

Preparing for Open Houses

Opinions about whether to hold an open house vary greatly across the country. You'll hear real estate agents flatly refuse to hold open listings because they view them as a wasted marketing effort, or they'll say open houses are just a tool to find the agent new clients.

There is some truth to those excuses, I mean reasons, but open houses also sell houses. About one in five of my listings sell at open houses. Consider also that many listing agents don't want to give up their Sunday afternoons to sit an open house and talk to strangers.

Although not all homes are candidates for an open house due to location, condition or competition in the marketplace, you won't know how much buyer traffic you will draw until you try. Exposure to potential buyers and to individuals who will talk about your home to others is almost always worthwhile.

Best Time for an Open House

- In many communities, Sunday afternoon is best.
- Two hours is typically the minimum, but some are held open four hours, for example, from 1 to 5 PM.
- Some agents do "blitzes," and trade off shifts, holding homes open from early morning until late evening.
- Schedule your open house to avoid conflicts with holidays, community celebrations or special events such as the Super Bowl.

- Check the weather forecast, too, because cold or rainy days tend to make people stay home.

At Least 7 Days Before Your First Open House

Before my sellers finish signing the listing agreement, invariably they will ask if I'm going to hold their home open that weekend. Because after the decision to sell is made, most sellers are eager to get started. However, the home needs to be in prime condition first. Here are few things I suggest doing before holding your first open house:

- Host a broker preview. Even if your home is not listed with a brokerage, if you are willing to pay a selling agent a commission, you can invite agents and brokers to preview your home. Agents can give you valuable feedback about how your home shows and whether your home pricing will meet buyer expectations.
- Move some furniture into storage. Sometimes sellers don't want to cooperate with home staging. Excuses I have heard are "my furniture is too valuable to move twice," or, "I think the rooms look lovely arranged this way." But smart sellers prepare a home for sale and move at least one piece of furniture out of every room. It makes the space look larger and more inviting to buyers -- to the people whose opinion matters.
- Remove items not included in the sale. Telling a buyer she cannot have your dishwasher because it's too expensive to leave behind or that the ceiling fan does not stay with the house because your father gave it to you serves only to make the buyer demand it. If buyers don't see it, they won't want it.
- Make arrangements for your pets to leave the house. Selling a

home where pets live is difficult enough without advertising the fact that pets live there. Call a family member or friend and ask if they could take care of your pets for a few hours. Pets are also a distraction during an open house, and you want buyers to admire your home, not your cockatoo.

- Part of your home marketing should include printing four-color flyers or brochures promoting your home. I use card stock coated in gloss. It makes them hard to fold, and they stand out among the other flyers buyers pick up. But make sure you include photographs, specs and pertinent information such as the price on your flyer because it's easy for buyers to forget particulars.

48 to 72 Hours Before Your First Open House

Clean and scour the house top to bottom. Vacuum cobwebs from corners, wipe windowsills and wash the windows, inside and out. Forget preconceived notions about cleanliness -- pay attention to small details and concentrate on making the home appear sterile.

- Buff surfaces, appliances, and floors to a gleaming shine.
- Launder and fluff bedding, towels, and rugs.
- Touch up spots on the walls.
- Sweep out the garage.
- Prune bushes, deadhead flowers, clean the sidewalks and mow the lawn.

24 Hours Before Your First Open House

Most of your work should be completed by now, and any anxiety that is sometimes caused by last-minute chores should dissipate. At this point, your home sparkles and glitters. In fact, you may be thinking to yourself that the house looks too nice to sell! Consider if you are truly committed to selling, because if you're going to experience seller's remorse, you may as well work through that process before your first open.

- Open all the windows to air out the house.
- Bake or pick-up treats for your open house guests.
- Give every room the "once over," by standing in the doorways and scrutinizing the view.
- Set out cards that house hunters can fill out to give you buyer feedback.
- Arrange flowers in attractive vases and place in appropriate places throughout your home to add color and floral fragrance.