

How to Prepare Your House for Sale

Every seller wants her home to sell fast and bring top dollar, but it takes more than luck to make this happen. It involves careful planning and knowing how to professionally spruce up your home so you'll convince homebuyers to scurry for their checkbooks

Disassociate Yourself with Your Home

Letting go can be difficult. You've lived here, possibly for years, and it's your home. It's become a part of you.

But you have to make that emotional break. Tell yourself, "This is not my home. It is a house. It is a product to be sold just like a box of cereal on the grocery store shelf."

Make the mental decision to "let go" of your emotions and focus on the fact that soon this house will no longer be yours. Picture yourself handing over the keys and envelopes containing appliance warranties to the new owners.

Say goodbye to every room. Stand in each doorway and talk out loud about your memories if that's what it takes. Don't look backward—look to the future.

Now Depersonalize the Space

Pack up those personal photographs and family heirlooms. You'll have to do it eventually anyway when you move, and buyers tend to have a hard time seeing past personal effects. You don't want your potential buyers to be distracted. You want them to be able to imagine their own photos on the walls and they can't do that if yours are there.

This goes for furniture items, too, painful as that might be. Not everyone will share your taste, so if you have your bright red sofa screams, "I'm unique!" you might want to remove it for the time being. Try to stick with your more understated pieces.

Depersonalizing Includes Decluttering

People tend to collect an amazing quantity of junk.

If you haven't used a certain item in over a year, you probably don't need it. If you don't need it, why not donate it or throw it away? Do you really want to go to the trouble of packing it up and carrying it to your next home?

Remove books from bookcases and pack up those knickknacks. Clean everything off your kitchen counters. Essential items that you use daily can be tucked away in small boxes that you can place in a closet when they're not in use. Think of this process as a head start on the packing you'll eventually have to do anyway.

Rearrange Bedroom Closets and Storage Cabinets

Buyers love to snoop and yes, they will open closets and cabinet doors. Maybe they're curious or maybe they legitimately want to see how much space is inside. Think of the message it sends if items fall out!

When a buyer sees everything organized, it says that you probably take good care of the rest of the house as well. This means alphabetizing spice jars and neatly stacking dishes. It means turning the coffee cup handles so they're all facing the same way. Hang shirts together, buttoned and facing the same direction. Line up shoes.

Consider Renting a Storage Unit

Almost every home shows better with less furniture.

Remove pieces that block or hamper paths and walkways and put them in storage, along with that garish sofa that only you like.

Your bookcases are now empty so store them, too. Remove extra leaves from your dining room table to make the room appear larger. Leave just enough furniture to showcase the room's purpose with plenty of room for buyers to move around.

Remove/Replace Favorite Items

If you want to take certain window coverings, built-in appliances, or fixtures with you, now's the time to remove them. If the chandelier in the dining room once belonged to your great grandmother, take it down. If a buyer never sees it, she won't want it and they'll be no dispute later. When you tell a buyer she can't have an item, she'll covet it and this could blow your deal.

Make Minor Repairs

In some seller's markets, you can sell a home in lived-in condition without much complaint. But in normal markets or a buyer's market, repairs can make or break your sale.

Replace cracked floor or counter tiles and patch any holes in the walls. Fix leaky faucets and doors that don't close properly, as well as kitchen drawers that jam.

Consider painting your walls neutral colors, especially if they're currently hot pink or purple. Don't give buyers any reason to remember your home as "the one with the orange bathroom."

Replace burned-out light bulbs and consider replacing those that have been in service for a while as well. Avoid the potential of having them give up the ghost and blink out at an inopportune time, like when you flip the light switch to show someone the room. It's not the end of the world but it's all about psychology.

And you do want light, as much of it as possible. Throw open the curtains and blinds and turn those lightbulbs on. Houses show better when each room is bright. Which leads us to the next issue...you don't want all that illumination to reveal dust bunnies congregating in the corner or under the sofa.

Make the House Sparkle!

Cleaning your home should go beyond the usual weekly or day-to-day cleaning jobs, even if you have to hire someone to do it. It could take all day to complete this job so you might want to pay for assistance.

Wash the windows inside and out. Rent a pressure washer and spray down sidewalks and the exterior. Re-caulk tubs, showers, and sinks. Polish chrome faucets and mirrors.

Yes, you're still living there so it's not going to be absolutely spotless 24/7. But make it a habit to clean up after yourself daily—maybe more than you would normally bother with until the weekend. Vacuum daily instead of weekly. Wax floors, dust furniture, and clean ceiling fan blades and light fixtures. Bleach dingy grout and replace any worn rugs.

Pay special attention to the bathrooms and the kitchen. Hang up fresh towels. Bathroom towels look great when they're fastened with ribbon and bows. Make it a habit to keep the toilet lid closed when it's not in use.

Kitchens are a big selling point for many buyers so you'll want yours to be as spotless and uncluttered as possible. Don't forget those snoopers—make sure the interior of the fridge is clean and orderly, too.

Above all, clean and air out any musty areas. Odors are a no-no. This might also include not cooking anything particularly odorous the evening before you know the house is going to be shown...or, if you really want to be on the safe side, until you have a purchase offer in hand. Skip the cabbage for a while. And if you have pets, keep on top of those litter boxes and other potentially smelly areas.

Of course, odors work both ways. Consider making a small investment in some pleasantly scented candles.

Scrutinize Curb Appeal

A potential sale is toast if a buyer won't even get out of her agent's car because the exterior of your home turns her off. So open your front door and step outside. Look up at your abode. Does it make you want to enter? Does the house welcome you?

If not, start with the front door. Make it urge people to turn the handle and come inside. Paint it and consider adding a seasonal wreath or other minor decoration. Just make sure it's not anything too overpowering. You don't want to intimidate your buyers and create the psychological equivalent of warning them off.

The decoration should not proclaim, "Welcome to the Smith home!" unless the buyers

happen to be named Smith. Remember, you want them to envision the home as their own.

Clear the sidewalks and mow the lawn. Paint faded window trim and plant some yellow flowers if the season allows. Yellow evokes a buying emotion and marigolds are inexpensive. And it goes without saying that you'll want to shovel and salt down those walkways in winter. Trim your bushes. Make sure visitors can clearly read your house number.

The Final Step

Now go back inside and do the same thing. Linger in the doorway of each room and imagine how your house will look to a buyer. Examine how the furniture is arranged and move pieces around until you achieve visual appeal. Make sure window coverings hang level.

Tune in to the room's statement and to its emotional pull. Does it have impact and pizzazz?