the homeowner already owns; sometimes the seller buys flowers or accessories. Designers and agents interviewed for this story said such arrangements are fairly typical of stagings in Chicago.

"My position would be to do the best I can with what they have. The agent wants me to do as much as I can in three or four hours," says Kendelle Cornette, a Lake Forest interior designer who says she averages three stagings a week. "I'm not there to sell them thousands of dollars worth of furniture.

"But if the house really needs a lot of help, I can put together a team to do the painting or change light fixtures," Cornette says.

And yes, she says, even in Lake Forest, sometimes the houses need help.

"The higher the price, the more excitement the buyer is looking for," she says. "If you're paying \$1 million for a house, it needs to have 'wow' factors. People want to be inspired. They want to walk in and say, 'This is where I want to entertain. This is where I can have Christmas dinner.'"

Not that the road to "wow" is always as simple as shoving the couch around. Skeptical homeowners may balk at suggested changes. Agents say, with a sigh, that sometimes sellers do a little when they should do a lot.

"You'd be amazed at how some people resist doing the obvious things like washing the windows or cleaning out the closets," Frumentino said.

Then there is a tact question.

"I try to be diplomatic and use as much of their own stuff as I can," says Evanston interior designer Ann Bartling, who does several stagings a year. "These are people's possessions. They love them. Even if I think they look terrible, they don't think so."

Chicago interior designer Norbert Young says that if his instincts tell him the client would be hurt by the suggestion that a piece has to go, he just finds another spot for it.

"For instance, the entrance sets the tone for the entire home. What happens with the floors and the artwork there is very important. Some artwork has a negative response with some people. In a case like

that, I'd move it to, say, an upstairs hallway, a transition point where it will be glanced at for only seconds."

Fru mentino says it's critical to convince the client to look at the home as a commodity, and that their personal tastes are secondary: "When you present it in that light, most of the time they'll be willing to take the advice."

Sometimes designers enter the picture when an agent wants an outside opinion.

"It takes the pressure off me," agrees Koenig & Strey agent Barbara Schulenburg, who often works with Cornette. "(Bringing in a designer) gives me a second set of eyes."

Recently Fru mentino brought in Laur Szkatulski, who is both a designer and a fellow agent at Koenig & Strey, to stage Liz and John Mannion's Lincolnshire home about a month after it went on the market.

Mannion breaks into a laugh as she explains that even before the house was listed, she knew that her kids' full-sized trampoline, the principal feature in her living room, would have to go. And she had carted out two pickup-truck loads of toys.

But Fru mentino was urging her to do more, and Mannion wasn't sure that the effort and cost would be necessary.

"We thought that the market was so hot that we wouldn't have to do anything," Mannion reasoned. "A house down the street had sold in days."

So Szkatulski presented them with a written list of suggestions that emphasized two areas: Move a bunch of furniture to specific spots to make the floor plan less "choppy," and repaint several walls that were in Liz Mannion's beloved pink.

The Mannions agreed, and with much effort moved major pieces to new locations. They stayed up to the wee hours with cans of white paint, though they decided to hold off on some suggested paint-over areas.

Szkatulski showed up with a few small pieces of furniture of her own and some accessories. A new wreath went on the door. They put formal place settings on the relocated dining room table.

But even the most radical makeover won't sell a house if no one comes to see it. The first weekend after the staging, only one looker had been there, reflecting a sudden quiet that Fru mentino said had descended on the North Shore market right after a wild week on the stock market. The Mannions and Fru mentino were willing to give it a few weeks before considering alternatives.

One of which is price. Agents who are unimpressed by staging efforts say that aside from doing basic tidying-up, what really matters is the money.

"I had a condo listing that was floor-to-ceiling Art Deco -- really exotic-looking," says Baird & Warner agent Pamela Ball. "I worried that the furniture was too distracting from the unit itself, and that was why it didn't sell.

"I brought in another agent, who said, 'Pam, it's the price, it's the price, it's the price.' So, we lowered it, and suddenly got multiple offers. It depends on how long you're willing to wait."

As of early last week, the Mannions were still waiting, though with some optimism. Further, one looker had been there three times, and all parties thought that an offer might be in the works.

"A lot more people have seen it," Frumentino said. "And as far as the staging goes, I think that has made the difference. The people who have seen it but weren't interested said it was because the house just didn't suit their personal needs. What we were getting before was that the house was 'chippy.' "

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