

# Buying the First Impression

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## Sellers Turn to Home Staging to Attract More Buyers, Add Thousands to Sale Price

By Kevin McCallum



There's an art to preparing a home for sale, and more and more sellers and their agents are turning to professional home stagers to help them transform mundane listings into masterpieces.

"Few agents are effective stagers," said Mark Spaulding, an agent with Prudential California Realty in Santa Rosa. "Many agents think they are, but few are."

Many real estate agents have taken classes on how to best stage a home, which involves decorating and preparing homes to make them attractive to the largest number of potential buyers.

As home prices have soared in recent years, however, more and more agents are subcontracting out the work to professional stagers. Fees range from a few hundred dollars to several thousand, depending on the scope of the staging, the amount of furniture rented and the number of days the home remains on the market.

Spaulding said a professional home stager is worth the investment, often adding tens of thousands of dollars to the sale price of a home.

He recently used a local stager to help a client spruce up a vacant four-bedroom, three-bath home in Windsor listed in a very competitive price range.

"If he sold it in the condition it was in when he left the home, we think he probably would have gotten \$679,000, \$689,000 maybe," Spaulding said of the client. "Instead, it sold in two days for \$759,000."

Not all of that is attributable to the staging. The homeowner also repainted, added new gutters and made other cosmetic upgrades to the home. But the staging played an important role.

"It definitely had the 'Wow' factor. They walked in the door and they said 'Wow,'" Spaulding said.

The increasing number of real estate agents turning to staging is tied to the dramatic price increase Sonoma County has seen in the past several years, Spaulding said. The median home price more than doubled between 2000, when it was \$300,000, and this year, when the median

passed \$600,000.

A typical \$4,000 investment in staging a home might not pencil out for someone with \$50,000 in equity accumulated in a home, but when someone has \$200,000 or more in equity, it starts to look like a better investment, he said.

Now that the market is slowing somewhat, staging can help sellers distinguish their home from similar ones on the market, Spaulding said.

The types of staging services vary widely based on budgets and whether the home is vacant or occupied, according to Mona Reeder, president of the Sonoma County chapter of the International Association of Home Staging Professionals.

“The whole idea of staging is to help people realize that this is a great house, and you can't do that with something that's austere and devoid of life,” Reeder said.

In vacant homes, the goal is to make the house look lived in, but not cluttered or filled with furniture or decorations that will distract potential buyers from the home itself, said Reeder, owner of Amazing Staging and Redesign.

It's the same concept behind a developer furnishing a model home, which Reeder said she also does. The goal is to decorate the home in a way that will help buyers be able to envision themselves living there, she said.

To accomplish this, Reeder and most stagers own an inventory of furniture and decorations that they draw from to stage a home. An average cost to fully stage a vacant home with her own furniture and decorations would be about \$2,500 a month, Reeder said, more if it stayed on the market longer.

A consultation for a seller, including a written report of her recommendations, runs about \$300, Reeder said.

In many ways, vacant homes are easier to stage than occupied ones because the current owner is not involved.

Paula Thomas, of Premiere Staging, said one of a stager's biggest challenges is to effectively integrate the seller's furnishings with her own inventory. Urging the client to remove clutter and personal items is common, she said.

In a recent staging of a man's condominium in east Santa Rosa, for example, the first thing she did was to tell him to move some of his possessions into the garage to create a feeling of space in the unit.

In addition, Thomas counseled him to remove collectibles and family photos and unique art work. Such items can be counterproductive because they remind a buyer of the person who lives there now, which can be a distraction, she said.

“You don't want the buyers to see another family in the home,” Thomas said. “You have to have

them envision their own family in the home."

She then added tasteful accents with lamps, pillows and throws to the man's existing furniture, angling it or moving it to different locations when necessary. To overcome a narrow entrance, Thomas said, she displayed some artwork on a back wall that drew people into the home instead of lingering in the tight entry.

She also used colors that helped draw buyers' eyes away from some problem areas and toward the home's strengths, she said.

Thomas, a former CPA, said she enjoys the work because it allows her to use her creative side, as well as to roll up her sleeves and get dirty. In the condominium sale, she fixed a fence and buried some irrigation lines to give the entry a more appealing first impression, she said.

Spaulding said he has recently received his certification to be a home stager but still prefers to hire professionals. He pays for his sellers to have an initial consultation by a home stager, and about 90 percent of them decide to hire them, he said.

"When you have an accredited stager, then they are at the top of their game," he said. "They are just better at it than I am."