

Home Staging
FOR
DUMMIES®

by Christine Rae and Jan Saunders Maresh



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Home Staging For Dummies®

Published by
Wiley Publishing, Inc.
111 River St.
Hoboken, NJ 07030-5774
www.wiley.com

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Published by Wiley Publishing, Inc., Indianapolis, Indiana

Published simultaneously in Canada

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2008924958

ISBN: 978-0-470-26028-9

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



About the Authors

Christine Rae is an internationally recognized trainer in the home staging industry. She has been providing ground-breaking staging programs since 2001, after a 32-year career in executive business management. In August of 2005, she developed and launched her innovative certification program throughout North America (Canadian Certified Staging Professionals and Certified Staging Professionals). Through that program, she has personally instructed over 2,600 entrepreneurs on how to start and grow a successful home staging business.

Christine has received many industry awards; among the most recent is the 2007 Real Estate Staging Association Staging Innovator of the Year. Christine has coauthored the *Home Staging Business Guide* e-book and countless articles in industry trade publications, like Canada's *Real Estate Magazine*. She is editor and contributing writer for the staging industry trade magazine *Staging Standard*. She has acted as subject matter expert for CE Network, an online staging program for real estate agents, and an assortment of other real estate one-day programs. She is a platform speaker with thousands of hours dedicated to the staging industry. For information about her staging background go to www.christinerae.com.

Christine's other credentials include Interior Redesign Industry Specialist, Canadian Vice President of Real Estate Staging Association, Affiliate Member of Women's Council of Realtors and Interior Design Society, Certified Dewey Color Instructor, Certified Home Marketing Specialist, Certified in Management, and Professional Manager.

When not traveling the world teaching, Christine lives in Canada's Niagara Region. She shares her life with "the Dutch Accountant" Ary, has a son, Lee, a grandson, Lucas, and an adorable Yorkshire woofie named Timmy.

Jan Saunders Maresh is a nationally known journalist and television personality specializing in sewing and home decor. Home sellers and real estate agents bank on her training as a Certified Staging Professional, Certified One-Day Decorator, and a Certified Dewey Color Instructor and her more than 25 years of design experience. Jan is also the bestselling author of 15 books, including *Sewing For Dummies*, Second Edition (Wiley, 2004).

In 2005, Saunders Maresh founded Naked Room Solutions, a home staging and interior redesign company. She speaks for Realtors and teaches home decorating, staging, and color classes at national industry events, paint and fabric stores, and home furnishing and design centers.

Authors' Acknowledgments

Even though our names are on the cover, it took an army of people to help bring this book alive. We are two cogs in a great big wheel. We couldn't have written this without Wiley Publishing and the incredible Dummies team. Thank you Mike Baker for working our book into the publishing schedule so it hits the market at the right time and for your continuing guidance and support in making sure this project is a success.

Thank you to Traci Cumbay for your patience, courtesy, and understanding, and for making us look brilliant, clever, and funny. You offered continuous encouragement throughout the writing process, and we both really appreciated your help and guidance through the rough patches and those killer deadlines.

Thank you to all the folks at the Certified Staging Professionals organization. The staff is passionate, supportive, and so proud. We couldn't have made this book happen without the special help from Angela Brooks, JoAnne O'Donnell, Lynelle Hartman, Leigh Hagen, Nairn Friemann, Gina McNew, and the many CSP graduates who shared freely their photographs so we could bring you great examples of what we speak about.

Personal thanks go to the family of Angela Brooks, who had to do without her for so many nights while she edited, researched, and secured photographs for this book. And to Angela: Thanks for supporting and believing in us.

Finally, thank you to all the people who buy and read this book; we appreciate and are very grateful you did. Both Christine and Jan are personally donating 10 percent of any proceeds made to the CSP Pay It Forward campaign for Habitat for Humanity; we are sure they appreciate you, too.

From Christine: Thanks to Jan for her amazing spirit and knowledge of book-writing, for her knack of knowing what the editors were looking for, and for sharing this opportunity.

Thanks also to Ary, who always believes in me, and supports and encourages me while watching the pennies and doing without me in many ways.

From Jan: Thanks to Christine for her willingness to share her incredible knowledge and experience of staging with me, my fellow CSPs, and now the Dummies' readers. Your commitment to excellence, innovative ideas, and raising the bar in the staging industry will outlive us all.

And thanks to my husband, Ted, for your patience, understanding, support, and tolerance of the crazy deadlines. Thanks, too, to our son, Todd Moser, for being so understanding about what I do. I promise I won't rent out our living-room furniture over your winter break again.

A great big thanks to my business partner and fellow CSP, Char Curry, who kept our business growing and running smoothly by managing all of our projects during the writing of this book.

Publisher's Acknowledgments

We're proud of this book; please send us your comments through our Dummies online registration form located at www.dummies.com/register/.

Some of the people who helped bring this book to market include the following:

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Introduction

A complete and proper home staging takes an occupied house from *okay* to *wow*, and it elevates a vacant property from cold and empty to warm and welcoming. It gives home sellers an opportunity to secure more equity and to sell their properties faster.

If you have a house that's just sitting on the market drawing no offers, or if you're getting ready to list a property for sale — as a real estate professional or as a homeowner — staging the property gives you a marketing edge. Your staged property stands out from the competition in the neighborhood and from the unstaged houses in your price range — and did we mention that staged properties sell faster?

In a soft market and with foreclosures on the rise, home sales are slowing all over North America, so staging your property has gone from a nice thing to do to a necessity.

About This Book

Whether you're interested in home staging for personal or professional reasons, you can get what you need from this book. The basic truth is that staged properties sell faster than those that are unstaged. And a staged vacant house sells faster than an empty property. In a hot market, a property that has been staged sells for more money, and in a slow market, staged properties sell faster than those that aren't. So why isn't everyone staging their properties? We'd like to know.

We wrote this book to show you how to prepare a house for sale so it sells faster and secures more equity. We know that reading this book and doing what we suggest gets you closer to a sale, so we've done our professional best to share what we know about preparing a property for sale so it can be as trouble-free an experience as possible. Yes, it's a lot of work, but it's well worth doing.

Conventions Used in This Book

To assist your navigation of this book, we've established the following conventions:

- ✓ We use *italic* for emphasis and to highlight new words or terms that we define.
- ✓ We use `monofont` for Web addresses.
- ✓ Sidebars, which are shaded boxes of text, consist of information that's interesting but not necessarily critical to your understanding of the topic.

Foolish Assumptions

As we wrote this book, we made some assumptions about you and your needs. We assume that you might be

- ✓ A homeowner getting ready to list a house with a real estate professional and wanting to know what to do to get top dollar
- ✓ A real estate professional or property stager who wants to use this book to help clients ready their houses before you list or showcase them
- ✓ A real estate professional who wants to know more about the ins and outs of staging to gain a marketing edge
- ✓ A homeowner looking for information that will sell her already-listed house faster
- ✓ Interested in finding out more about staging as a career
- ✓ Rehabbing or flipping properties and interested in how staging helps properties sell faster
- ✓ A builder who wants to know how best to sell a vacant new property

If any of these sound like you, you've come to the right book!

How This Book Is Organized

Unless you've been through a recent move, you may not know how the market has changed and what the home seller and real estate professional do to ready a property for sale. But you're in luck because you have this book.

The following sections give you a rundown of where you can find what, so you can use this guide to your best advantage.

Part I: Preparing Your Property for Sale

In this part, we tell you what buyers are looking for in a new property and help you identify what you're selling, so you can go into the selling process with your eyes wide open. We give you some of the basic principles of staging and show you how to start putting those principles into action, starting with color, light, and furniture placement.

Part II: Three Staging Steps Toward Hitting a Home Run

Property staging is *not* decorating! Our three-step staging process helps you look at your property through the eyes of the buyer — warts and all — and then tells you what to do to get your property sold. In this part, you find out what to expect from a staging consultation, the kinds of things you're going to need to do to get your property in shape, and how to show off your work through photographs and to real estate agents.

Part III: Working Through Your House, Room by Room

What you do in a bedroom isn't necessarily what you do in a dining room — staging-wise or otherwise. In this part, we give you the goods you need to get each room into showing shape by taking into account its purpose, its architectural features, and the things buyers are going to want from it. We take you through the front door and out the back with stops at every room (and closet) along the way.

Part IV: Addressing Special Staging Considerations

Sensitive issues can get between you and a sale. In this part we tell you how to deal with your mother-in-law's teacup collection, your affinity for sports paraphernalia, or your kid's pets. We give you the ins and outs of staging when you're flipping or rehabbing a property.

You find in this part an introduction to the Feng Shui practices that can help direct energy (and buyers) through your house, and we wrap things up by giving you eco-friendly staging ideas.

Part V: The Part of Tens

In this part, we share ways to avoid common mistakes home sellers and real estate professionals make when it comes to staging properties. We run you through reasons to bring in a professional stager and show you our favorite staging products, tools, and ways to get your house (and yourself) ready for the sale.

Icons Used in This Book

Throughout this book, we guide you toward important points by using the following icons:



Next to this icon, you find information that you should keep in the back of your mind as you prepare your house for sale. These points are key to efficient property staging.



This icon highlights information, techniques, or products that professional stagers use to get a space ready for the sale.



Anything that saves you time, energy, or money gets special treatment with this icon.



The home selling process is stressful enough without putting yourself, your home, or your sale in danger. The information you find next to this icon can help you avoid frustration.

Where to Go from Here

Most *For Dummies* books are set up so that you can flip to the section of the book that meets your present needs. You can do that in this book, too. We tell you where to find the information you may need when we refer to a concept, and we define terms as they arise to enable you to feel at home no matter where you open the book.

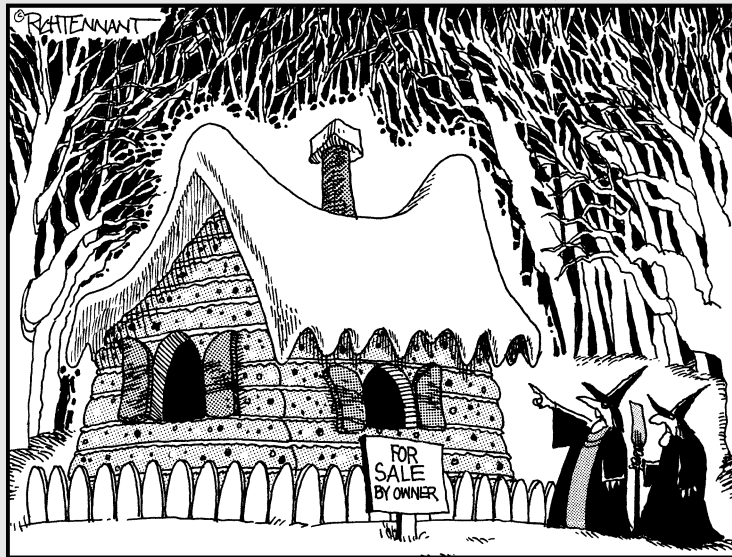
Does your living room need special attention? Head straight for Chapter 12. Want to find out what you can expect from a consultation with a professional stager? Chapter 6 has what you need. If you're an overachiever or want to ensure that you find out everything you need to know to get your house in tip-top shape before you put it on the market — well, then turn the page and keep on reading until you hit the index.

Part I

Preparing Your Property for Sale

The 5th Wave

By Rich Tennant



"Most of the gingerbread is still in good shape and I had the roof re-frosted just last year."

In this part . . .

Putting your house on the market is kind of like dating. You don't show up for a first date in your comfy sweats with the salsa stains down the front. You want to smell good, look good, and make a good enough first impression that you score a second date. Before the first potential buyer comes through your door, you want to get your property into first-date shape. This part of the book shows you how to take a long, hard look at your house as a product you're selling. Consider these chapters a reality check for anyone getting ready to put a house on the market.

Chapter 1

Matchmaker, Matchmaker, Make Me an Offer

In This Chapter

- ▶ Coming to grips with selling your house
 - ▶ Looking at your house with fresh eyes
 - ▶ Harnessing the power of staging
 - ▶ Running down reasons to stage
 - ▶ Discovering staging's three steps
 - ▶ Finding ways to stage with minimal stress
-

Moving is stressful. And we have more good news for you: Securing the highest return on the sale of your house is a lot of work — exhausting, emotional, and often back-breaking work. And even when the house is priced right and in a great location, you have competition for buyers.

You can become blind to the wear and tear and the flaws of your house that jump out to a prospective buyer. The objective eye of a professional stager can make all the difference. A local, trained stager knows what's right for your market and can uncover areas that need attention to earn you the most equity from the sale of your house. You can emulate that process yourself by following the tips we give you throughout this book. The important thing is that you do it — getting the most money from your house depends on it.

So whether you're a do-it-yourselfer or want to call in the pros, we set the stage for the rest of the book by acquainting you with the staging process and why staging can secure the most equity from your home. And we hope that what we share here takes some of that stress out of moving.

Turning Your Home Back into a House

Home staging (*house doctoring* in British English) is the process of preparing a private residence before listing it in the real estate marketplace. This process includes

- ✓ Cleaning
- ✓ De-cluttering
- ✓ Repairing
- ✓ Showcasing to show off the property's best selling features or minimizing its least desirable features

A *professional stager* has been trained to look at a property and suggest improvements that will help it appeal to the highest number of buyers. A professional stager knows how to look at a property and recommend changes that lead to a sale. They know how to position furniture, artwork, and accessories to sell the room and minimize its flaws. A professional stager can recommend color schemes, suggest vendors for repairs and other projects, and for vacant properties, source rental furniture, artwork, and accessories to create a feeling in the house that buyers can see themselves moving into. For information about hiring a professional stager, see Chapter 6.

If you watch Home and Garden Television (HGTV) you've probably seen shows on home selling and staging properties. Property staging has been around for more than 20 years but more recently has become a serious marketing tool for selling houses. Why? Because it works! As professional stagers, we believe staging requires a trained eye, elbow grease, psychology, marketing, and a generous dose of staging training thrown in.



Staging a house means taking the time and investing the money up front to prepare your house for sale.

We outline clear steps for staging your house, but you have to do the work, and one of the toughest parts of that work is the emotional challenge of letting go — while you're still living in the house that you're selling. Over and over we talk to sellers who really haven't faced the inevitable; they know one day they'll have to pack everything and move — *one day* — just not now.

The memories you made in a house connect you to it, but those memories also can be roadblocks to successfully marketing your house if you wait until late in the process to uncover them. Severing any emotional ties early saves

you equity later by freeing you to make the changes you need to make to sell the house (like saying goodbye to the orange shag carpet you had installed when the kids were little). When you depersonalize and pack away the memories, you make the house less “your home” and more a commodity.



The sooner you face the music, the better you’ll be able to move forward with your selling plans. Do yourself a favor: After you make the decision to sell, walk through the house and revisit your memories, room by room. As you do this, take photos so you can make an album of how things were.

Feeling better now? Great. Now start packing away those memories to make room for that perfect buyer who will pay top dollar for your house.

Seeing the Property Through the Buyer’s Eyes

Trying to see what a buyer sees in your house can be tough, but getting that glimpse is extremely important for preparing your house for sale. Remove your rose-colored glasses and take an honest-to-goodness look at your property, warts and all.

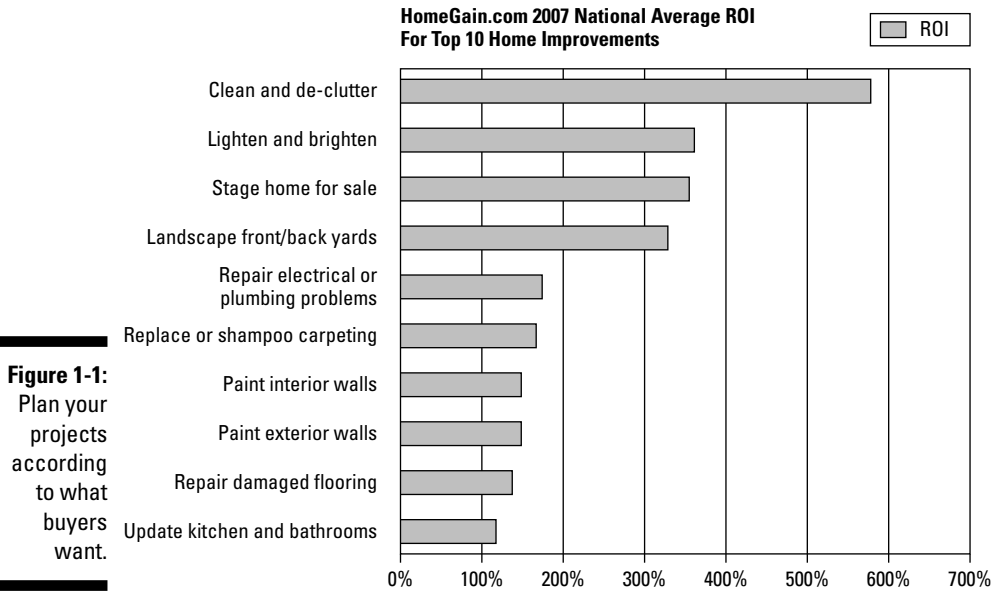


Starting at the street, take an unbiased tour of the house, noting where your eyes are drawn. What is it that you notice first? Write down all the things you see that might turn off a buyer, from outdated carpet to leaky faucets, cracked sidewalk to cracked ceiling, risqué artwork to religious symbols. Paying attention to even the smallest detail might earn you equity later.

As you tour the house, take pictures or jot down some notes of the areas that need attention. Based on what you want to invest in getting your home ready for sale, the notes and photos will help you prioritize your to-do list later on. Chapter 2 tells you more about prioritizing your repairs.



The goal of staging is to sell a house in the shortest time for the most money by attracting the highest number of potential buyers. A 2007 HomeGain.com survey of 2,000 real estate professionals nationwide found home staging can average 340% on the return of investment. Figure 1-1 shows you the results, and that expending your energy in some areas pays off more than it does in others.



When prospective buyers review your property you want them to put their full attention on how the property *feels* and what it will be like to live there. Through our research, we know that most buyers take between three to six minutes to tour your home. *Three to six minutes* to decide whether this is the place they want to spend the next part of their lives. You can't waste a moment.



TIP

Minimize and remove any and all distractions that throw off the buyer from taking a closer look at your property. What are these distractions? Usually the day-to-day items, like a collection of teapots, spoons, china, and so on. Any collection may pull the buyers eye and waste some of those precious minutes, whether it's a fabulous art collection, designer clothes, CDs, or gothic posters in the kids' rooms — anything that derails the focus of the buyer from your house to your belongings. As harsh and premature as this may seem, do yourself a favor and pack away those personal items. Chapter 7 tells you more about depersonalizing your house.



STAGING SECRET

Buyers talk of falling in love with a house; however, it's not the house they actually fall in love with but the concept of living in the house. The key to successfully staging your house is starting a romance with the lifestyle your house represents. You find out more about igniting the flames of house passion in Chapter 2; Chapter 8 tells you about showcasing to sell a lifestyle.

Staging your house gives you a competitive leg up when you enter the market. Professionally staged houses look better than nonstaged houses in the same price range. And when real estate professionals know your house is staged, they have confidence that the property will show well, and they therefore bring more buyers to look at it. So staging a house for sale is like being very well-prepared when you go to a job interview — you have everything working for you.

Recognizing What Staging Is and Is Not (Hint: It's Not Decorating)

One big misconception professional stagers overcome time and time again is that staging the property means overdecorating or something akin to set design for a magazine shoot. Nope. Decorating appeals to the person living in the house; staging is removing the owner's personal connection and targeting the buyer who will purchase your house. To help you better understand the differences, Table 1-1 compares decorating and staging.

Table 1-1 Staging versus Decorating	
<i>Decorating</i>	<i>Staging</i>
Creates an environment according to the homeowner's taste	Creates an environment that appeals to the future buyer
Is an interpretation of personal style	Applies a universal style
Occurs with the luxury of time	Takes place under tight deadlines
Generally involves a larger budget	Necessarily works with tight budgets
Is an optional expense	Is a necessity for securing the most equity in the sale of your house

The upcoming sections tell you more about the important differences among the professionals who work to make your house look good for very different audiences.

Running down interior designers' responsibilities

Interior designers have four-year degrees and can manipulate the architecture of a room or structure. They know which walls are weight-bearing and which walls can be opened up without the roof caving in.

You might hire an interior designer for a project large or small. They generally do whole projects like a house remodel or new build and take care of every detail — blueprints, design, materials, fabrics, flooring, and so on. Interior designers also manage the contractors and eliminate as many headaches as possible for the homeowner to make sure the project runs smoothly and comes in on time and within budget. But every interior designer works differently, so check in with several if you're considering a project of any size.

An interior designer can also become a member of the American Society of Interior Designers (www.asid.org) with a qualifying associate or bachelor degree, a minimum of 3,520 hours of interior design experience, and by taking a test given by the National Council for Interior Design Qualification (www.ncidq.org). If the designer is a member, you see ASID behind his name.

Defining an interior decorator's job

Interior decorators don't need a college degree but may have attained an associate's degree or a certificate in decorating. These professionals may have taken an online decorating class, a course by mail, or trained at a local interior decorating school or hands-on workshop. Interior decorators can become certified by taking a certification test given by Certified Interior Decorators International (www.cidinternational.org). If they have passed the test, you see CID after their name.

Interior designers work with the structure and architecture, and interior decorators focus more on selecting interior furnishings. Their primary focus is creating an environment for the clients that suits how they live.

Decorators take a look at the room layout and then suggest furnishings and furniture placement. They also suggest accessories, art, wallpaper, paint color, light fixtures, and flooring and other hard surfaces. Decorators work

with a list of preferred vendors but aren't qualified to touch the structural integrity of the house.



Peering into the staging profession

Staging focuses on improving a property by transforming it into a welcoming, appealing, and attractive product for sale.

Staging often raises the value of a property by reducing the home's flaws, depersonalizing, de-cluttering, cleaning, and making it look its best with furniture placement, lighting, color, and much more. For vacant homes, stagers use rental furniture to create a living space that buyers can see themselves in. Properly executed staging leads the eye to attractive features and minimizes (not hides) the property's flaws. A professional stager is trained to help you and real estate professionals navigate this process.

Like a lot of newer industries, staging offers a wide range of training opportunities, which means that all stagers are not trained equally. A lot of folks call what they do staging but have been in the decorating field and haven't had any formal staging training. The staging industry is changing dramatically, and the opportunities for learning have grown exponentially. Some stagers may not have kept their education current, so do check. Some stagers may learn their trade from online or telephone classes, some take a combined training course for decorating and staging, and others learn at intense 30-hour hands-on courses with rigorous testing, certification, and continuous education opportunities.

Staging to make every moment count

More people come through your house during the first five to ten days it's on the market than at any other period. You know the power of first impressions. Why risk even one dollar of your equity by not making absolutely sure that your house is in tip-top shape and that it will survive the scrutiny of even the pickiest of potential buyers?



Timing is everything. Stage your house before you list it so that you don't risk making a less-than-favorable first impression with a single potential buyer.

Staging stats every seller should know

Still not convinced that staging your house is the way to get it sold? Don't take our word for it, see what independent sources say:

- ✔ From a survey conducted by the real estate marketing firm HomeGain, 2,000 real estate agents deduced that home staging provides a 340 percent return on investment.
- ✔ In an April 2006 AOL Money and Finance poll of over 15,000 people, 87 percent said that home presentation makes the difference in most sales.
- ✔ 86 percent of buyers surveyed said that storage is important. Effective staging maximizes space and spaciousness.
- ✔ The top three interior selling features are freshly painted walls, organized storage space, and current flooring. Effective staging addresses all three.
- ✔ 52 percent of buyers said the kitchen had the most significant impact on their purchasing decision.

From the 2005–2006 Maritz Research Poll:

- ✔ 58 percent of buyers made a decision to buy after seeing ten properties. Effective staging keeps your house on the list of must-see properties.
- ✔ 79 percent of buyers indicated that they would be willing to pay a premium for a home with an updated kitchen.
- ✔ 41 percent of men and 30 percent of women were more likely to place a premium on updated décor.

- ✔ 79 percent of sellers are willing to invest up to \$5,000 to get their houses ready for sale if they knew how to spend it.

We suggest the average home seller consider an investment of 1 to 3 percent of the listing price to get the house ready for sale. Working with the right staging professional maximizes your return on investment and keeps you on budget.

- ✔ 63 percent of buyers will pay more money for a house that is move-in ready.

From a Proctor and Gamble survey

- ✔ Location and size make up 78 percent of the decision to view a property. But those elements are outside the seller's control.
- ✔ Elements that create 72 percent of the first impression *inside* the home are within the control of the seller — everything the buyer can see, hear, touch, and smell. Well-trained staging consultants know how to show these to their best advantage.

Another daunting house-selling fact is that the longer a property is on the market, the more likely it is to be marked down. At no point does the price go up when a house is sitting on the market, and the reality is that the price usually drops and drops further as time goes by.



You have to spend money to stage your house, but chances are that you'll spend much less to stage it than you would otherwise lose in price reductions if your house isn't at its buyer-alluring best.

Flying solo or calling on the pros?

Staging is a sophisticated approach to preparing your house for sale. Merely packing away extra items and cleaning your house just isn't good enough anymore for getting the most money out of your house. And when you're dealing with your equity, you're talking big dollars. So why risk it? We know stories of huge equity gains. While we were writing this book late in 2007, a Certified Staging Professional told us about a house she recently staged: It went on the market for \$1.2 million and in just five days sold for \$345,000 over the list price!

Statistics like that are wonderful to see, but you may be thinking, "That won't happen to me!" If you don't stage your property you'll never know.

As a homeowner you can save money by completing the homework part of the staging process — the packing and cleaning and minor repairs — yourself. But when it comes to the final showcase and styling part of staging the property, we recommend you leave it to the pros. An educated, well-skilled staging professional knows how to style a room to address what the buyer needs to see, how to highlight the best features of your house, and how to minimize its less desirable attributes. Stagers also know how to maximize space by using correct placement of color, lighting, and art to harmonize a living space so the buyer connects on every level and makes an offer.

The information in this book helps do-it-yourselfers and provides the know-how but not the experience that a professional stager can offer.

Why Real Estate Pros Embrace Staging (And You Should, Too)

Real estate agents the world over are having an *aha* moment about the staging process, scratching their heads, and wondering why this process (which they think they've been promoting for so long) is suddenly being sought out by their sellers and promoted on TV and in the press as much as it is. For decades, savvy agents have been helping their clients pack away some of their personal items and extra furniture and advising them to clean and dust thoroughly.

But now a more sophisticated approach to preparing the rooms is in the air. Packing away extra items and cleaning the house is no longer good enough.

Looking into staging's benefits for sellers

The number one benefit of staging for any seller is maximizing the equity gain from the sale of the property. When a house has been fully and properly readied for sale, agents are more impressed, are able to support a higher list price, and know that the house will spend fewer days on the market. They're also proud to show the house, making it much easier for the agent to get other agents to bring prospective buyers to see your property. Here are some of the benefits that make these points true:

- ✔ Staged properties attract more potential buyers. When a house looks great and shows really well, agents can initiate aggressive marketing strategies, maximizing the number of potential buyers who look at your property. More often than not, the house sells faster and for more money than it would if it hadn't been staged.
- ✔ Sellers experience less stress after the house sells. Rather than waiting for an offer and then packing up and moving all at once, homeowners who stage their properties do a lot of their packing before the house even hits the market.
- ✔ All the sorting, organizing, and purging you've promised yourself you do for years actually gets done. Meeting that milestone definitely qualifies as a feel-good moment and enables you to move to your new house with a clean slate.
- ✔ A faster sale equals less stress. When your house sells fast, you have fewer open houses to prepare for, fewer intrusions, and a shorter amount of time you actually have to keep the house show-ready.

Finding benefits for buyers



Today's buyer wants to close the sale on Friday, move in on Saturday, meet the neighbors on Sunday, and have the kids in school and be back at work on Monday.

Buyers realize the following benefits when they view a staged home:

- ✔ They can more easily see what they're buying rather than wading through existing family and personal belongings.
- ✔ Buyers can fall in love with the house because they see that it has room for the family members and their things.
- ✔ A professionally staged property shows buyers how their furniture will fit in the house to maximize the space.

- ✔ Buyers have peace of mind knowing that all the repairs and updating are done.
- ✔ Buyers don't need to invest more money into a property that has been staged, because the repairs and updates have been completed.
- ✔ Buyers can move in and settle back into the regular routine more easily because they don't have to deal with the usual challenges moving requires, like painting, repairs, and updating.

Highlighting benefits for real estate professionals

Staging offers definite benefits for real estate professionals. Here are our favorites:

- ✔ A seller who has invested time to ready her property for sale is also someone who is more likely to appreciate the work an agent does on her behalf.
- ✔ Working with a professional stager provides an objective third-party opinion. A real estate agent is in a difficult situation; she wants your listing but also needs you to help get the house sold by bringing it up to optimum viewing condition. Telling you what needs to be done may be difficult while balancing the relationship. Professional stagers look at properties objectively and can address any questions, concerns, or objections from the agent.
- ✔ Staged properties look better on the Internet and in print. Photographs for the flyers or feature pages and for the Multiple Listing Service (MLS) look much better after the staging process.
- ✔ Staged properties help grow the agent's business. Both satisfied buyers and sellers more frequently refer the agent who has staged listings. Staging tells buyers and sellers that this agent markets their listings well.
- ✔ Staged properties show better. Other agents are pleased to show the listing, bringing more potential buyers for the property.

Setting the Stage: Three Steps to Sold

Staging your house is a three-step process that starts when a stager evaluates your house and ends when the house is at its "buy me" best. The following

sections show you what you can expect when you work with a staging professional.

Step one: The consultation

The staging process starts with a face-to-face consultation with a staging professional. A consultation establishes a working plan, sets up deadlines and timelines, helps you settle on a budget, and determines who will complete which part of the plan. A full-service consultation is very comprehensive, covering everything the consultant really believes will make or break the sale of property — not just the things that fit into your budget.

Stagers tour your home and then produce a report with their recommendations. They later sit down with you to go over their findings and make their top recommendations. Chapter 6 gives you a full rundown of the staging consultation.

Step two: Work, work, work

This step is where the “anxious to save money” sellers maximize their savings by doing the work themselves. If you’re a do-it-yourselfer, you may actually enjoy this part of the process.

The work of staging obviously varies from house to house. It can be simple — packing up some items and rearranging furniture — to the more intense work of painting and refurbishing. With your stager, determine your window of value, time, budget, and inclination and then decide which of the recommendations fit into your budget and maximize your return on investment.



Some areas of the property and rooms in the house are more important than others. Here’s a list of important areas ranked from most to least important for getting buyers through the door:

- ✓ Curb appeal (see Chapter 10)
- ✓ Kitchen (see Chapter 14)
- ✓ Bathrooms (see Chapter 14)
- ✓ Entry (see Chapter 11)
- ✓ Living room (see Chapter 12)
- ✓ Dining room (see Chapter 13)

- ✓ Closets (see Chapter 17)
- ✓ Master bedroom (see Chapter 15)
- ✓ Other bedrooms (see Chapter 15)
- ✓ Office (see Chapter 16)
- ✓ Garage (see Chapter 17)
- ✓ Attic (see Chapter 17)
- ✓ Basement (see Chapter 17)

Chapter 7 tells you what you need to know about getting through step two most efficiently and effectively.

Step three: Showcasing your work

Showcasing is usually the step that most folks know as staging. *Showcasing* is when professional stagers create the magic that gets the buyer to stop a moment and imagine living in the space. Anyone bringing a property to market without completing this step is totally missing the boat, because it's the part that most helps the buyer connect emotionally to your house and to make the offer you're looking for.

Showcasing is where the skill level of the person you're working with really shows. The styling of every room should capture the interest of the buyer. That's why it's important to correctly place items to engage the buyer in the life they will have when they buy your property. For example, in a kitchen you might place a bowl of popcorn or a tray with sparkling water and drinking glasses on the counter. In a bathroom you might include a basket filled with rolled up towels.



Many people who plan a move buy new items — towels and bedding in particular — and then bring those items to their new house. Use fresh, new things to help showcase your house knowing you can keep on using them after you move.

We tell you more about showcasing in Chapter 8.

Making Staging Happen with Minimal Stress

If there is anything that brings a person down, it's being overwhelmed with the amount of work to be accomplished. Sometimes clients ask us, "Do I have

to do *all* of these jobs that you recommend?” We then sweetly reply, “Oh no; of course not. You just need to discuss with your agent how much you want to reduce the listing price.”

When you’re in the middle of cleaning out a cupboard or taking yet another load of stuff to the Goodwill store, just think of this work as making a deposit into your new house fund, because that’s just what you’re doing. The more effort you put into getting your house ready to sell, the more equity you’re depositing into your new house.



Whether you work alone or with a professional, an organized plan of action is essential to completing everything on time before your property is photographed and listed.

Taking a room-by-room approach

Working on one room at a time breaks up the job into bite-size pieces so it’s easier to plan your work and work your plan. Any roadblock you put up for completing all the recommendations is the very roadblock that will keep you living in your current house. The room-by-room approach is the best way we’ve found to make sure you accomplish all that’s necessary to ready your house for sale.

Part III of this book runs you through the projects you may need to accomplish for each room of your house.

Reaching simple rewards



After you make the commitment to doing the work, make it worth your time and effort by giving yourself a goal. It could be as simple as packing five boxes after work or just going through a drawer in the kitchen. When the task is complete, give yourself permission to watch your favorite TV show or read a little more of that novel you’ve been working on.

Packing early and attending to the details of the move ahead of time speeds up the process, secures more equity, and makes you feel more in control and less stressed out. It also leads you to appreciate the house all over again, which gives you a really good feeling about selling its value.

Remembering that the work is worth the effort

Keeping your eye on the prize is crucial to getting the work done. When things get tough, remember why you're moving and some of the ways your work is going to pay off:

- ✓ Staging helps your house sell quickly.
- ✓ Staging provides you a net equity gain that will make you happy.
- ✓ Staging helps you purge all the stuff you've been meaning to get rid of anyway.
- ✓ Staging helps you start off fresh and clean in your new house because you have gone through and eliminated stuff, drawer-by-drawer.
- ✓ Staging makes the buyer happy because they get a great house at a great price and get a great value for their investment.

Treating yourself to dinner and a movie

Celebrate the staging process along the way. Set some big goals; for example, when you complete three rooms, treat yourself to a spa afternoon, dinner and a movie, a nice glass of wine — whatever will keep you on track and motivated. And don't forget to dream about what you'll do with the extra money you're earning by staging your property.

Chapter 2

Discovering What Buyers Want

In This Chapter

- ▶ The dating game: How buyers find house love
 - ▶ Evaluating and researching your competition
 - ▶ Looking into high-return upgrades
 - ▶ Appealing to your target market
 - ▶ Making your house positively memorable
-

Think back to grade school birthday parties, the cupcakes that the birthday kid brought to share with the class. When you chose your cupcake, didn't you look for the one that had the most sprinkles or icing? The one that looked the most delicious? Not much changes. People do the same thing when buying a house — they look for the best house for the money in their neighborhood of choice. So how do you make your house stand out from the others? Sprinkles and icing aren't going to cut it.

Before you make the all-important first impression with the buyer, you're making a first impression on the real estate professional who lists your house, the home inspector who puts your house under the magnifying glass, and the appraiser who pinpoints the value of the house.



As much as we'd like to tell you that the home-selling process is scientific, it involves human beings — not only their expertise and opinion but their gut instincts and emotions. Check out a couple examples:

- ✓ When someone walks up to your front porch and feels the crack of an uneven piece of cement under foot, her gut tells her to keep an eye out for other things in the house that need repair.
- ✓ If a home inspector sees a mountain of dust caked on the hot water tank and a dirty filter, he's more likely to look closely for other parts of the house that haven't been well cared for.

As you prep your house for sale, the more research and homework you do up front, the better. Educating yourself and following the processes we outline in this book help you avoid a bad first impression and instead pull the buyer's emotions in a positive way.

In this chapter, you get to peer into the head of the buyer (and everyone else involved in marketing your house) so that you better grasp the *whys* of preparing your home for sale.

Comparison Shopping: Buyers Do It and So Should You

The buyers who want to live in your neighborhood are keeping an eye on what's for sale, and when you're looking to sell, you need to do the same thing. Checking out the competition gives you a better sense of what you have and what you need to work on, as well as what your house is worth.



Before you contact a real estate agent, take a look at the real estate transfers recorded through your city or town clerk. Public records tell you when a house was built, the selling price of the property, its property taxes, the size of the lot, and other information that may help you know how your house stacks up against those in similar neighborhoods. In many areas this information is accessible online, enabling you to easily compare several properties. Call your local or county clerk of courts to find out the county's Web address.

Buyers are going to compare your house to any number of others, and you're going to fare better in the sales race if you do the same kind of comparing yourself. Before listing your house for sale, get a handle on what your home has going for it that others don't. The upcoming sections tell you what to look for.

Evaluating your property



Several Web sites can help you gather information about an average selling price for your house based on its condition, age, and location. With the information you find on sites like these, you get a pretty good ballpark figure and start comparing yours with other houses in the same price range:

- ✓ www.free-home-appraisal.com: A compilation of sponsored sites that provide real estate services for a fee.
- ✓ www.zillow.com: Gives you the most recent listings for sale in your area or the area you're looking to move into.
- ✓ www.reply.com: Provides updated property reports for your area by e-mail.
- ✓ www.valuemyhouse.com: Plug in your property information and a local real estate agent calls you back with some comparison information.



Even though these are great tools for getting a ballpark figure about what your property is worth, this research is not a replacement for a competitive market analysis from a real estate professional who has personally looked at your property and evaluated it against the other properties for sale.

After you have a rough idea of the market value of your house, a good next step is to go to www.realtor.com or a local real estate agent's or real estate broker's Web site and check out houses in a similar price range to see how yours compares. The Web sites for national realty companies work for gathering this information, too; just search in your zip code to look at the houses that are comparable to yours.

Getting a look at how your house stacks up helps focus your time and directs where you spend your money as you prep your house. You want the improvements that are comparable to what's already on the market, but not so wonderful that you're spending money you don't need to.



If you haven't done so already, start visiting open houses and pulling flyers from the houses in your area to see what features and upgrades the houses in your price range have in common. This way, you can plan what areas in your house need immediate attention and then make a detailed and prioritized plan of action — a *staging plan*. For example, if most of the houses on the market in your area have upgraded the vinyl flooring in the bathrooms to tile, and you haven't, you may want to consider the upgrade so you're competing on even ground.

We talk more about staging plans in the following section and in Chapter 6.

Identifying and Upgrading the Money-Making Rooms

Buyers are less likely to care whether your closets have a fresh coat of paint than they are to be concerned about the condition of your kitchen flooring. A staging plan outlines where you put your time, effort, and money for the best return on investment.

As we tell you in Chapter 1, investing 1 to 3 percent of the listing price may more than pay for itself in equity earned. So where do you get the most bang for the buck? The following sections run down the changes that make the biggest impact on buyers.



The top three features buyers look for when shopping for a new house are

- ✓ Updated and on-trend flooring
- ✓ Freshly painted walls
- ✓ Organized, adequate storage space

Lighten and brighten

You accomplish this cost-effective staging solution by

- ✓ Removing excess soft window treatments such as heavy drapes, toppers, or curtains
- ✓ Opening the blinds
- ✓ Washing the windows and screens inside and out
- ✓ Storing unused screens to let in more natural light
- ✓ Upgrading light fixtures to those that are more on trend
- ✓ Replacing all the light bulbs with the same light bulb type and appropriate wattage for the lamp or light fixture

Upgrading light fixtures doesn't need to be cost prohibitive. Bellacor (www.bellacor.com) is a great Web site for selecting lighting, faucets, and lots of other products that help update your house. Click on the kind of fixture you're looking for, the style, and price range. The site automatically sorts the choices for you and often offers free shipping. Many staging consultants offer preferred pricing on these items, too.



Opening all the shades and turning on all the lights is a common tactic for brightening up the place before an open house, but many of the houses we stage don't have decent (or sufficient) lamps. Placing lamps in a room adds warmth and invites buyers to stop and look a little longer.

Add warmth and style with color

Neutralize the house by painting with Staging Safe colors (see Chapter 4). Fresh paint in a current, on-trend color is one of the least expensive improvements you can make and one of the top three features buyers are looking for in a new home. If you're colorphobic and still living with contractor-white walls, paint adds warmth and creates a welcoming feeling when buyers walk through your front door.

We're working with a builder who paid for us to showcase a model home with our rental furniture. Even though we recommended painting, the builder decided to leave the walls contractor white. After a \$60,000 markdown and three more months on the market, the builder took our advice and painted the walls a warm color. The house was in contract within 30 days. The builder has since painted other model homes the same way.



When freshening up your house with new paint, make it easy on yourself or the painter. Choose one paint color that works in all the rooms — fewer choices to make, fewer brushes to clean.

Clean and de-clutter

No matter how much it means to you, your fourth-grade 100-yard-dash medal isn't going to sell your house for you. It actually will only distract potential buyers from the gorgeous wood window trim you draped it over.

Getting rid of anything you don't use regularly and that doesn't contribute to your comfort or décor is a low-cost equity-builder and a home-selling essential. (You have to do something with all that stuff when you move, right?) Chapter 5 gives you strategies for de-cluttering, donating, cleaning, and storing your extra stuff.

Upgrade kitchen and baths

Buyers go crazy for a nice, updated kitchen and a swanky, contemporary bathroom. If your kitchen and bathrooms aren't up to the standard of the other homes in your price range, you can count on getting a lower price than the homes you're competing with. If, for example, slab granite is the norm and you have 15-year-old tile countertops with stained grout, you need to consider upgrading the countertops. You don't need to install slab granite; less-expensive options can give buyers what they're looking for without costing you an arm and a leg. Get a comparable look by using granite tile or a granite product that wraps over the existing counter tops. Finish the upgrade by adding an on-trend faucet, drawer pulls, and hardware.



If competing houses have the Lamborghini of kitchens, you don't necessarily have to upgrade your own kitchen to Lamborghini level, but you can't hover around Ford Escort level, either. Find upgrades that improve your kitchen according to current trends without busting your budget.

If your appliances are showing their age, then consider replacing them. Again, you don't have to buy the best, just buy the moderately priced models. Take care of these issues, and your agent can advertise that the kitchen has been updated and has new appliances — a great selling point.

Bathrooms should look like they've never been used. If the norm in your market is tile or vinyl flooring and you have worn-out carpeting, then replace the carpet or upgrade the flooring to vinyl or tile. Look at the sink and faucet. Is the faucet pitted or the sink stained? Find out what style sinks and faucets are on trend in your price range, and then replace one or both.

Turn to Chapter 14 to find more details about sprucing up your kitchen and bathrooms.

Repair floors, replace carpet

Number two of the top three features buyers look for is updated and on-trend flooring; rather than marking down the price of the house by giving a carpeting allowance, you're better off buying a mid-grade carpet and high-end pad and having them professionally installed. Buyers tell us that hardwood is the most desirable flooring, so if you have hardwood covered with carpeting, consider removing the carpeting and, if needed, having the hardwood refinished.

Speed Dating: What Happens When Buyers Start Looking

Speed dating gives men and women a measly five minutes to introduce themselves and make enough of an impression to merit a real, full-length date. It takes place in large groups so that each speed-dater has a couple dozen or so brief chances to make a love connection. First impressions make or break the outcome.

Buyers do something similar, moving from house to house over a brief period in their own quest for house love. And just like in speed dating, positive first impressions are crucial for getting your property sold, because buyers are comparing several properties within a short time span.

To sell your house, your best bet is making that first date with the buyer a sensory event so that the buyer makes a total emotional connection. You want your house to look good, smell good, sound good, feel good, and taste good. Here's what we mean:

✔ **Looking good** means that everything from the curb through the house and out into the back yard looks well-tended and on-trend. That includes details like these:

- At night, interior lights are on, and exterior lights show the way.
- The kitchen is up-to-date, and the landscaping is, too.
- Showcasing brings buyers' attention to your house's best features and views.

If your house is the best-looking option at the right price, it will go to the top of the buyer's list for that second or third date and a timely offer.

- ✔ **Smelling good** means that the air is fresh and clean — it doesn't smell like potpourri, air freshener, wet dog, or cinnamon. Artificial fragrances give the buyer the subliminal message that you're trying to cover up something. And if you have pets, be sure that buyers aren't bowled over by pet or mildew odor. (Chapter 18 gives you ideas for dealing with these issues.)
- ✔ **Sounding good** means that during showings and open houses, you set the mood so buyers stay a little longer and take a second look. If there's road noise or the kids next door are playing and making a lot of noise, close the windows! Buy a pleasant music CD and leave it playing in the background.

We love using the Certified Staging Professionals music CD called "Set the Stage." It's specially mixed for playing at open houses to set the mood for buying. Call 1-888-STAGING to order.
- ✔ **Feeling good** means that the house doesn't cause any discomfort and that it instead is easy to navigate and pleasant to be in. That means that your sidewalks, decks, and pathways are even, swept clean, and shoveled in the winter. The floors are easy to walk on (Don't take chances with toys or clutter left where buyers may be walking.), and the temperature of the house is comfortable no matter the weather.
- ✔ **Tasting good** means that during open houses, you and the agent have something tasty for buyers to eat (but not messy so buyers don't drop crumbs all over the place). Snacking slows down buyers so they can really look at the house. Candy is an easy feel-good — especially the individually wrapped candy pieces or small-sized candy bars.



Hitting the Target Market

According to real estate professionals, the average home seller is 57 years old, but the average home buyer is 32 years old. Without a doubt, that generation gap has an impact on how you ready your house for sale. These statistics are merely averages, so we like to dig a bit further, asking sellers and agents who they think is the perfect buyer for the house. Consider the following examples of potential buyers and their needs:

- ✔ Newlyweds are likely to want a home that isn't too big but has enough room to start their family. If you're selling a 1,200-square-foot ranch house, these may be your target buyers.
- ✔ Families with young children usually look for a yard and basement. A cul-de-sac location is a bonus.

- ✓ Empty nesters typically want to downsize but still have room for guests, and they want a property that's been updated and is going to be easy to maintain. Homes with a one-level floor plan especially appeal to this buyer.

Figuring out who you're targeting also helps you determine what you most need to update and which type of décor is going to appeal to your likely buyer. If your décor was up-to-date before the targeted buyer was born, you're going to have to adjust your thinking and ready the house to appeal to that younger buyer.



Our rule of thumb is that if your décor is 5 or more years old, it's not on trend and needs to be updated.

For us, the easiest way to spot decorating and lifestyle trends is to watch the decorating and home-selling shows on HGTV, A&E, and TLC. *Secrets That Sell*, *Divine Design with Candice Olson*, *Designed to Sell*, and *House Hunters* are just a few of the shows that let you peek into houses with buyer's eyes. All the shows have their own Web sites and links to trends, products, do-it-yourself projects, and great money-saving advice.

Another way is to hit the news stands and take a look at decorating magazines. Our favorites are *Home*, *Dwell*, *Elle Décor*, and *House Beautiful*. We also look for trends by browsing through mail-order catalogs or visiting virtual or brick-and-mortar home décor and furniture retailers.

Sherlocking while you shop

Every time we go to an open house or do a staging consultation, we see what buyers see and ask ourselves this question: Who lives here? Or, at least, what kind of person would we expect to live here? Does the house look like a bachelor is in residence — posters on the walls, electronic equipment and cords running all over the place, and no homey touches? Does it look like a granny lives there with lace curtains and doilies everywhere?

Even though the seller may be a woman in her 30s who happens to love lace, buyers with young children may tour the house and get the impression that the neighborhood has a senior

slant and won't have other kids in the neighborhood for their kids to play with. Such an impression may mean the perfect buyer takes a pass on the property because it doesn't feel family-friendly.

Making assumptions is part of human nature, even though those assumptions are often wrong.

To avoid assumptions that may cost you the sale, the goal in staging your house is to neutralize it enough in color and décor that it appeals to the broadest audience.

Making the Most of What's Memorable about Your House

You want buyers to remember your house, but not because it's the one with the roomful of Beanie Babies or the mauve carpet straight out of 1986. Your best bet is to neutralize your décor so that it appeals to a wider audience. In this section, we show you several properties through the eyes of professional stagers.

Is yours "the yellow one"?

The exterior of your house can push buyers away, convincing them there's no reason to even bother looking inside. An offbeat paint color can be like a big "Do Not Enter" sign, particularly when the paint is in bad condition or doesn't fit into the scheme of the neighborhood.

Staging nightmare: Lynelle Hartman and Leigh Hagen of LH2 Staging work in the Minneapolis–St. Paul area. One of their clients is a flipper (someone who buys properties at a low price, fixes them up, and then sells the properties for a profit) who was looking to sell a house in a prestigious, old-money area of million-dollar homes. The exterior of the house was painted yellow and needed painting and updating.

Staging solution: Hartman and Hagen chose a slate gray for the exterior and added midnight blue shutters to create additional focal points. With the improved curb appeal, the house went from making a first impression as "the yellow one" to being "that beautifully updated one." It really stands out in the established neighborhood, and it sold quickly after its facelift.

Is yours "the one with all the art"?

Buyers are looking at a house for sale because they want to see the house, the architecture, the yard, and to see whether it fits their needs. Buyers *aren't* there to see a museum exhibit. If all they remember about your house is the art, you've missed an opportunity to sell your house.

Staging nightmare: Author Jan and her business partner and fellow Certified Staging Professional, Char Curry, worked with an agent who had spent almost \$12,000 marketing a property whose listing was about to expire. As a last-ditch effort not to lose the listing, the agent decided to have us showcase the house. The seller agreed to the service because the agent was paying for it, and he agreed to do whatever we told him to do with the property, acknowledging that we were the experts.

The remarkable thing about the interior of the house in Figure 2-1 was that the seller had an incredible collection of modern art — very large and colorful pieces, some of which were a little off-putting. The seller thought that if he left the art up, buyers would see what a quality house it was because of his incredible art collection. What really happened was that buyers couldn't get beyond the art and never saw the golf course view from the living room, the incredible woodwork, or the cathedral ceilings.

Staging solution: Jan and Char removed a lot of the art from the living room and either stored it or moved it to other rooms. They then repositioned the furniture to draw buyers to the windows so they could see the gorgeous view of the golf course and notice the incredible millwork and cathedral ceilings. (Check out the results in Figure 2-2.) After being on the market for almost a year, the house sold in 30 days after showcasing!

Is yours “the dark one”?

The right color and lighting warm your heart and welcome you home. Dated color and dreary lighting chase buyers away.



Figure 2-1:
Before, the
owner's art
steals the
show.



Figure 2-2:
Staged,
fewer
distractions
enable
buyers to
notice the
room's great
features.

Jan Maresh and Char Curry, Naked Room Solutions

Staging nightmare The fourplex in Figure 2-3 was being converted into condominiums. The building was 80 years old, and it was dark and dreary. It looked as if the oppression and tragedy of those 80 years and who knows how many occupants' lives were hanging in every corner. The remodeler wanted to tear out the built-in buffet, which would make for a very expensive project.

Staging solution: Lynelle Hartman of LH2 Staging recommended painting the built-ins a fresh, pale green that brought new life and brightness to the space. (See Figure 2-4.) Even the light coming through the windows felt fresher after the new paint job.



Figure 2-3:
Before, 80
years of
hard living
takes an
obvious toll.

Lynelle Hartman, LH2 Staging



Figure 2-4:
Staged,
a fresh coat
of paint
creates an
updated
feeling.

Lynelle Hartman, LH2 Staging

Is yours “the one with the beautiful view”?

In Jan’s market outside Portland, Oregon, a lot with a view adds \$50,000 to a property’s selling price. But if buyers don’t notice the view, getting that extra money is tough. Staging highlights a view.

Staging nightmare: The 2-year-old house had been on the market for 16 months. The almost-new house had incredible floors of inlaid hardwood, custom woodwork, striking architecture, and incredible views. The master bathroom was stunning — travertine from floor to ceiling, and again, incredible views — but no offers came. Because the master bedroom had so many hard surfaces, the space echoed and felt very cold. Buyers were so busy looking at the travertine that they hardly noticed the view.

Staging solution: The staging team’s goal was to warm up the area and draw buyers to the view. To accomplish that, they added some luxurious towels, hung bathrobes next to the shower, and added some plants and a screen at the window. The finishing touch was adding drapery panels that puddle on the tub deck to either side of the center window. The added softness and color let buyers imagine taking bubble baths overlooking the view of the Columbia River. The house (shown in Figure 2-5) was in contract within 60 days of showcasing.



Figure 2-5: Staged, soft details take the room from harsh to inviting.

Chapter 3

Finding the Fixes You Can't Ignore

In This Chapter

- ▶ Hiring an inspector to uncover problems
 - ▶ Hiring the best inspector for the job
 - ▶ Getting everything in tip-top shape
 - ▶ Putting your money where the return is
-

Even though you're selling your home, we know you still love it — or at least a good part of it! After all, you spent years turning it from a house into a home and are proud of the renovations and decorating you've done. But buyers want to see the features of the house, not little pieces of your life. They want to know that the house is in good condition, even in those areas that aren't immediately apparent.

In this chapter, we run through all the important details of readying your house for sale. We encourage you to take a long, hard look at our recommendations for both the structural and cosmetic features of the house. When you do everything you need to do to get your house ready to go on the market (clean, paint, repair, replace, de-clutter, store, and so on), you get top dollar, the house appraises well, and with all things being equal, the house sells quicker than your competition.

Having Your Home Inspected Before You Sell

A professional *home inspection* (an objective review and assessment of the condition of the interior and exterior structures of a property and its mechanical and technical features) is common — and in many situations, mandatory — before a house sale closes. The home inspection is usually ordered by the buyer to find out as much as possible about the condition of the house.

Assessing the condition of the competition

In addition to looking at comparable properties to get a handle on the price range of your house and the target buyer (tips we tell you more about in Chapter 2), you also want to know how the condition of your house stacks up against other houses in the neighborhood. To make appropriate improvements and determine the extent of the repairs needed, here are some areas to check against your competition:

- ✓ Recent repairs and upgrades
- ✓ Whether the basement is finished or unfinished
- ✓ The condition of front and back porches and decks
- ✓ Utility costs
- ✓ Heating and air conditioning systems
- ✓ Flooring condition and type
- ✓ Kitchen appliances' age and brand



TIP

Depending on the age and condition of a house, we encourage sellers to consider ordering their own professional home inspection so they can learn early on about major repairs the house needs. Discovering problems and fixing them prior to listing the property saves you time; gives you peace of mind; and demonstrates to buyers, agents, and the buyer's home inspector that the house has been well maintained. Most of all, a home inspection can save a sale.

Case in point: Jan has a client who owns a 15-year-old home with *LP siding* — an engineered wood siding. In the Pacific Northwest serious mold damage is common in homes where the LP siding wasn't installed correctly. She recommended that the sellers have a home inspection prior to listing the property to be sure that the siding wasn't going to be an issue when a serious buyer came forth. The home inspector confirmed that the siding was installed properly, and also discovered that the flashing around the chimney needed repair. After the repair was complete, the home inspector gave the seller a comprehensive report complete with descriptions and photographs. The seller left this report on the table with the agent's listing sheets so potential buyers could see what had been inspected and have no qualms about the LP siding or any other potential problem with the house. If the owners hadn't had the inspection, potential buyers may have shied away from even touring the house because of the LP siding.

REMEMBER



When homeowners have a home inspection *before* listing a house for sale

- ✓ Sellers get the peace of mind that comes from knowing that a hidden problem or major repair wouldn't hold up the sale of their house.
- ✓ Agents can promote the house as having already passed the home inspection process, so potential objections are overcome before they're raised.

- ✓ Buyers know that the house has been well maintained, giving them one less reason to look elsewhere to buy another house.

Addressing the Fixes That Make Your House Safe

Most states and provinces in North America have minimum safety requirements for a house — things like smoke detectors in specific areas, electrical systems that are up to code, plumbing that works, furnaces that are clean and work efficiently, and foundations that are sound.

As unromantic as these mechanical systems may seem, they demand attention. You may be required to disclose violations of the code to buyers, and even unintentional violations put you at risk of losing a sale. On top of all that, you and your family should be living in a safe environment, no matter how few days you have left in the house.

The upcoming sections outline some of the safety concerns that a home inspection uncovers.

Looking into air quality

To pass a home inspection you need to be aware of potential hazards to the air quality of the house. Here are some common things to keep in mind:

- ✓ Asbestos is a carcinogen but until the 1980s was used in homes in a number of places including the ceiling tiles, insulation, and insulation wrapped around pipes.
If the material that contains the asbestos is intact, then you can probably remove it yourself. If not, then you need to hire a licensed asbestos abatement contractor. Check the rules in your state or province.
- ✓ Lead-based paint, found in houses built or painted before 1978, is one of the most common means of lead poisoning in children. Laws in most municipalities regarding the requirements and disclosures about lead paint can kill a sale.
If your ceilings and walls are covered in lead paint that isn't chipping or peeling, painting over them with latex paint may be all that you need to do. However, if you have lead paint that's chipping or peeling, you need to have it removed. We recommend calling in a professional, because the paint can be very dangerous to pregnant women and children.



- ✓ Mold can be hazardous to your health. Simple household mold can be removed with serious elbow grease, but some dangerous varieties can make you or your family members sick. The most common and hazardous is *black mold*, which grows in damp drywall or improperly installed exterior siding. If a home inspection reveals that you have a mold problem, get a mold specialist to inspect and treat your home.

One amazing machine we recommend for mold control is the Fresh Air by EcoQuest machine. You can find it at www.ecoquestintl.com.

- ✓ Radon is an odorless, invisible gas that has been linked to lung cancer. You find it in most areas across North America, and it commonly leaks through foundations and basements. A home inspector can test for it, or you can use a do-it-yourself kit available through home improvement stores. If you decide to go the DIY route, be sure to follow the directions carefully. If your house tests positive, you may need to have a radon mitigation system installed to continuously pump out the gas.
- ✓ You need to have smoke detectors and carbon monoxide detectors on each floor near the bedrooms — even in a vacant house. Check that they work and that the batteries are fresh. Nothing gets a buyer out of the house faster than a smoke detector that beeps and needs a battery. Many municipalities have laws governing installation and how many detectors are required per household.
- ✓ A home inspection may turn up pests and other hazards such as carpenter ants, termites, wood beetles — or the more unusual electromagnetic fields and formaldehyde. An exterminator or hazardous waste specialist can correct or eradicate these problems.

Upgrading the electrical system

If your house is more than 5 years old, it may be due for an electrical check-up. How can you tell? If the lights flicker or fuses blow, you want to get a professional inspection — not only for the buyer's safety but for yours while you're still living in the house.

Your electrical system may need to be replaced if your house

- ✓ Includes an addition of one or more rooms
- ✓ Has a fuse box instead of a breaker system
- ✓ Includes a higher-than-average number of energy-consuming appliances such as a hot tub, extra refrigerator, or freezer
- ✓ Is at least 40 years old
- ✓ Has aluminum wiring



According to the United States Product Safety Commission, aluminum wiring once was used to save on building materials but is a frequent cause of residential fires. If you have this type of wiring, a licensed electrician will likely recommend that you replace the whole system. (You'll get the same recommendation in Canada.)

Addressing the plumbing and hot water tank

Your plumbing needs to be in good working order. Period. That includes the seldom-used shower and toilet in the basement as well as the outdoor shower by the pool. If these don't work at all or if they leak, buyers wonder what else in the house needs repair. Your water heater also needs to work and be leak-free. If yours isn't, start shopping.



If the plumbing is not in good working order and needs to be replaced, expect buyers to chip away at your equity.

File this tip under "use it or lose it." If you have two toilets in your house and use one most of the time, start alternating. When you don't use a toilet regularly, it gets sluggish.



An agent friend of ours tells her clients to make sure the water heater and furnace are well dusted and clean and that the filter in the furnace is new. These things send a subtle message to the home inspector that you maintain your house well.

Fixing the foundation and roof

Regardless of the type of foundation under your house, it must be in good repair. If the foundation is falling apart, it affects the structural integrity of the house and can cost a fortune to fix. When in doubt, hire a professional to take a look at the foundation so you can address any repairs prior to listing the house for sale.

The roof must not leak if you want to sell your house. Thinking about repairing the leak, and then patching or painting over it? Home inspectors are trained to look for these tricks, so if the roof needs repair, leave it to the professionals.

Working with a Home Inspector

Home inspections have changed how real estate is sold. Until 1995, home inspections weren't required when buyers applied for a loan. Now they are, so you need to make sure that you work with an accredited professional who will do a thorough job. Finding one isn't as easy as doing a Google search for "home inspection."

A good real estate agent should be able to recommend several well-qualified inspectors, and then it's up to you to choose the right one. Here's a list of questions you need to ask before you choose a home inspector:

✔ What are your qualifications?

The home inspector should have some training in construction and building-maintenance standards and a proven track record in the home inspection business. Like property staging, home inspection is a self-regulating industry, so ask the candidate about certification in home inspection. Visit the American Society of Home Inspectors (www.ashi.org), or Canadian Association of Home and Property Inspectors (www.cahpi.ca) to understand more about each organization's code of ethics and certification designations.

✔ What is included in your inspection?

Ask the inspector what parts of the property are included in the inspection — the roof, swimming pool, built-in appliances? The more thorough the inspection, the better.

✔ May I look at a sample report?

Find out what you can expect to get for your money. Ask the inspector to show you a checklist or inspection report. A comprehensive report includes a narrative description rather than just check-off boxes, and the information is presented and explained clearly and completely. Also, be sure that the report highlights any problems that could present a safety hazard.

✔ Can you provide references?

Make sure you find out whether former clients were satisfied and found the inspector's report helpful.

✔ What are your memberships and affiliations?

You can find good home inspectors who don't belong to national associations, but associations provide training and additional certification programs to keep members current with industry standards and best practices. In Canada, inspectors can acquire certification from the

Canadian Association of Home and Property Inspectors; so far only about 400 inspectors are certified. (Go to www.cahpi.ca to find out more.) In the United States, check out home inspectors through the International Association of Certified Home Inspectors, Inc., by going to www.nachi.org.

✓ What is your policy on errors and omissions?

Even the best home inspectors make mistakes or miss something they should have noticed. Find out what their company policy is regarding errors or omissions in the report. Does the company or individual inspector stand by the report? Many companies ask customers to sign a waiver limiting the company's liability to the cost of the inspection. Others carry professional omissions and errors insurance.

Making the Changes That Sell Your House

Preparing a house for sale can reach a point of diminishing returns. You want to be the best house in your price range, but you don't want to spend more money than necessary to get the house sold. This section gives you general guidelines for preparing your house for sale. For more room-specific information and recommendations, see Part III.

Sellers are sometimes torn about spending money on their old house when they're planning to move to a new one. We've put together some basic changes that bring the biggest bang for the buck and great advice for any seller, remodeler, and even those folks who are flipping houses.



After location and price range, the top three features buyers are looking for in a property are current flooring, fresh paint, and adequate storage. Whatever you can do to enhance these features will help you sell your house.

Neutralize the color

We often tell sellers to “neutralize” the space, and painting is one of the easiest and least-expensive ways to do this. Neutralizing the color brings the buyer one step closer to making an offer because the color goes with any décor, which means the house is move-in ready. Neutralizing can be as easy as painting a room or two or as complex as an extreme home makeover. Because curb appeal is vital to getting buyers through the door, in this section we take a look at color from the outside in.

Exterior color

Before trekking off to the paint store and choosing a color, remember that the palette needs to coordinate with the fixed elements of the house — those elements that you cannot easily change, like the roof, the brick, and the stone.

Gray may be your favorite neutral, but it won't work if your driveway and front walk are brown-toned exposed aggregate, your house includes brick with light and medium browns through it, and the roof is a darker brown. The cool gray fights with all the warm tones of the fixed elements of the house. A warm beige and slightly darker trim is a better choice, particularly if you add the punch of warm red on the front door.

You also want to imagine how the house color will look throughout the seasons. What will it look like when the leaves are off the trees and the snow is on the ground? A grey or slate blue exterior may not be the best color during those long gray winter days when the snow turns to black slush. In milder climates, gray might be a perfect color as a background for blooming perennials and other foliage.



If you've determined the exterior needs painting, then look for exterior colors that are in a "historic" or "preservation" palette. These colors are usually safe neutral colors, and some brands even provide suggestions for coordinating the trim and the door colors, too.

Interior color

Neutral doesn't necessarily mean white. That's why we use Staging Safe paint colors. These colors have been carefully selected by Christine, based on her own work and on discussion with many professional stagers, because even within the neutral palette of any paint brand, you have hundreds of colors to choose from. And as professional stagers, we know what colors are on-trend and what colors sell when used on an existing property. Chapter 4 tells you more about Staging Safe colors.

Like the exterior color choices, your interior color should complement the fixed elements of the house — the flooring, cabinetry, tile, and countertops. As a general rule, use the warm neutrals (tan, beige, gold, yellow, ivory) with brown-toned woods and stone; use cool neutrals (white, gray, blue) in houses with white trim, gray stone or tile and darker woods. (For more information on color and how it works for and against you in selling your house, see Chapter 4.)

Staging nightmare: The cabinets, tile on the wall, and the bright wallpaper made this 50-year-old kitchen in Figure 3-1 looked dated. The tile was a particular challenge. Chipping it off would be a long, messy, and expensive project. The cupboard near the entry blocked off the room.

Staging solution: Christine had the cabinet removed, and immediately the place felt more open and spacious. Strapping was applied to the walls and dry wall was laid right over the upper walls and the tile, and crown molding was added at the same time. The walls were painted a Staging Safe cream color. The cabinets handles were removed and the holes filled with wood filler then given two coats of warm white, and the counters tops with two coats of black. A new light fixture, brushed aluminum mushroom handles for the cupboards, as well as plantation shutters on the windows finished the more modern look. (See Figure 3-2.)



Figure 3-1:
Before, the
kitchen is
dark, dated,
and dreary.

Christine Rae, Certified Staging Professionals

Flooring: Clean, repair, or install

The style and condition of flooring reveal a lot about a person and how the house has been maintained. The carpeting may need just a little steam-cleaning or an all-out replacement.



Figure 3-2:
Staged,
fresh color
made the
room bright,
warm,
modern, and
inviting.

Christine Rae, Certified Staging Professionals

We once worked with a client who had a throw rug in the upstairs hallway that was covering up vomit stains. The stains had been there for a couple of years, even though the client had cleaned several times. Other than the stain, the carpet didn't smell and looked to be in pretty good shape. Before suggesting they replace the carpet, we encouraged the sellers to hire a professional carpet cleaner and try, one last time, to get out the stain. When we came back to showcase the house, the stain was gone and the carpet looked new. The sellers were shocked and admitted that they had tried cleaning the carpet using their own household carpet cleaner on the stain.



If the carpet is in good shape and doesn't smell, have it professionally cleaned before deciding whether you need to replace it.

When you want a cost-effective replacement option, carpeting is the flooring solution of choice. If the carpet is worn, sun-faded, or bears the marks of pets' training accidents, rather than giving a \$5,000 carpeting allowance or reducing the price, replace the carpet and pad for less; making the change ahead of time keeps you in control of the budget.

If you need to replace the carpet in several rooms, use the same carpeting throughout the house. And carpeting is always less expensive than vinyl, tile, laminate, or hardwood.

Regardless of your décor, replace the flooring with a neutral color that works with the fixed elements in the room, such as the hardwood or tile flooring, the cabinetry, and the fireplace.



When pulling up the carpet, you may discover hardwood underneath. If so, you may have hit the jackpot — hardwood is a very desirable selling feature. Because updated flooring is one of the top selling features buyers look for, strongly consider refinishing the hardwood if it needs it. But leave refinishing to the pros. They will sand the wood properly without denting the baseboards and then apply a coat or two of satin urethane to protect and bring out the beauty of the wood.

Sell the storage space

Sellers are looking for more storage space, so give 'em what they want by maximizing what you have. Pack away and store out-of-season clothes, clean out what you don't need from under the sinks, and pick up everything from the floor. When it looks like you have extra storage space you're not using, the subtle message to buyers is that your house has plenty of room for their stuff, too.

Clean and repair the windows

We're constantly surprised by how many sellers forget about the windows. Buyers are looking for a light and bright environment. Sparkling clean windows tell buyers that the house is well cared for. Clean windows also let in much more light into the rooms. Whether you're washing the windows yourself or hiring someone to do it for you, check that all the windows are in good working order. If not, add another task to your list.

Light the way

Lighting (or lack of it) and light fixtures can date a house. If you have the budget and want to update the light fixtures, do your research on the current styles by checking out the decorating magazines and what you see in home improvement stores. When setting up the lighting in a room, here are some other considerations that give rooms a welcoming ambiance:

- ✔ Make sure the wattage of the bulb is the highest the fixture will accommodate. Select energy-efficient daylight bulbs for maximum impact.
- ✔ Accent lights are sometimes ignored. If you have cove or valence lighting or lighting above or under the kitchen and bath counters, turn those on, as well; they're a lovely selling feature.
- ✔ Chandeliers should be half the width of the table they hang above plus 5 inches, and you want them to hang so that there's 30 inches to 40 inches from fixture to table top.
- ✔ Make sure any exposed bulbs are clean — dust- and cobweb-free.

We tell you more about lighting in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4

Color Me Sold: Using Color and Light to Sell Your House

In This Chapter

- ▶ Working with your house's complexion
 - ▶ Looking into color's emotional pull
 - ▶ Using light and the colors within it
-

Have you noticed what color does to your mood? How it makes you feel in a particular setting or room? When you're staging a house, you need to appeal to all five senses. In this chapter, we focus on directing the buyers' sight. You do this by neutralizing the space and then adding a punch of color to a room. Add the same color in the next room, and the color entices a buyer to take a look.

Color is complex: Just stand in the paint department at a home improvement store and watch how everyone's eyes glaze over as they try to pick out just the right color for their house. In this chapter, we pin down color and lighting basics for you so you can ready your house for that perfect buyer.

Grasping Color's Emotional Power

Color influences a person's mental and psychological state. Think of the colors you see at the beach in the sand, the water, the shells, and vegetation. The colors are soft, cool, and relaxing, which may have something to do with the droves of people who go to the beach to unwind. On the flip side, you find red in a lot of restaurants because it stimulates the appetite and digestion, but it is not a restful color.

Professional stagers use color to create flow from one room to the next. The plain or neutral-colored background that stagers recommend to sellers gives the eyes a place to rest; stagers add interest with accessories that contain patterns, textures, and punches of color. The key to creating flow is using these elements in balance.

Warming up and cooling down with color

All reds are not created equal. Put two reds side by side, and you may find that they clash. Reds may be cool, meaning they include a lot of blue (think Red Delicious apple) or warm if they contain a lot of yellow (like a tomato). Any color has warm and cool shades that aren't necessarily going to match.



When you put cool-based and warm-based colors together in the same room or on the exterior of the house, they clash — just like the apple and the tomato — and clashing colors make a space uncomfortable. The right color choices help you make your house look as fresh, clean, and new as possible.

Before you choose paint colors, take a long hard look at the fixed elements of your house to determine whether your house has an overall warm tone to it, or an overall cool tone to it. Professional stagers call this determining the *complexion* of the house. Once you know the house's complexion, you can choose the exterior and interior colors that work with it.

Fixed elements are those features of the house that you can't change or that are expensive to change:

- ✓ Exterior fixed elements are the roof, stone, brick, and siding.
- ✓ Interior fixed elements include flooring, countertops, cabinetry, woodwork and doors, the materials used on the fireplace, and possibly the hardware on the sinks and doors.

Even though most of these fixed elements seem to be neutral, they still may be warm or cool. You may choose to change out one or all of these things on the interior, but remember that the color of these surfaces helps determine the complexion of your home and guides you toward your best color choices. Pair a cool wall color with a warm carpet, and you create disharmony in the room.

Unmasking your home's complexion

Just like people, houses have a complexion. When you know the complexion of your house, you can boil down your color choices and then create an environment buyers form an emotional connection with.

Your home's complexion is cool if your

- ✓ Roof is black, gray, or blue
- ✓ Brick, stone, or siding is gray or blue
- ✓ Windows are white (not the trim around the windows, but the vinyl or aluminum that holds the windows in place)
- ✓ Carpet, wood flooring, and tile colors are blue, gray, white, taupe, or black
- ✓ Cabinetry is whitewashed, pickled, maple, or cherry (toward the red tones)
- ✓ Countertops are blue, black, gray, or white
- ✓ Sinks and kitchen appliances are blue, white, black, or stainless steel
- ✓ Metals are black natural iron, brushed nickel, stainless steel, chrome, or pewter

Your home's complexion is warm if your

- ✓ Roof is brown, tan, or rust
- ✓ Brick or stone is brown, tan, or rust
- ✓ Windows (not the trim around the windows, but the vinyl or aluminum that holds the windows in place) are cream or off-white
- ✓ Carpet, wood flooring, and tile colors are coffee, mustard, off-white, warm beige, or terra cotta
- ✓ Cabinets are natural oak, pine, or birch
- ✓ Countertops are brown or tan
- ✓ Sinks and kitchen appliances are ivory, tan, or off-white
- ✓ Metals are brass, antique brass, polished brass, copper

Narrowing down your color choices

After you have discovered the complexion of your house and trained your eye to spot warm and cool color tones, but before heading to the paint store, do one more thing: Take a look at the furnishings and art you have in the room and decide what's going to stay. Then, pick your color scheme using the upholstery, rug, or art as your inspiration — stagers call this the *inspiration piece*.

Relying on an inspiration piece helps narrow down your color choices even further because you want the paint to harmonize with your furnishings and art. If you can, take a swatch of the upholstery fabric, an extra arm chair cover, or a throw pillow to the paint store to keep your color choices on track.

With inspiration piece in hand, you can head to the paint store with confidence. When you get there, look at how the paint displays are set up. Notice there are usually four sections of paint colors per manufacturer. They work something like this:

- ✔ One section contains pastel colors — those that look like the color has been diluted with white. These colors have white undertones and look good in houses that have a cool complexion.
- ✔ One section includes colors that look like they've been diluted with brown or tan. These colors have brown undertones and look good in warm-complexioned houses.
- ✔ One section holds colors that look like they've been diluted with black or gray. These colors have black undertones and look good in houses that have a cool complexion.
- ✔ One section contains clear, clean colors; those are vibrant colors and are great to use as accents in any room.



Tempted though you may be to pull one paint chip from one section and team it up with another color from another section, don't. The colors are destined to clash. Stick with colors from the same section, and you know they all work together because they all have the same undertone.

Combining colors effectively

Color creates an impact and leaves an impression, so use it wisely to create a great memory: Use three colors in a 60/30/10 ratio. The dominant color provides 60 percent of the impression, which is why we suggest a neutral palette in the staging process; the secondary color provides 30 percent; and you use an accent color for other 10 percent.

Here's how the 60/30/10 rule plays out:

- ✔ Wall color is the most dominant space in the room and claims 60 percent of the color in the room. Remember the ceilings and floors are walls, too!
- ✔ You use the secondary color on the larger pieces of furniture and window treatments.
- ✔ Use the accent color on throw pillows, florals, art, and accessories.

Staying safely neutral

If you don't feel comfortable choosing colors, you may want to choose a Staging Safe color. Staging Safe is a palette of beautiful neutral paint colors available through your Certified Staging Professional. Each has been carefully selected; the colors are rich and neutral without being white. For more on Staging Safe Colors ask your Certified Staging Professional or call 1-888-STAGING. Your CSP has access to a discount of up to 60 percent for paint.

The only scientifically validated color system in the world is the Dewey Color System, and we like using it when selecting interior and exterior colors for our clients after they have moved to their new home. Not only can the system help you choose colors for your house, but it also identifies your personality traits based on your color preferences and helps the family live harmoniously. To learn more about the Dewey Color System and the Dewey Color Coordinator visit www.deweycolorsystem.com.



Sticking to just three colors totally simplifies your life because you won't be tempted to buy anything that's not in your color scheme. To further simplify your life, we like to keep the same color scheme going throughout the house whenever possible.

If you have a two-color scheme, use your colors in a 60/40 or 70/30 proportion. Using two colors in a 50/50 ratio doesn't keep the eye moving smoothly around the room.

Turn to the color pages of this book to see the 60/30/10 rule in action.

Staging with Color Psychology

Colors evoke emotion. You want buyers to connect emotionally with your house, and one of the ways to make that happen is through your use of color.

Here's a brief description of colors and their corresponding emotion, as well as how to use each when you stage your house:

- ✓ **Red gets your heart pumping.** It fortifies your body, helps build red blood cells, and is often used in a dining room to stimulate digestion — but we don't recommend red in the bedroom because it isn't a restful color; it increases blood pressure and stimulates your appetite. Use red in a room as an accent color in the flowers or throw pillows, to update a tired room, or to put a punch of color into a neutral-colored space. Use red on a front door to invite buyers in.

- ✔ **Yellow is a happy color associated with intellect and creativity.** Yellow is also welcoming and a good selling color because it's light and bright; the lighter shades qualify as warm neutrals. From a psychology perspective, yellow creates an environment that fosters decision-making, good judgment, and well-being. You can safely use soft shades of yellow and cream in almost any room; yellow also says "welcome home" (like the yellow ribbons welcoming home a returning hero) when used in foyers and entrances.
- ✔ **Orange fortifies the immune system, fights depression, and cultivates good humor.** It's associated with autumn, pumpkins, and the warmth of a fire. Because orange is a strong color, use it as an accent.
- ✔ **Blue is a calming color associated with inner security and confidence.** Color therapy uses blue to relieve pain, lower blood pressure, and stimulate healing. Blue may be the most popular color in decorating, but it's the hardest color to sell — an on-trend blue used correctly as an accent color is fine. If you don't have blue in your house, don't add it when readying your house for sale. If you don't want to change out the blue furnishings or carpet, use crisp white for trim and accessories, and paint the walls pale yellow. This conservative look promotes harmony and peace.
- ✔ **Green is the color of nature and signifies growth and prosperity.** Sage green makes white molding and trim pop. It works well with a lot of wood tones, and because it's the color of nature and thus considered a neutral hybrid, it can be used in most rooms without objections from buyers.
- ✔ **Violet symbolizes power and a sense of wealth and luxury.** Lavender is a good shade for healing and meditation but should be avoided by people who suffer from depression. If you need to work around violet in your house, limit it to an accent color.
- ✔ **White is associated with peace, cleanliness, and purity and is the easiest color to use in any room.** White trim paint showcases and intensifies the color of the walls and the architecture of the room.
- ✔ **Black adds a contemporary touch to any room and is best used as an accent color when showcasing a room.** Use three touches of black in every room. Do this by using black lampshades, an accent piece such as throw pillows, or a black handrail for a staircase.
- ✔ **Grey is a cool neutral and is usually not a good color to use for staging.** You can use it sparingly in a contemporary home. Grey suggests a lack of assertiveness and guarded behavior. However, carbon gray is a trend color for 2008.
- ✔ **Brown is a comforting color — think of coffee, tea, and chocolate.** Brown coordinates well with other colors and can be used in a variety of



color schemes. Like black, brown adds sophistication, but it does so without the intensity of black.

Don't use brown as a siding or trim color — especially not a pinkish brown or taupe, because those shades give the house a dated look.

To tone down a vibrant color in a room, use colors that are opposite each other on the color wheel. Red and green are opposite each other on the color wheel; so, if you have a red sofa and love seat, paint the walls a pale sage green to balance the intensity of the red in the room. Don't use too many colors, though; use three colors for your interior and exterior color selection. Remember, flow and blend are the objective.

Finding the Right Way to Let There Be Light

Walk through a model home or an open house, and you're likely to find that all the lights are on. Buyers buy light, bright houses, and lighting — like color — helps create an emotional connection to the buyer.

Layering light

Light follows some of the same principles of design: You layer it in a room to create balance at eye-level, mid-level, and floor-level. Here's how:

- ✓ *Eye-level* lighting includes everything that comes in through the windows — thus the importance of sparkling-clean windows. Your house may also have cove lighting or track lighting over paintings, so make sure you turn on those lights during showings.
- ✓ *Mid-level* lighting is all the task lighting created by lamps and under-counter lighting. If you don't have lamps in your house, buy, rent, or borrow some! You can find reasonably priced lamps at home improvement stores. After you have your lamps in place, use the highest-watt bulbs recommended.
- ✓ *Floor-level* lighting sits on the floor and lights your way at floor level — stairway lighting and up lights. We love to put up lights in and under a silk or live tree because the plant casts an interesting shadow on the ceiling and adjoining walls.

Maximizing light's color

Drive down the road at night, and you quickly notice that different colors of headlights are coming toward you. That's because light has a color, too. The color of light you use in your house creates a mood.



Daylight bulbs are available at every hardware store and provide light most comparable to sunlight. They're wonderful throughout the house. Energy-efficient bulbs are worth the extra money because they save electricity and last up to seven years. Daylight bulbs provide better light for photographs.

Different kinds of bulbs cast different kinds of lights:

- ✓ Incandescent bulbs cast a yellow light and add warmth to a room.
- ✓ Fluorescent bulbs cast a blue light and cool down a room.
- ✓ Halogen bulbs are very hot and add purple light to a room.

Lighting has a huge part to play in choosing the right colors for a room. Other factors change a color in a room as well, for example:

- ✓ Eastern exposure adds a green cast to the colors of a room.
- ✓ Southern exposure adds a yellow-white cast to the room and brightens the colors in the room.
- ✓ Western exposure adds an orange cast.
- ✓ Northern exposure adds a grey cast that cools and dulls a room.

Choose a neutral paint color that will work throughout the house, taking into consideration the natural light and the electric lighting in the rooms.



After you've narrowed down your paint choices, get a sample quart or packet from your paint store and paint three large poster boards with the color. Let them dry thoroughly, then prop up the color boards against the three walls you see when entering the room to see how you like the color during all times of the day and evening. If you don't like the color, paint another three boards and try again. This way you don't become confused by all the color swatches painted on the wall and you don't mess up the walls with color swatches that have to be primed over later before painting the final color.

Chapter 5

It's Not What You Have; It's Where You Place It

In This Chapter

- ▶ Highlighting focal points
 - ▶ Recognizing room shapes
 - ▶ Making the most of any shape
-

After you do the de-cluttering, packing, and storing (see Chapter 7), and after you make it through the painting, cleaning, repairing, and replacement, the coolest thing about readying your house for sale is putting everything back in place. You get to start fresh with a clean slate. Where you go from there depends upon the room you're working with. You solve the furniture-placement puzzle differently for a square room than you would for a long rectangle of a room.

In this chapter, we help you figure out what shape your rooms are, and then we give you strategies for making the rooms look larger and be more functional.



If you have furniture in a room, you can be thrown off the scent of the room's true shape. The easiest way to see the shape of the room is to look at the ceiling. Most rooms fall into one of these five categories:

- ✓ Rectangle
- ✓ Square
- ✓ L-shape
- ✓ Bowling alley
- ✓ Rooms that have a unique angle (from built-in cabinetry, maybe, or a fireplace in the corner)

After you determine the shape of the room, you can more easily place your furniture so that buyers actually see the room — not just your furnishings.



Even though you may use the extra bedroom for your home gym, it's important that you turn it back into its original purpose. A dining room needs to be a dining room, not a computer center or home office.

Focal Points: The Start of the Selling Process

A room's *focal point* is the place in a room where your eyes are first drawn. Color, furniture placement, the lines and scale of items are all things that enhance the focal point. Everyday focal points are often personal possessions like a special collection, family photos, or trophies and awards. In a family room or great room the focal point is often the television.



When you're staging your house for sale, make the focal point something the buyer inherits, like the windows or the fireplace instead of your personal items. Your super-premium flat-screen TV might be the focal point of the family room for living purposes, but unless you plan to include it in the sale, draw buyers' attention to the fireplace or other fixed feature of the room.

The personal items that create the ambiance in a room are those items that need to be packed away so buyers can imagine their own things in that space. After you remove all your personal stuff, you can more easily take an objective look at the room and find its selling features. Getting your things out of the room might also mean you lose or change the focal point that you created. The purpose of staging is to sell what the buyer inherits — the architecture.



A room can have more than one focal point. A typical place for competing focal points is a family room with a TV, a fireplace, and a great view of the garden from the patio doors. In an instance like that, choose a fixed element that you think will most entice buyers and position your furniture so that you highlight it.

Eying your existing focal point

You can do a quick focal-point test by noting where your eyes are drawn when you walk into your room. If it's the outdated teal carpet instead of the fireplace, then you need to take a closer look at what you want the buyers to focus on. Chances are it's the fireplace, which means you need to strongly consider changing the carpet.

When you're selling your property, you need to ensure that the buyers' eyes are looking at positive impressions related to the features of the house — not your personal things.

Focal points can be *fixed* (the architectural features that stay with the property and that are very difficult or impossible to change, like a fireplace or a great view) or *non-fixed*, meaning that they can easily be moved, like a piece of art.



When staging a property for sale, highlight the fixed focal point in the room first and resort to placing a non-fixed focal point when necessary. The goal is to highlight the house itself, not your great taste in art.

Creating focal points

When the view is not great from the window or the windows are outdated and need replacing, then draw the buyers' eyes away from the problem with non-fixed focal points.



Covering up a defect in a house is shortsighted and irresponsible, and it's not something that a professional stager would recommend. Replacing windows is always the first choice over covering them, but if your budget doesn't allow it, work to highlight something else to draw attention away from the non-selling feature of the house.

Highlight focal points by arranging the furniture around or toward it and marry it with well-placed artwork, color in throw pillows and accessories, mirrors, and other scaled-to-size items. Pay particular attention to the flow through the room. You want to make sure that buyers have clear pathways to the focal point and to the other rooms.

Staging nightmare: Figure 5-1 shows you a living room furnished the way many people live — a casual, traditional setting ready for entertaining a lot of people. For appealing to buyers, however, the room holds too many distractions from its selling features.

Staging solution: The Certified Staging Professionals graduating class removed some of the furnishings to create a more spacious look and feel. In Figure 5-2, your eye immediately is drawn to the windows and how the shape of the mirror also replicates the shape of the fireplace. Repeating shapes and sizes helps create a feeling of cohesion, staging has highlighted the best features of that very same room.



Figure 5-1:
Before, buyers see the furnishings and miss the focal points of the room.

Graduating CSP class



Figure 5-2:
Staged, removing the rug and a lot of the furniture enabled buyers to see the great-looking fireplace and a cozy alcove.

Graduating CSP class

Positive fixed focal points you want to highlight when selling are

- ✓ Fireplaces
- ✓ Large beautiful windows (unless they frame a garbage dump, an abandoned car, or another unsightly view)
- ✓ Architectural features such as moldings, staircases, built-in cabinetry — any beautiful workmanship that adds value to the home

Negative focal points that you want to draw buyers' eyes from include

- ✓ Television, electronics, speakers, home stereo system
- ✓ Bright rugs and carpeting, especially if they're outdated or worn
- ✓ Books, DVD, or music collections
- ✓ Collections of any sort, including trophies and awards
- ✓ Religious or potentially personal items, such as naked silhouettes or statues
- ✓ Family photos or lifestyle choices like religious, drug, political, or sexually explicit subject matter displayed in artwork, photographs, and so on
- ✓ Anything that would make the buyer think the property hadn't been taken care of, like cracked or broken tiles, fingerprints and dirt smudges on doorknobs and door jambs, or an unkempt yard

Making sure furniture sends the right message

The furniture you put in your home influences the buyer's impression of the property. If the furniture is old, worn, out of scale, or distracts from the focal point you may send the subliminal message that all in the house is not well maintained. The following sections offer a few ideas about how to keep your furniture from sending a negative message.

Clean it

A professional cleaning really can make furniture look new. If your furniture is stylish or has simple lines, a good cleaning may be all it needs to bring it up to snuff. Dress it up with a few pillows and a throw, and — *voilà* — your furniture just gained another life.

Slip into something more stylish

Slipcovering a piece of furniture gives it a clean updated look and breathes new life into a room. Slipcovers are great for covering furniture that's a little past its prime or stained. Keep in mind the following points when you shop for a slipcover:

- ✔ A slipcover should be sized and shaped just right for the piece of furniture it covers or you don't get the pulled-together look you're shooting for.
- ✔ Look for a neutral slipcover that covers the entire piece of furniture and complements the other pieces of furniture in the room.
- ✔ A polyester/cotton slipcover is the least-expensive option and fine if you're buying something you plan to use just for home-selling, but if you're looking for a long term cover, go for comfort and durability.
- ✔ You can renew even ottomans and recliners with slipcovers.
- ✔ A high-quality slipcover can cost as much as new furniture but there are plenty of inexpensive, current styles and colors available at www.surefit.net.

You can easily slipcover a variety of furniture using furniture throws or even bed sheets. Read *Sewing For Dummies*, Second Edition, by Jan Saunders Maresh (Wiley, 2004) to find out how.

Update it

If your furniture is worn or outdated, try one of these solutions:

- ✔ Replace it with new furniture that you take with you to your new home
- ✔ Store it and rent updated furniture from a local furniture store or professional stager
- ✔ Cover it with ready-made slipcovers
- ✔ Accessorize around it with well-chosen accessories and art that draws the buyer's attention away from the furniture

Eliminate some of it

Oversized furniture can overpower a room and make it feel smaller. Remove some of the pieces of oversized furniture — or replace them with smaller pieces — to open up the space.



Space is more important than your comfort and convenience when selling your house.

Too much furniture also makes a room look small. Be aggressive and take out anything you don't need or aren't currently using to make the room look

open and larger. Remove shelves, large cabinets, extra chairs — anything not attached to the wall. Our staging motto is “When in doubt, take it out!”

Place it

Consider the traffic flow of the room by looking at the location of your doorways. A big no-no in selling a room is to position large furniture near a doorway or where it will block the traffic flow to a window.

Pay attention also to the balance of the room. Positioning all large pieces of furniture on one side of the room leaves the room looking off kilter or too heavy on one side.



Place the tallest item farthest from the door to minimize its size and keep the buyer from feeling squished in the room.

Light it

Your agent may suggest you turn on all the lights during a showing, but most houses don't have enough appropriate lighting. Lighting is often too dim, too harsh, or coming from too few light sources in the room.

Here are some tips to help you light up your house:

- ✓ Add lights until you have 100 watts for every 50 square feet in the room, using energy-efficient compact fluorescent bulbs. For more on energy-saving and eco-friendly staging techniques, be sure to check out Chapter 21.
- ✓ Install dimmer switches throughout the main rooms of the house. Buyers look at them as an upgrade.
- ✓ Layer the room with light at different levels. To create a beautiful ambience, combine overhead, table, floor, and accent lighting. Spotlights on artwork or an up-light behind a potted tree can cast interesting shadows that add to the warmth of the room.



Often just changing a lamp shade to a lighter, more contemporary one can make all the difference in upgrading an otherwise outdated lamp.

Chapter 4 tells you much more about how to use lighting.

Adding Angles to a Square-Shaped Room

A square room can be boring and feel small. Depending on what you're selling — the view or the beautiful fireplace, for example — the position of the furniture can direct the buyer to the focal point and even make the room

look bigger. That's why we like to showcase a square room by angling the furniture to open up the space.

A caveat: In some rooms, angling won't be the solution. You really do need to consider flow around furniture, too.

Staging nightmare: The biggest problem in the room in Figure 5-3 is that the sellers' furniture is too big for the space. Buyers couldn't get beyond the huge sofa they saw when they entered the room.

Staging solution: Staging by Jan and her business partner Char Curry enabled buyers to see that the house has lovely hardwood floors and a great yard. Angling the sofa, removing the over-sized area rug and opening the plantation shutters enabled buyers to see the back yard. Figure 5-4 shows you the results.



Figure 5-3:
Before,
the sofa
dominates
this square
family room.



Figure 5-4:
Staged,
angled
furniture
gives buyers
a better
view.

Jan Maresh and Char Curry, Naked Room Solutions

Balancing a Rectangular Room

A lot of folks don't know what to do with a rectangular room, especially if it's large enough to have two or more conversation areas. The best furniture placement is straight, with the furniture parallel or perpendicular to the walls. Always keep traffic flow in mind so the furniture doesn't block buyers from walking through the room.

Staging nightmare: In addition to the distracting clutter, the room in Figure 5-5 is a very challenging one because it has doors at both ends. This living room is just to the right of the front door, and buyers needed to walk through it to get to the family room via the French doors at the other end.

Staging solution: After the clutter was packed away and moved out of the space, buyers could see the fireplace and the architecture of the living room. (See Figure 5-6.) Opening the French doors invited buyers to tour the rest of the house.



Figure 5-5:
Before, this rectangular-shaped room was cluttered and confusing.

Graduating CSP Class



Figure 5-6:
Staged, the furniture placement invites buyers to walk through the rectangular room to see the rest of the house.

Graduating CSP Class

The L-Shaped Room

A good example of a typical L-shaped room is a living room–dining room combination. In a lot of these rooms, the sofa is placed with its back to the windows. This arrangement blocks the view out the front window. Instead, open up the space between the two rooms by angling the furniture so the buyer is drawn into the room and isn't blocked from the view.

Staging nightmare: A small apartment living/dining room was doing more than double duty. The owners used it not only as a living room but as a family room and the home office you see in Figure 5-7.

Staging solution: Removing the home office and then angling the furniture enabled buyers to focus on the view. Figure 5-8 shows you the room after the graduating CSP class morphed it back into its original purpose — a dining room.



Figure 5-7:
Before, one
end of an
L-shaped
room was
being used
as a home
office.



Figure 5-8: Staged, the other end of this L-shaped room was returned to its intended purpose.

Graduating CSP Class

Sparing a Bowling Alley–Shaped Room

Bowling alley rooms (rectangular rooms less than 12 feet wide) are tricky because they're long and narrow. We see a lot of rooms like this where folks have used a straight furniture arrangement that makes the room look even longer and narrower. Your bowling alley-shaped room may be large enough to create an open, V-shaped conversation area. Angling the furniture in such a configuration visually widens the space.

Staging nightmare: The small, multipurpose space in Figure 5-9 didn't look large enough for living room furniture, let alone a dining room table and chairs.

Staging solution: Adding furniture at angles gave the room more depth and let buyers see that there was enough room in this space for relaxing and entertaining. Figure 5-10 shows you the results of the staging by Jackson West of Reveal Estate.

Figure 5-9:
Before, a vacant, bowling-alley-shaped room is deceiving to buyers.



Jackson West, Reveal Estate

Figure 5-10:
Staged, the angled furniture visually widens the room.



Jackson West, Reveal Estate

Addressing an Unexpected Angle

More than any other room shape, unique angles in a room determine the furniture placement because one angle requires another angle to balance the room. And if you don't balance the angle with another angle, the furniture in the room just looks . . . funny. If, for example, you have a corner fireplace, balance the room by mirroring the angle with the sofa positioned parallel to the fireplace.

Staging nightmare: The tiny apartment in Figure 5-11 was just 500 square feet, so buyers could not see how they could comfortably live in the space or how to set up the furniture so they could enjoy the corner fireplace and the view out the front windows.

Staging solution: Stager Jackson West angled the furniture to mirror the corner fireplace in the room and balance the space (see Figure 5-12). Choosing furniture that's in proportion to the room enables buyers to imagine moving in; the dark-colored chairs mirrored the corner fireplace and help balance the room.



Figure 5-11:
Before, this
oddly-
shaped
room looks
small and
hard to
furnish.

Figure 5-12:
Staged,
proportion-
ate furniture
and an
angled
arrange-
ment
balance
the angle in
the room.



Jackson West, Reveal Estate

Part II

Three Staging Steps Toward Hitting a Home Run

The 5th Wave

By Rich Tennant



"Before you begin your home staging consultation, let me say one thing, because I know what you're thinking, and we already plan on getting rid of that hideous lamp."

In this part . . .

Most people we meet — and many we work with — initially think that staging is just moving around the furniture. After all, that's what they see on TV, right?

In this part, we take you through the three-step staging process so you better understand what happens at a staging consultation, the kind of work you're going to need to do, ways to show off your house's features, and the many ways your life changes when you open your house to potential buyers.

Chapter 6

First Base: The Staging Consultation

In This Chapter

- ▶ Outlining reasons to call in a professional
 - ▶ Glimpsing a complete staging consultation
 - ▶ Setting staging priorities
 - ▶ Getting a fix on probable costs
 - ▶ Considering do-it-yourself staging
-

Many home sellers are *house blind* — they’ve lived in the house long enough that they don’t see the imperfections anymore. They overlook the worn floors, the dented and scuffed baseboards and have totally forgotten that the doorbell doesn’t work, the toilet flapper is broken, and the faucet leaks. Owners develop blind spots like these because the brain hangs onto the image it stored when the house was new instead of what the eyes actually see. Having a set of fresh eyes that are trained to find details that chip away at your equity is worth your investment.

A *staging consultation* is a fee-for-service meeting between a professional stager and a house seller during which the stager compiles a list of recommendations for work to be completed throughout the property (inside and out) to ready the property for sale. The consultation process can also include a list of action steps, priorities, and resources. Having a thorough staging consultation by a professional stager is like drawing up the ultimate “honey do” list. It helps you identify things around the house that you may not see, that will detract from a sale, and that will gobble up equity if you don’t correct them.

When we review our findings and recommendations with sellers during a consultation, we hear, “I didn’t notice that,” and the sellers seem amazed that we did. Another oft-heard line is, “You’re so picky.” Stagers find what needs to be

fixed, cleaned, painted, or replaced because they're looking for flaws and you're not.



When it comes to stagers, pickier is better. You want your stager to notice everything that needs improvement so that you can bring your property up to snuff before the buyer picks another property to view or purchase.

Knowing When and Why to Call a Stager

We find that most folks think *home staging* is just another term for cleaning and packing personal items, moving around the furniture, and decorating. After all, that's what you see on HGTV, isn't it? When home staging is done correctly, it's that and a whole lot more, and we believe it's both a science and an art.

The *science* is the straightforward, statistically supported process of preparing the house for market; it's the prelude to the art of home staging and covers things like

- ✓ Packing away personal items
- ✓ Performing necessary maintenance
- ✓ Refurbishing dated fixtures

The *art* of home staging includes

- ✓ Maximizing the positive architectural features of your house
- ✓ Utilizing furniture, lighting, art, and accessory placement to draw viewers to the house's positive features
- ✓ Targeting and appealing to the widest prospective audience interested in buying your house



No one gets a second chance to make a first impression, and in home-selling terms, the first impression means dollars. Why gamble with your equity by failing to get your house into its best shape for a stunning first impression?

Agents tell us all the time that they understand staging and how it makes showing a property easier. When they see stories in the media or talk with stagers, they're skeptical of the overused "sell quicker and for more money" claim. They're hesitant about it because there are no guarantees when selling your house. Staging has proven to help houses sell quicker, but many things affect the final sale, including price, location, and condition — even the state of the economy.

Home staging is a service whose time has come, and it's changing the way real estate is sold. The home and property staging industry is growing by leaps and bounds.

Before you sell your property, you need to know how to invest your time, money, and resources to bring your property up to a marketable condition if you want to secure the most equity you can get. A stager can help you figure out what you need to do and where you should spend your money to bring your property to market.

But staging isn't a cure-all: Location, price, market conditions, and economics all play important roles in the sale of a property. The one area where you have total control is the condition of the property — how the house looks and feels. Having a professional consultation helps you focus on the process of earning and uncovering the equity within the walls of the property.

Moving is so stressful that it ranks right up there with public speaking and even the death of a spouse on the anxiety scale. A great stager works with you and your agent like a professional fitness trainer, by showing you the most efficient way to get your homework done, removing as much stress as possible from the moving process, making the top recommendations to get your home sold, and helping you get everything done on time.

A great stager also

- ✓ Helps you determine what projects you're able to do yourself
- ✓ Points out areas where you may need contracting help
- ✓ Has a stable of insured, reliable tradespeople to help you get all the work completed on time
- ✓ Has an arsenal of trade connections and great resources to help you save on products and services to keep you on budget

Finding a professional

When you're looking for a professional stager, *caveat emptor* (let the buyer beware) applies just like it would to finding a mechanic or dentist. The industry includes excellent professionals . . . and some that aren't so excellent.



Because the home-staging industry is still emerging, it isn't regulated; no single source holds stagers (or those who call themselves stagers) accountable to a set of common standards and best practices. Therefore doing your homework and asking a lot of questions before you hire a stager is extra important.

Ask your real estate agent of choice to recommend a professional stager. The Internet also can point you to a number of professional stagers in your area. Simply put the word *stager* with the name of your town into your search engine of choice, and then start reading.



The following Web sites can direct you to stagers in your area:

- ✓ www.findyourstager.com (in the United States)
- ✓ www.findyourstager.ca (in Canada)
- ✓ www.iahsp.com

Screening your prospects

After you find a couple of prospects from recommendations or from your Internet research, get your picks on the phone to find out more about their experience and methods. Make sure that you ask the following questions:

- ✓ **What qualifies you to be in this business?** Ask the candidate where she received her training, how long she's been staging houses, and whether she's certified.
- ✓ **What are your professional affiliations and certifications?** Those interested in growing and developing their business and keeping their skills current are usually active in national trade organizations and local chapters of the Builders Industry Association or other related trade associations.
- ✓ **Can you give me an example of the results your work brings?** While not every staging job sells the house during the first open house, most stagers are happy to share their successes with you.
- ✓ **May I see a sample of your work?** Any stager worth his salt has a portfolio. Ask to see it.
- ✓ **Do you have a Web site where I can see your work?** If a stager is certified, her training organization makes it very easy and inexpensive to put up a Web site. If she doesn't have one, you may want to questions her credentials.
- ✓ **Do you have any testimonials I can read?** Ask the stager what his clients say about him or whether he has testimonials he'd like to share with you.
- ✓ **Can you provide references?** References are the lifeblood of building a staging business. Any stager serious about her business should be able to provide you a list of referrals that includes clients and real estate professionals.

- ✔ **What guarantees do you offer?** Staging comes with no guarantees, so if a stager gives you one, run! A reliable stager more likely tells you that if you don't fully prepare your property, it may be on the market longer and you'll need to accept an offer that's less than you wanted.
- ✔ **Do you have standards or a code of conduct to follow? If so, may I see a copy of the document?** Certified Staging Professionals must agree to, sign off on, and adhere to, a strict code of ethics.
- ✔ **What business insurance do you have? May I see it?** Insurance is extremely important when you have someone in your house moving around your personal belongings, so make sure your stager has it.
- ✔ **Are the members of your team also insured?** The staging insurance policy we have covers anyone we work with. Make sure the same is true of the stager you hire.

Knowing What to Expect from a Complete Staging Consultation

Not long ago, sellers could just clean up the yard, wash the dishes, and dust the floors before putting a For Sale sign in the yard. But the market has changed: Consumers are very savvy, and you're competing with brand-new construction when you try to sell your house.

When buyers choose a house, they're looking for the best house they can get for the price they're willing to spend. The best way to get your house ready to compete is by having a complete staging consultation.

A *complete staging consultation* is a thorough inspection of your house and property. The professional stager gives you a written report of the inspection that usually looks like the mother of all "honey do" lists. This list contains all the things you planned to get to eventually but that you need to complete now, and a lot of stuff you probably never noticed. Moving is a lot of work, sure, but remember — the more you do to prepare your house for the transition, the better your return on investment.

Some stagers also provide a *walk-through consultation with recommendations* — an abbreviated version of the complete staging consultation. This kind of consultation isn't nearly as comprehensive.

Peering into the *CSP Room Ready Handbook*

When the Canadian Staging Professionals (CSP) staging program was launched, the organization initiated standards that consumers could count on and developed a comprehensive list of items that a trained eye needs to look for and evaluate.

The CSP's recommendation list became the 56-page *CSP Room Ready Handbook*, which the

CSP stager completes and discusses with you before leaving the property. Right then and there, you get to keep, refer to, and carry out the top staging recommendations. The handbook also includes EcoStaging guidelines to make your house more marketable. (Check out Chapter 21 for more on staging your property to save our precious resources.)

Delving into the consultation report

The written report that you receive after a complete consultation varies depending on who you hire. Some stagers provide a handwritten report on the spot, and others take notes while they're at your house and then mail or fax a typewritten report later. Some stagers e-mail the report when it's ready.



Because time is usually a factor when you're readying a house for sale, ask the stager when you can expect the report.

One stager we heard of actually tells the home seller during the consultation, "You'd better take notes while I talk." Some consultation! If the stager doesn't take the consultation seriously and do everything that he should do, then how will the rest of his work be performed?



A complete staging consultation should result in a comprehensive list of recommendations that flow from room to room. It should also include observations and recommendations for the exterior of the property. Think of it as an action plan, a work plan, a starting point. If the idea of doing all this work is making you crazy, turn your thinking around and look at the staging consultation as a treasure map to uncovering the equity in your house.

How long are you going to poke around my house?

Because the complete consultation is comprehensive it's also personal. Like home inspectors, stagers look at every nook and cranny; unlike home inspectors, stagers go so far as to inspect your bathroom vanity drawers, closets, and kitchen pantry.



Stagers have good reason for all this poking about; for example, organized storage space is the third most-important selling feature of a house. You need to know whether your storage areas could use new flooring and paint.

If your rooms are big or packed with furniture, or if you have a lot of rooms, expect your consultation to go even longer.

All of your questions about the consultation process should have been answered by phone before a stager gets to the house, but to make the seller feel comfortable most stagers usually start the face-to-face consultation with a brief conversation to allay any concerns they may have. Realtors who are using a stager for the first time will want to attend this first meeting with the homeowner.

The stager begins the consultation by touring your house and writing down recommendations. At the end of the consultation, the stager reviews with you what you need to do to stage your house and helps you plan your next steps.

Setting Your Priorities: What Are the Top Recommendations?

You may feel a little overwhelmed when you look at the laundry list of projects that your stager provides you. Many people do. Just focus on the result of the work you're about to do and make the list more manageable by prioritizing the recommendations.



High-priority staging recommendations are those that

- ✓ Impact the equity of the house
- ✓ Have the highest emotional impact on the buyer

A great staging professional provides double value when it's time to prioritize the recommendations by taking your budget into consideration and putting the recommendations in order of importance.

Every house is different, so even if your house is in the same neighborhood and has the same floor plan as one that was staged last month, your top recommendations may be different because you live differently than your neighbor.

If you're considering hiring a stager to complete the consultation and then deciding on the top recommendations yourself, keep an open mind and

remember what buyers need to see — not what you think they need to see. Also find out what home builders provide as standard amenities in the new houses in your area and price range, and then figure out how you can include these features in your existing home.

What's This Going to Cost Me?

You find a wide range of prices for stagers' services, but count on spending something close to what we outline in the following sections. And remember, don't base your decision whether to hire a stager on price alone. You usually do get what you pay for.



Discuss the stager's fees when you first request information from him. This may be on the telephone or in person. Some stagers provide an estimate over the phone, others require a visit. Taking a quick look gives the stager an idea of the condition of your house and provides you a more accurate quote.

When one of Jan's clients complained about spending \$350 on paint to update the cinnamon walls with the pink niches, Christine asked, "Would you paint if I gave you \$5,000?" Who would say *no* to that? Think of the prep work you do and any money you spend as an investment rather than a cost.

Pricing the walk-through consultation

Price varies by where you live, of course, but a good average for a walk-through consultation is \$250 for two to three hours. We hear of some stagers charging \$50 to \$100 for a walk-through consultation. This consultation is usually referred to as a "quick" walk-through. No kidding! We don't recommend a quick walk-through. The idiom "you get what you pay for" applies.

One reason a stager might be quick is that she doesn't know what she's doing; she may just not be thorough because she needs to get in and out of your house in a hurry to ensure that she doesn't lose money on her low-rate services.

Martha Stanton-Smith, a Certified Staging Profession in Kingston, Ontario, has a great comeback when someone says, "So-and-so charges much less than you." She replies, "I don't have a problem what anyone else charges; they certainly know what their services are worth." Ouch!

Professional staging consultation

The price you pay for a professional staging consultation is based on one of three things:

- ✓ The number of hours the stager spends to conduct the consultation
- ✓ The square footage of your house
- ✓ The number of rooms you have

The larger the house and the more stuff you have, the longer it takes to compile a comprehensive list of recommendations, but here's a staging consultation guideline: If your house is less than 2,000 square feet, you can expect to pay around \$250. Be prepared to pay more for a larger place.

Can I Do My Own Staging Consultation?

Sure! We'd never suggest that you can't, but we offer this important proviso: You can do your own staging consultation *if* you can be objective. Bear in mind also that you need to

- ✓ Know what the buyer needs and wants to see in your property. (Chapter 2 gives you the details.)
- ✓ Be familiar with current trends.
- ✓ Think outside the box to make your house a marketable commodity.

One way that home sellers save dollars without losing the objective eye is to invest their property preparation dollars into a staging consultation and then completing as much of the work as possible by themselves. This "home-work" portion is the foundation for the very crucial showcasing part of the equation — "the art of staging" that we mention in the section "Knowing When and Why to Call On a Stager."



You can perform a staging consultation and do the resulting work on your own, but we encourage you not to try going without it. We have staged many houses where home sellers decided to just try to sell a house without any preparation or a staging consultation. Many have regretted not taking the time to do a thorough job — an oversight that left the house on the market for months. Eventually their real estate agent recommended the services of a stager and within a short period they had revamped the house, and it sold in days and for more money than they expected.



We often recommend that sellers get a professional home inspection before listing the house so they can take care of potential problems ahead of time. In most cases this “preemptive strike” has resulted in a faster sale. The same holds true for the professional staging consultation; by knowing what you have to do ahead of time, you stave off an objection before it comes up.

Decorating isn’t the same thing as staging a property for sale. Working with a decorator or real estate agent who *thinks* he knows what to do to sell your house costs you equity and additional days on the market. The upcoming staging nightmare illustrates the importance of having a professional staging consultation.

Staging nightmare: The real estate market was brisk in the fall of 2006 when Terrylynn Fisher (Realtor and professional stager) was called to a home in Alamo, California. The house had been on the market since May.

The inside of the home had been “staged” by the previous listing Realtor who convinced the home seller that she knew how to “decorate a property for sale.” She had totally ignored the exterior and the all-important curb appeal. The arbors (See Figure 6-1) were 10 years old, had been added to the front porch for entry appeal, were unpainted, and looked very weathered.

Curb appeal gives the buyer an expectation of what’s inside. If the exterior is unkempt and in need, buyers wonder what else has been let go. This home hadn’t been let go, but buyer perception at the curb was keeping agents from getting buyers through the front door.

Staging solution: The power of a consultation impacts curb appeal. As a very busy agent, CSP graduate and active stager Terrylynn Fisher knew what needed to be done but decided it would be better for the client to have the recommendations come from an independent staging expert. The client had already had a less-than-successful experience with an agent-cum-decorator. Terrylynn called in Kym Hough of Staged to Sell in Danville, California, to give a comprehensive staging consultation.

The square footage and lot size were smaller than many of the homes in the area, but the house was well positioned and appealing. The challenge was to maximize the appeal of the house, while making it appear large and spacious and play up the well-appointed features that some of the neighboring homes did not have. Terrylynn and Kym developed a staging plan.

The first order of business was to paint the arbors white to match the other house trim and make them more inviting. (See Figure 6-2.) Inside, the stagers maximized the space, highlighting the architectural features, and removed the superfluous, heavy furniture.

The result: The home went back on the market in November of 2006, typically the slower time of year and in a softer market. 23 days later the owners had three offers. The home sold for \$25,000 over the asking price.

Figure 6-1:
Before, the
black arbor
outside
looks
drab and
uninviting.



Terrylynn Fisher

Figure 6-2:
Staged, the
arbor
attracts
buyers to
walk
through the
front door
and take a
closer look.



Terrylynn Fisher

Chapter 7

Second Base: Earning Equity with Elbow Grease

In This Chapter

- ▶ Getting each room into selling shape
 - ▶ Banishing clutter from the home stage
 - ▶ Sprucing up the walls and trim
 - ▶ Hiring specialists to help you prepare
-

Whether you intend to do this step by yourself or hire help, this homework step is where you earn big-time equity. You read that right . . . *homework* — everything you need to do to your property to get it ready to sell. If you haven't sold a house in awhile, you may remember the days when giving the house a thorough cleaning and touching up the nail holes was all you had to do. Not today. The Internet and decorating shows have educated buyers to look for near perfection — or ask for a significant markdown.

This chapter gives you a summary of property preparation. We start by redefining clean, showing you what the buyer expects, and then we share our favorite cleaning tricks and products. Next we talk you through important repairs and tell you what you're likely to need to replace and why. After everything is repaired and cleaned, you need to turn your home back into a house by depersonalizing and de-cluttering. We show you how to do that, too, complete with packing and storing strategies.

Finally, we wrap up the chapter by guiding you through what you need to know about working with outside vendors.

Earning Equity: Steps for Every Room

In this section we start breaking down the job ahead into bite-size pieces. The first step in making your house show-ready is to clean it like you've never cleaned before. Next you make the needed repairs, and then mentally start moving onto your next house by depersonalizing the one you're in now.

Leaving no streak behind

Every surface in your home — every window, door, floor, counter, and so on — needs to sparkle. You want every spot where a buyer's eye lands to look like no speck of dirt, dirty finger, or dust bunny has ever rested there.



Buyers can tell whether a house has been only surface cleaned. You're going to have to go far beyond swiping the cabinets with a dust cloth. You want toilet seats and bathroom fixtures to be so clean they look never-been-used new. Clean light fixtures, wall coverings, door handles, and baseboards — leave not one dust mite behind!

When your house goes beyond spic-and-span, it sends the message that it's a loved and well-maintained house — and that it's move-in ready. Here's a handy checklist to keep your cleaning tasks on track:

- ✓ **Appliances:** Clean all major kitchen appliances inside and out, even if you aren't selling the appliances with the house. Don't forget the filter and the fan above the stove.
- ✓ **Baseboards:** If you're not repainting the baseboards, be sure to clean them well. Also wipe down and clean the thresholds (the piece of flooring that transitions between a doorway and the room beyond it).
- ✓ **Bathroom fixtures and toilets:** Keep everything in the bathroom sparkling clean. Always keep the toilet seat lid down. Remove plastic or fabric seat covers. Store the toilet brush, cleansers, plunger, and all reading material. Take personal items out of shower and tub area and store them in baskets out of sight — doing so makes the space look larger and hotel impersonal.
- ✓ **Beds and linen:** Keep beds made every day and be sure the towels and linens are crisp, clean, and wrinkle-free.
- ✓ **Ceramic tile and grout:** Scrub the grout with an old toothbrush to remove any signs of mold or stains. (Check out our favorite cleaning tips and special grout-cleaning formula in the upcoming section, "Taking cleaning cues from staging professionals.")
- ✓ **Decks, patios, and walkways:** Sweep down and power wash these areas.
- ✓ **Electronics:** Wipe all traces of dust. A can of compressed air can be used cautiously to get the dust out of the creases.
- ✓ **Fireplaces:** Clean out ashes completely; make any glass or metal trim sparkle. Dust and wash the brick, stone, or tile. If you have soot on the firewall above use Krud Kutter to remove it. (See the section, "Taking cleaning cues from staging professionals" to learn more about Krud Kutter.)

- ✔ **Floors:** Clean every floor no matter what the surface; we recommend you have all carpets professionally cleaned. A professional carpet cleaner makes worn and dingy carpets look like new. Even carpets with stains you think may never come out disappear when you get the pros to do it!
- ✔ **Furniture:** Pull out your furniture; vacuum under it and under the cushions.
- ✔ **Garbage:** Remove all debris and trash from the property; empty containers daily and wash them out to prevent odors.
- ✔ **Gutters:** Clean and clear away any leaf debris.
- ✔ **Kitchen cupboards:** Look for and clean off all the fingerprints near the door knobs and drawer pulls. Clean off the food splatter on the lower cupboards. Buyers *will* open the doors and look inside everything.
- ✔ **Laundry rooms:** If you don't have time to keep all the laundry clean, in a pinch you can place dirty laundry in the washer or in a decorative laundry basket with a lid to hide the contents and place a clean towel over top of the dirty clothes. Put away all the clean laundry. Remove and store any excess hangers because they tend to eat up visual space and make the room look messy. Clean the machine lids, knobs, and remove dust and lint from in, over, and behind the dryer.
- ✔ **Light fixtures and switch plates:** Buyers turn on lights and look at the style of light fixtures. Dirty fixtures and switch plates warn buyers that the property may have not been cared for properly.
- ✔ **Mirrors:** Clean any mirrors and reflective surfaces throughout the property so they sparkle.
- ✔ **Walls:** If you're not repainting the walls, dust for cobwebs, and wipe off fingerprints and smudges in high-touch areas such as hallways and staircases.
- ✔ **Windows:** Buyers look at the view from each room, so they notice dirty windows. Make them sparkle inside and out — even basement windows count. Don't forget to clean inside the window frames and tracks, too. Windows work better when they're clean. Finally, during the off-season, take out window screens to let in more light.

Preparing an open house shuffle duffle

When your house is on the market, you sometimes get little notice that an agent wants to show the house. When that call comes, you pull out your duffle and get ready to do the duffle shuffle.

Gina McNew, owner of Diva La Difference Interiors (www.divaladifferenceinteriors.com) and host of the radio show *Diva in the House — The Voice of Real Estate Staging*, says, “When I've staged a property, I like to prepare these

bags with an instruction card and give them out as gifts to my sellers or as a gift to a Realtor.” Here’s how she does it:

1. Purchase very inexpensive laundry bags to act as the duffle.

You can find them at Walgreen’s for just \$5 for two bags. You want one bag for each floor of your house. You may want to put a duffle in each of the kids’ rooms, too.

2. Fill each bag with everything you need to wipe off glass surfaces and furniture.

At the dollar store, purchase one of the following for each bag

- Premoistened glass-cleaner wipes
- Furniture wipes
- Lint roller
- Air neutralizing spray
- Whistle

3. Store a filled duffle bag in a closet on each floor.

Make sure family members know where to find the duffle.

4. When an agent calls, blow the whistle to alert everyone that it’s time for them to grab a bag and get to work.

Do the following:

- Wipe off the glass surfaces and furniture.
- If you don’t have time to vacuum, use the lint roller to pick up any pet fur off the floor or the furniture.
- Use the air neutralizing spray to freshen up the room.
- Throw any items that shouldn’t be in the rooms during the showing (excess mail, toys, games, or magazines — anything that keeps the house from being “show ready”) into the duffle bags. Take the bags with you when you leave the house for the showing.

5. When you get home, put all the loose items back in their proper places, and then replenish and return your shuffle duffles back into the closets for the next time.



If you have young children at home, keep a deck of cards or some small toys in their bags to keep them entertained while you’re away from home.



Taking cleaning cues from staging professionals

Professionals in our business have to be prepared for just about any mess at any time. The following products — some of them surprising — are favorites for many of us and are likely to come in handy for you, too:

✔ **Mr. Clean Magic Eraser:** Hands down the number one recommended product for cleaning by professional stagers. Here are a few tips from Certified Professional Stagers Martha Stanton-Smith and Kimberly Uksik. They advise using the Magic Eraser for

- Cleaning up scuffs and dirt from walls
- Removing marks on plastic surfaces like the inside of the refrigerator
- Spiffing up plastic or fiberglass showers
- Removing scuffs on vinyl floors where scrubbing hasn't worked

One word of caution, be careful using the eraser on flat paint; if you rub too hard, it can turn a smudge into a shiny mark.

✔ **Borax:** Yellow, baked-on grease splatters above stoves, backsplashes, and the surrounding areas come off with the help of Borax Laundry Cleaning Granules, even if the original baking-on happened years ago. CSP Glenda James (www.designingfirstimpressions.ca) advises that you soak a sponge with a little hot water then add Borax cleaning granules to the surface of the wet sponge. Place the sponge on the soiled surface and let it sit (dripping if need be) for 2 to 3 minutes. Wipe off the surface with a white vinegar solution to dissolve the granules, and buff to a shine.

✔ **Krud Kutter:** This spray cleaner is one of Christine's favorites. Use it to remove dried-on latex paint, blood stains, and grease in kitchens or work areas. Krud Kutter also removes spots and stains on carpet and from upholstery, as well as heel marks on walls and baseboards, floor wax build-up, lipstick, and pen and pencil marks on walls, carpets, and upholstery.

✔ **Hair dryer:** Remove dust on real or fake plants, advises CSP Hiedi Kachel (www.harmoniousspaces.ca), by using a hair dryer on a low setting.

✔ **Pledge:** CSP Lynelle Hartman (www.lh2staging.com) recommends that you clean silk plants or trees by spraying them with Pledge. It eats the dust so you don't have to dust the individual leaves.

✔ **Aluminum foil:** Scratches in your stainless steel? Hartman advises rubbing them out with aluminum foil.

✔ **Citrus fruit:** Christine places a few wedges of lemon or orange into a garbage disposal to keep it smelling fresh.

✔ **Terry cloth:** Keep plenty of dry terry cloth rags around to dry the chrome taps and stainless steel sinks so they stay spotless. CSP Martha Stanton-Smith (www.rearrangements.ca) says the dry terry cloth also is great for removing the hairs off the white porcelain in the bathroom especially the base of the toilet.

Repairing or replacing what's less than perfect

The time for procrastinating is over. If you want to earn the most equity in your home, take action now. If it squeaks, give it oil. If it needs repair — fix it! If it's cracked, broken, or outdated, replace it. If it needs painting, get out the paint brush and roller. Compile the ultimate “honey do” list as you take stock of your home, and make sure you've crossed off every item before you take another step toward selling your property.

Use this handy checklist so you don't miss anything that needs some TLC:

- ✓ **Bathroom faucets and fixtures:** Repair any broken toilet seats or hinges. Fix any leaking, worn, or pitted faucets; replace washers and caulk if needed.
- ✓ **Countertops, cabinets, and cupboards:** Replace damaged countertops and fix any cupboard doors that don't swing smoothly. Also clean the cupboard and cabinet doors — inside and out.
- ✓ **Doorbell, doors, and door hardware:** Repair any doors that don't swing or slide smoothly. Oil any squeaks. Repaint doors that need it. If the hardware on the doors is old and tarnished, polish or replace it. Repair a doorbell that doesn't work.
- ✓ **Floors:** Replace or repair flooring that is loose, broken, or missing. Professionally clean the carpets.
- ✓ **Light fixtures, switch plates, and electrical sockets:** If they don't work, repair them; if they're too small or outdated, replace them.
- ✓ **Shower curtains and towels:** Replace any outdated, worn, or damaged curtains and towels. A new shower curtain and towels make a huge difference to any bathroom.
- ✓ **Walls:** Repair any cracks or holes.
- ✓ **Window trim and baseboards:** Address any window trim that needs a touch-up or all-out repair.
- ✓ **Windows and window panes:** Be sure they operate properly; if the seal or a pane is broken, repair or replace it.



People buy homes — not work. When buyers view a potential property and see fixing, cleaning, repairing, and spending money, they're not envisioning themselves living in the house. They *are* envisioning themselves spending hours of time and a lot of money fixing it. Even if a buyer sees past this and imagines what the home would look like if it were finished, is she going to chip away at the selling price if you don't do the work? You bet she is! When you leave any part of the work undone, you leave the price open for discussion and negotiation, resulting in lost equity.

Depersonalizing your spaces

Depersonalizing your home is the act of letting go, and it can be a very painful process.

We know your identity is reflected in the way you decorated your space — the artwork you chose, the colors of the walls, the way you placed your family photos and your personal possessions. But, as long as the property is reflecting you, it can't reflect someone else's taste unless they are exactly like you, and what are the chances? Depersonalizing removes all the things that emotionally block a buyer from making a connection to the property so he can visualize moving in.

The following sections run through some of the items you may need to stash to get yourself out of the way of a sale.

Family photos and memorabilia

Pack up the family photos and specialty items with names on them, such as trophies, plaques, and memorabilia. Buyers tend to be distracted by photos and often feel as if they're invading the private domain of the current home owner. This can make buyers uncomfortable and lead them to spend less time in your house — a very high hurdle for a buyer to overcome so that he can visualize himself living there.

You have a better chance of enabling buyers to linger and therefore see themselves living in your house if you replace family photos and personal items with artwork and neutral photos like landscapes.

Potentially offensive art or items

When you're preparing the property for sale you want to be sure not to turn even one potential buyer away. We were taught not to talk, sex, religion, or politics with anyone new and that we wanted to impress. That same rule applies when you're selling your property. Don't let the message displayed in the house be offensive to anyone. And don't forget the teenagers' rooms! It takes an emotional connection for a potential buyer to make an offer, but a negative emotional thought can also turn the buyer away.

Books and music

The books you read and the music you listen to tell a story about who you are. So pack away all the paperback books, political or religious books, old LPs or records, magazine collections, and cookbooks you don't use. If you keep hardcover books out for showcasing (see Chapter 8 for more about showcasing) remove and store the dust jackets.



Stagers often use a book as a prop. For example, a book open on a table in a corner of a room accompanied by a comfy reading chair can reach out and help a buyer visualize herself curled up in that same corner with a good book. If you use this type of emotional connecting, be sure to use a book that appeals to a wide range of people — something about travel, history, or nature, maybe, but certainly not anything controversial.

Knickknacks and collections

Leave your knickknacks and collections on display and buyers are either awed and spend too much time looking at your collection instead of focusing on the property, or they don't like the collection and find it a turn-off. Either way, these things slow down the house-selling process.

If buyers are ogling your collection of widgets, they may also miss a feature of the house that they've always wanted — if they had only been able to see it. So pack up your collections early; you need to pack them anyway, and doing so keeps them safe from accidents during showings.

It's De-lightful, It's De-lovely, It's De-cluttered

Our friend Susan told us about how she helped her “pack-rat” sister de-clutter her house. After days of sorting, tossing, and donating, the pack-rat sister was happily on her way to an organized living space. After this cleansing process, her sister said to Susan, “So when do you want me to help you de-clutter your house?” Susan had never realized that her own house was in a state of clutter. After a short discussion and looking a bit further, she realized that her closets were full of clothes she hadn't worn in years and her kitchen cupboards were overflowing with glasses and dishes that hadn't seen the light of day in a decade.

When it comes to de-cluttering your property, be completely honest with yourself; if you find this hard to do, enlist an objective eye. When you have clutter, buyers tend to focus on your stuff rather than the house. And if your drawers or closet doors can't close, buyers think the house doesn't have enough storage space for their things. In this section, we help you sort through your clutter and get it out of the house (or at least out of sight). It's hard to do, but de-cluttering gets you closer to the sale.



De-cluttering to move is very different from de-cluttering to live. When you de-clutter to live, ostensibly everything has a place, and all you do is make sure that everything is in its place. When you de-clutter for a move, you take out everything except the necessary furniture and accessories. You handle the clutter by packing, giving, or throwing it away.

Sorting through the clutter

De-cluttering experts tell you to enter a room with three boxes, each labeled with one of the following:

- ✓ Pack
- ✓ Donate
- ✓ Toss

Quickly move your way around the room, putting everything you touch into one of the boxes until you have nothing but furniture and bare-minimum accessories left in the room.



If you have a lot of stuff in the room, line each box with an appropriately-sized trash bag. Then, when you fill up one box of stuff, you can label and remove the full trash bag, take it to a holding or storage area, and then put another empty bag in its place for more stuff.

Deciding what to pack, toss, or donate can be difficult. Here are some questions to help you decide. If you answer *yes* to any of these questions, then pack the item away. If you answer *no*, then donate or throw it away.

- ✓ Do you have an emotional attachment to the item?
- ✓ Have you used it in the past year?
- ✓ Do you really need it?
- ✓ Will you benefit from keeping it?

When in doubt, throw it out!

Packing containers make moving fast and easy

Packing is a whole lot easier when you have the right tools and materials. Here are some suggested sizes and products for packing your books, collections, and other household items:

- ✓ 2 cubic-foot carton for books and small appliances
- ✓ 4 cubic-foot carton for small appliances and cookware
- ✓ 6 cubic-foot carton for linens
- ✓ Lampshade carton
- ✓ Small mirror carton for small mirrors and prints
- ✓ Large mirror carton for large mirrors and prints
- ✓ Wardrobe cartons for hanging clothes and curtains
- ✓ Mattress bags to protect your mattresses

Packing your stuff

You've already made the decision to move and you know that a de-cluttered house is easier to sell, so why wait to pack up as much as you can? Early packing can save you a boatload of time and the stress of getting everything packed right before the moving truck arrives.

Keeping track of your stuff — even when it's boxed

One of the reasons sellers don't want to pack up early is the old "But what if I need something before the house sells?" complaint. Pack smart, and you can still find anything you may need. Here are our top three things to keep in mind when packing boxes before a move:

- ✔ List the contents of the box on one of its sides, and then stack boxes so you can read the writing on the side of each box. If the contents are marked on the top of the box, you need to unstack all the boxes to find where you put what you want.
- ✔ Color-code the rooms. Buy colored stickers at the office-supply store, and assign each room its own color. After packing and marking the box, stick a colored sticker on its side. This way you can easily find the kitchen boxes by their blue stickers, for example.
- ✔ Have each family member pack a "tonight and tomorrow" box so they each have what they need when they get to the new house. Think of it like an oversized overnight box. For "tonight," you need bedding, jammies, a towel and toiletries; for "tomorrow," you need a change of clothes. You also want an immediate staple box — coffee pot and coffee, and so on. These boxes are the last to go on the truck or in your car and the first off when you get to your new house.

Moving out without messing up your back

When you start de-cluttering and culling through several years of collecting, you realize you have some things that you really aren't using and don't want to move to your new house. You may also decide that a room looks bigger without Aunt Betty's armoire, and want to wrap it up and move it off site. When that's the case, we find these tools helpful in getting large items moved out and other items moved from one room to the next:

- ✔ **Shoulder dolly:** Reduce back, hand, arm, and forearm strain and risk of injury by using a shoulder dolly to move most bulky and heavy items — appliances, furniture, cabinets, mattresses, plywood, cased glass, file cabinets, and so on. A shoulder dolly also is excellent for moving things up and down stairs.

- ✔ **Furniture lifters:** The furniture lifter can help you get a hand under heavy pieces of furniture. This tool has a flat disc on one end and a strong metal handle on the other. Simply slip the flat disc under the furniture, and then step down on the handle end of the lifter to raise appliances and furniture with a step of your foot. The furniture lifter prevents knee and back strain and supports up to 400 pounds.
- ✔ **Furniture movers:** These movers slip under sofa, table, or credenza legs so the furniture slides effortlessly across carpeting, vinyl, laminate flooring, tile, or hardwood. You find two kinds of furniture movers: hard sliders that work great on carpet and felt sliders that work well for hard surface flooring.
- ✔ **Moving blankets:** These padded blankets provide protection to your larger appliances and cherished wood furniture.

Go to www.stagingmall.com or www.moverssupplies.com to find these products. You also might be able to rent moving blankets from a local moving company.

Finding storage outside the home



Store your packed boxes in your house (even in the garage or basement), and you totally defeat the purpose of your hard work. After all, storage is one of the top selling features buyers look for, so you want to leverage all your valuable space for selling.

Get the stuff out of your house entirely with one of the storage options in the following sections.

Off-site storage units

Off-site storage refers to any space that you might rent to stash your stuff. Some are like outdoor garage spaces with roll-up doors, and others are in large, climate-controlled buildings.

If you're storing wood furniture for long periods of time or if you live in an area where the weather changes drastically from season to season, check out the climate-controlled units to protect your belongings in all types of weather conditions.

Look for the following policies and services before you choose off-site storage:

- ✔ Security surveillance and on-site managers to keep your stuff safe.
- ✔ Insurance packages so your belongings are protected in case anything happens to them while they're in storage.

- ✓ 24-hour, 7-day-a-week access to your storage unit, because you never know when you may need something.
- ✓ Flexible rental agreements so you don't have to pay for storage when you don't need it. Staging your property may mean you sell it fast, so check into the number of days' notice you need to give before vacating the premises.

Portable self-fill containers

You can now have the storage come to you (and then go away). Portable self-fill containers are delivered right to your door so that you can load them in your own time. The containers sit at ground-level, so you don't have to climb in and out of a vehicle as you pack.

After you've packed the unit, you just call to have it removed and stored off-site. The service eliminates truck rentals and extra loading and unloading time and muscle. You load once and then unload when you're ready to move into your new home. Very convenient.

Two popular companies offer portable self-fill containers:

- ✓ U Can offers rental containers by the day, week, month, or year throughout Canada. Call 1-800-980-UCAN or visit www.ucanstoreandmove.ca.
- ✓ PODS (Portable on Demand Storage) operates storage centers in the United States, Canada, and Australia. Check it out at www.pods.com.

If you don't have a budget for storage, try hitting up a friend or relative for storage space so that you can get your boxes out of the house. A space in your own garage or basement works only as a last resort and with the knowledge you can be jeopardizing some equity in the property.

Painting for Perfect Walls and Woodwork

After you have everything cleaned out, packed up, and stored away, you can get a good look at your walls, ceilings, and woodwork. If they're in need of repair or an update, paint is one of the easiest and most cost-effective ways to make a worn and tired house look fresh and new. Choosing the right color is extremely important (and something we talk about in detail in Chapter 4).

The following companies sell quality paint at a good price. Check out their Web sites to find just the right product for the job:

- ✔ The **Sherwin Williams** Prep-rite System makes choosing the right primer for each project foolproof, and many of the Sherwin Williams programs are geared to provide you with more product knowledge so you choose the right products for the job. For more information and store locations visit www.sherwin-williams.com.
- ✔ **ICI Paints** in North America produces decorative coatings and paints for Glidden, Dulux, Ralph Lauren, Devoe, Devoe Coatings, Fuller-O'Brien, Sinclair, and Liquid Nails caulks and adhesives. ICI products are sold in over 700 company stores, national retail outlets, and independent dealers in the United States, Canada, and Puerto Rico. For more information on ICI products visit www.icipaints.com.
- ✔ With more than 4,000 independent retailers across North America, **Benjamin Moore** has been offering paint solutions for the homeowner since 1883. Benjamin Moore paint is a favorite of interior designers and professional painters and has some wonderful tutorials that you can find online at www.benjaminmoore.com.



When you do paint, these painting tips from staging pros might come in handy:

- ✔ Take the smell out of acrylic or latex paint by blending a cap full of vanilla into the paint. (Karen McMillan, CSP, www.bestdressedhomes.ca)
- ✔ When you're finished painting for the day but you haven't completed the project, wrap the wet paint brush and roller in plastic wrap and put it in the freezer. The next day when you're ready to paint, take the brush and roller out of the freezer and let them thaw. The brush should be ready for use in 5 to 10 minutes. This saves time in the clean-up process. (Delaine Fox, CSP, www.nextstepstaging.com)

For the complete picture on painting, read *Painting Do-It-Yourself For Dummies* by Katherine Kaye McMillan and Patricia Hart McMillan (Wiley, 2008).

Hiring the Elbow Grease: Working with Vendors

When you're getting your house ready to go on the market, even if you are an avid do-it-yourselfer, you sometimes need things done yesterday. And if you have two left thumbs, you need to hire the expertise. In either case, you want to be sure that you get the most for your money and hire the best folks for the job.

Compare the potential vendors' answers to important questions to find the one who's best for your situation. Here's a list of some great questions to ask every vendor you interview:

- ✓ **What percentage of your business is repeat or referral business?** Ask for references and contact others who have used the vendor.
- ✓ **How many projects like mine have you completed in the past 12 months?**
- ✓ **What is your process for a project like this?**
- ✓ **How long have you been in business?**
- ✓ **Do you belong to any industry associations?**
- ✓ **Are you licensed in your area of expertise?**
- ✓ **Does your company carry workers compensation and liability insurance?** Request to see certificates. You don't want to be liable for any accidents that may happen on your property.
- ✓ **Who will serve as project supervisor for the job?** Ask for contact information for the supervisor and for whomever you should contact if the supervisor isn't available.

Ask to see portfolios and any company brochures they have. Doing so is the best way to see examples of their work, pricing, and customer satisfaction.

Don't base your decisions solely on price, look for quality, reputation, and their resourcefulness.

For whatever work you hire a vendor to do, insist that you have a contract. A solid contract needs to include:

- ✓ Timelines
- ✓ Costs
- ✓ Warrantees or limited warrantees on products or materials
- ✓ Method of payment
- ✓ Insurance
- ✓ Cancellation or rescheduling policy



Be sure estimates are in writing and insist on proper preparation (taping, priming, two coats, and so on) to be included in the contract. Ask how many jobs the vendor currently has going and whether she will complete yours before starting the next one. You don't want your project held up because the painters are too busy.

The following sections offer some additional tips for hiring specific vendors.

Landscaper

Ask foremost about equipment — those who have to rent equipment and don't have their own can be more expensive because the rental cost gets passed to you. A landscaper who rents also may not have the experience you're looking for.

Curb appeal is job one when you're prepping a house for sale, so insist on a great-looking, low-maintenance yard, which you can use as a selling feature. Ask about pesticides and chemicals vendors may use; these products may be harmful to the environment, pets, and children. Alternatively, you may choose to use an environmentally safe service; investigate your local vendors.



For more information, check out: American Nursery & Landscape Association (www.anla.org), or Canadian Nursery Landscape Association (www.canadanursery.com).

Painter

Many painters have a preferred paint brand they use and buy all their materials from one source; doing so saves them time and money. Some painters do pass on discounts to their customers. **Note:** Sometimes home stagers' preferred pricing is better than the paint contractor's and can save you more money.



Even though paint companies can create any paint formula, they all use different base colors, which means that you end up with a similar color rather than an exact match.

Carpet cleaner

If you're considering replacing the carpet but just aren't sure, get a professional carpet cleaner to give you an estimate. If the color is neutral, the pad is in good shape, and you don't have pet stains imbedded into the carpet and pad, a good carpet cleaner may save you from having to buy new.

Get a written estimate on-site — not over the phone — when the carpet cleaner is looking at the work to be done. You want the person doing the work to tell you what the extra charges are for tough stains, smoke damage,

and so on. Ask what the normal dry time is after the carpets are cleaned so you leave yourself enough drying time before potential buyers start walking through the house.

Carpet installer

If you need new carpet, hire a good installer who has thorough knowledge about the condition of the subfloor. Whether the subfloor is wood or concrete, the installer should be experienced with it and know how to fix it, if it needs repair. A smooth, solid subfloor ensures that the carpet lays smoothly.

When interviewing a carpet installer find out whether the installer

- ✓ Sells carpet pad. If so, compare quality and price with what you find at the carpet store.
- ✓ Picks up the carpet and pad before installation. You might get a price break if you do this step yourself. Remember that carpet comes in 12- or 15-foot-wide rolls, so you need a vehicle long enough to transport the carpeting.
- ✓ Moves your furniture. If not, and you have big pieces to move out of the way, ask whether the installer can recommend someone for the job.
- ✓ Removes the old carpet and pad and takes it off your premises. You might pay an extra charge for this service.

Carpenter

Some carpenters specialize in finish work — doors, trim, mantels, and so on. Others specialize in building cabinetry and fixing railings. Make sure you find a carpenter who focuses on the kind of work you need.

Ask whether the work requires permits and, if so, who's responsible for securing the permits. For helpful information, visit the National Association of Home Builders Web site at www.nahb.org.

Handyman

Sometimes all you need is some help from a qualified handyman who can install lighting, handle small carpentry projects, do a little painting, or even tackle simple tile installation. Some handymen can do all the work themselves; others specialize in several areas and subcontract the work in areas where they need help.



Wait until you have several jobs for the handyman to do. These vendors may offer a per-day rate that saves you money over paying by the hour.

Make a list of what you want to have done, being as precise and clear as possible. Go over the list and make sure the person you're hiring is comfortable with all the tasks and duties including the clean-up. Ask about who picks up and provides the supplies. If you're picking up the supplies, make sure you have a complete list of what the handyman is going to need.

To find a handyman in the major metropolitan areas in the United States and parts of Canada, consult www.servicemagic.com or www.erenovate.ca, or www.handyman.com.

Electrician

Licensed electricians have been through a rigorous training program and passed their state's licensing requirements. Because of those requirements, their per-hour rate is generally higher than that of a handyman, but they're certified and licensed to complete higher-level tasks such as reading blueprints and installing and repairing electrical wiring in your house.

For more information about electrical work, visit the National Electrical Contractors Association (www.necacconnection.com) or the Canadian Electrical Contractors Association (www.ceca.org).

Plumber

Plumbers deal with everything water-related in your house — the pipes used for water, drainage, and waste. They can remove and install toilets, sinks, and faucets, but like electricians have been trained to handle the higher-level plumbing problems in the house, so know where the job begins and ends. If you're a do-it-yourselfer or hire a handyman, you may be able to save some money on less-complicated tasks.

Before you hire a plumber, ask the plumber for a written review of what's wrong, the proposed solution, and an estimate of the time for and cost of the work. Find out also who does the clean up. Finally, don't be afraid to get a second or third opinion.

For more on hiring plumbers and other trades people, check out the Plumbing-Heating-Cooling Contractors Association (www.phccweb.org).

Roofer

Weather conditions in your area have a lot to do with the material that ends up on your roof. Ask the roofer what product he recommends, and ask for brochures and information on each product, the length of the warranty, and who offers it. Make sure the job site is cleaned on a daily basis.

For more information on roofing solutions, visit the National Roofing Contractors (www.nrca.net) or the Canadian Roofing Contractors' Association (www.roofingcanada.com).

House cleaner

Your house needs a thorough cleaning before you put it on the market. You can clean it yourself, but for a good, deep cleaning, you may need to hire a professional. A house cleaner can be an individual or a crew. Ask what they need in the way of cleaning products, mops, rags, paper towels, and so on, and who supplies them. Ask what they clean, and more important, what they *don't* clean. Talk about flexibility and your general likes and dislikes. Finally, make sure the cleaners avoid strong-smelling products like pine-smelling cleaner, bleach, or chlorine because buyers may think you're trying to cover up a potential mold or mildew problem.

Chapter 8

Third Base: Showcasing Makes Your House Photo-Ready

In This Chapter

- ▶ Grasping the importance of showcasing
 - ▶ Giving your home finish with accessories
 - ▶ Determining how to hang mirrors and art
 - ▶ Putting accessories to work for function and feeling
 - ▶ Improvising accessories for creative showcasing
-

Showcasing is the most crucial step in securing the most equity from the sale of your house and helps the house sell in the shortest amount of time. But don't take our word for it: Staging statistics tell us that the average staged property sells in half the time of a non-staged property and earns a selling price that averages 6.4 percent more than list price.

Showcasing refers to the correct and strategic placement of furniture, lighting, art, and accessories to show off the best features of every room in the house. Showcasing each room guides the buyers, step by step and room by room through the house and the rest of the property, to show them an appealing lifestyle that often leads to an offer.

In this chapter, you see the difference between showcased and non-showcased rooms. You see how a complete showcasing highlights the home's best features and the benefits of living there. You also find out what a professional stager does to showcase rooms by using accessories, art, and mirrors. We finish up the chapter by sharing some of our on-site solutions using common household items to sell a room.

The Ins and Outs of Showcasing

After you complete the all-important repairs, painting, cleaning, and de-cluttering, the next step — showcasing — is what really helps the new buyer

emotionally move in. Showcasing is the merchandising step of selling your house and sells not only the spaciousness and beauty of the house but the lifestyle the house affords.

If you're reading this and thinking "everyone says my house is fabulous," good for you, but you still need to kick it up a notch! As Christine says, "the house shows how really well *you* live in it — not how the future buyer needs to see it."



No matter the neighborhood, the income level of the buyer, how your house is priced, or how it's positioned in the marketplace, showcasing improves the way your house looks, and that has an overall impact on how buyers view it.

Imagine Oprah was arriving this afternoon with a photographer. Is your house "glossy magazine" ready? Ready for millions of viewers to peek into every room, into every closet, and under every bed? Showcasing your house makes it ready for you to open the door to anyone — even the Queen of England — and know that it will pass inspection.

Professional stagers look at a room much differently than a homeowner does. Their job is distinctive from that of a decorator, interior designer, or architect — professionals trained to tailor a house to a client's lifestyle. A professional stager is instead trained to sell the features of your house, to set up each room so that it invites buyers to come in, linger, and imagine their own furniture and accessories in place. The upcoming sections give you a glimpse into how they do what they do.



Showcasing is truly a crucial part of the process. If you make all the repairs, do all the cleaning, and so on, but decide to skip the showcasing step, you may have just wasted your time, effort, and money. It's that simple. Although all your work makes a difference in how the property looks and feels, statistics show that completing the process with showcasing pays big dividends.

Getting your house ready for its close-up

Showcasing is the last step in the staging process and ensures that your house is photo-ready — in good form for all those beauty shots that you use to

- ✓ Entice buyers to take a closer look and drive by the property
- ✓ Invite buyers in



Don't make the mistake of taking the flyer and Web photos before you showcase your house. You want the best chance of inviting buyers to take a closer look, so take the photos after the exterior is cleaned up and the showcasing is done.

Peering into the showcasing process

Whenever possible, professional stagers use the current homeowner's furniture and accessories to showcase the house. Sometimes stagers supplement what you have with additional accessories, art, lamps, and greenery; in other cases, stagers recommend that you rent furniture to replace or support what you already have.

The stager's recommendation depends on your time frame, budget, targeted buyer, what you already own, and the stager's particular talents.

Staging nightmare: Nairn Friemann, president of Ingenuity & Pizzazz, Inc., was contacted by a perplexed and frustrated homeowner whose six-bedroom house had been listed at \$1,599,000 and had received only one offer of \$1,300,000 in four months.

The house was located in a highly desirable, affluent suburb of New York, was priced realistically, had outstanding curb appeal, and was in impeccable condition. However, the first impression of the interior was totally overwhelmed by the bright yellow wall-to-wall carpeting that covered the foyer, staircase, hallway, living room (see Figure 8-1), and dining room floors. Other rooms had bright-colored carpeting, strong wallpaper prints, and an abundance of furnishings and personal belongings. Although the property had many attributes, potential buyers couldn't see past the dated decor.

Figure 8-1:
Before, the dated carpet, the small floating area rug, and too much furniture had this house sitting on the market four months.



Staging solution: Following Nairn's recommendations, the homeowner had all the carpeting removed to expose beautiful hardwood floors. Figure 8-2 shows you the results. Wallpaper was also removed and the walls and shelves were painted in a soft warm white to reflect more light. Approximately 25 percent of the furnishings were moved to storage or donated to charity.

Nairn showcased all the rooms, working with the homeowner's furnishings and a small budget for additional decorative accessories. To increase the appeal of the house for today's buyers, a large portion of the huge basement was staged as a state-of-the-art home gym, and the home office was moved from a dark, cramped corner of the basement to a bright and spacious spare bedroom. The property went back on the market and sold in four days.

Staging nightmare: John had already purchased another house across the street from where he lived and planned to move in three months. He wanted to sell his house himself; it was in a trendy, desirable part of Toronto, Canada, and he didn't think he would have any problems selling it. He wanted to bring it to the market quickly at \$995,900.



Figure 8-2:
Staged,
the house
sold in four
days with
multiple
offers for
\$1,605,000.

Around the same time the Canadian Staging Professionals class was polling agents for a house to use as a class project. John was approached by his neighbor, a friend and real estate agent, and he jumped at the chance to have his house professionally staged. The showcase challenge was that there were a lot of oversized things and small rooms. The master bedroom had a king-sized bed and additional furnishings that made it feel uninviting and cramped. (See Figure 8-3.)

Staging solution: The showcasing team removed the king-size bed and replaced it with a full-size bed that was in the guest room. (See Figure 8-4.) Using what the seller owned, every room was transformed to a spacious, relaxed family space. The owner was so impressed he ran next door for the agent and immediately decided to sign a listing so he could get a lot of people through the house right away. He listed the house at \$1.1 million. It was a huge success; the owner received multiple offers and accepted one for \$85,000 over the listing price.



Figure 8-3:
Before,
the small
master
bedroom
felt
uninviting
and
cramped.

Graduating CSP Class, Toronto



Figure 8-4: Staged, the room is more spacious and relaxing.

Graduating CSP Class, Toronto

Accessories: Jewelry for Your Rooms

A home without *accessories* — lamps, throws, plants, trees, vases, and other decorative items — just isn't finished. Accessories bring a home together just like they bring an outfit together. Too much can kill the look and not enough leaves it lacking.



When a house is overaccessorized, it can look full, overwhelming, or cluttered. The challenge for selling a house is to pack away all those extra items but leave enough to finish the room. Our rule of thumb is to pack away anything smaller than your fist.

In this section, we help you decide what to pack and what to keep so that a professional stager can strategically place what's left. When the furnishings in a room don't show off the room's features (such as the view or a built-in china cabinet in the formal dining room), accessories might help draw the buyer's eye where it's most likely to see a selling feature.

Creating balance

A room is *balanced* when everything within it works together harmoniously. Balance is what creates a pleasant feeling in a room. To achieve balance you need to ensure the size, scale, color, and lighting elements of the furnishings are in direct proportion with each other and that one dominant element isn't overpowering the room.

The left side of the room needs to have the same color, lighting, and visual weight of furnishings as the right side, for example. A tall, heavy armoire in a small room creates a lopsided feeling because the proportion of the piece is out of balance with the size of the room. If you couldn't remove the armoire, you'd need to balance it by placing a large vertical piece of art (one at least two-thirds the width of the armoire) on the opposite wall.



You create visual weight with correct placement of art and accessories; vertical lines and placement add height and formality; horizontal lines create the illusion of width and add a casual feel to a room.

Before hanging art, consider the placement of everything else so that the finished room feels balanced. Mirrors and art on walls help direct buyers' eyes. Before you hang the art, though, be sure to consider the furniture as part of the overall composition. For example an art piece over a sofa needs to be smaller than the furniture, otherwise it feels unbalanced.

To create balance with furniture and art, start with the heaviest piece at the bottom. For example, the sofa anchors a grouping, so position it first. The art above it needs to be smaller than the sofa; hang it 6 to 8 inches above the back of the sofa so it looks like it belongs with the furniture piece. If the art is too high, it looks like it's lost in space and doesn't belong anywhere.

When accessorizing shelves, tables, and parts of the floor, the goal of correct placement is to have the buyer's eyes meander around the room. You achieve this by strategically placing items of a particular color around the room, and by avoiding large displays that stop the eye.

When using multiple pieces of art or accessories, don't place them so far apart that they lose their relationship to each other. We generally space multiple pictures 2 inches to a palm's width apart. For perfect balance, the whole composition should roughly represent a geometric shape.

Make sure you take into consideration everything you set against the wall when you determine the final art placement. If you want the buyer to notice the incredible cove ceiling in the dining room, you may place a buffet against the wall with a large vertical picture above it. That arrangement encourages the buyer's eyes to travel up to the ceiling.



The larger the object, the more space you need to leave around it so the eye can rest. Where the eye rests, the sale begins. If there's too much to look at, the buyer can't focus and becomes distracted by the things in the room rather than examining the room itself.

Creating visual flow

Have you noticed how a model home visually moves you from one room to the next, and then you go home to yours and . . . it doesn't? The effect that keeps you moving is called *visual flow*. How do you create visual flow so buyers can't wait to see the rest of the house? By creating consistency — repeating shapes, colors, textures, patterns, and metals within a room and throughout a house.

You can mix different patterns, but you need a practiced eye to do it well. Generally you can mix a floral, a solid, and a geometric pattern if they're all from the same color palette and are in a different scale from one another. A great place to see this principle in action is to go to www.waverly.com and click on the "great rooms" link.



Mix prints with a restrained hand. You want buyers to view your house — not be drawn to your furnishings.

Knowing when to say when

You can always have too much of a good thing — even when you're using nothing but tasteful pieces. No matter what style of accessories you have, we caution you to remember that less is more for staging.

We find contemporary and Asian items in most of the homes we stage; they show best with space around them, so avoid grouping them together. Place other accessories in harmonious arrangements; three items in a triangular composition works best — one tall, one medium, and one small.

Accessorizing at every level

You strategically place accessories at each of the three decorating levels in a room to provide balance and interest without going overboard:

- ✓ **Floor-level** décor is everything on the floor — area rugs, plants, and the flooring itself.
- ✓ **Mid-level** décor is the furniture you sit on and all the lamps and accessories you place on tabletops.

- ✔ **Eye-level** décor is the artwork on the walls, accessories on the mantels, and the windows and window treatments.

In a well-balanced room, the eye travels effortlessly from one level to the next. Your placement of colored items helps create this balance. For example, we did a job recently where the home sellers didn't own any art or lamps. The living room had blue carpeting, a blue sofa, a coffee table and homemade end table, and two enormous recliners. It looked crowded and unfinished.

When we showcased the living room, we repositioned the sofa and coffee table, removed one of the recliners; the seller borrowed lamps from friends, and we brought in art. *Voilà!* Everything we needed to create a balanced room. Here's how the changes affected each level:

- ✔ At **floor level**, buyers could actually see the carpeting because we removed one of the large recliners from the room.
- ✔ At **mid level**, we added sage green throw pillows to the sofa and a matching throw to the remaining chair. We then added the borrowed lamps to the end tables, and accessorized the coffee table by combining two plants (a blooming African violet and a tall skinny tree-like plant for great textures and contrast in heights) with a piece of driftwood.
- ✔ At **eye-level**, we recommended that the windows be washed and the blinds opened to let in natural light and fresh air. Next, we hung art with shades of blue, lavender, and sage green over the sofa.

Making more of your rooms with simple tips

Here are some more guidelines professional stagers use when accessorizing a room:

- ✔ Make sure the proportion and scale of objects are appropriate for the surface where they're displayed. Something suitable for a side table may be totally lost when you place it on the floor.
- ✔ Any item you position by itself should be dynamic. Make sure its setting and lighting denote its importance. (Chapter 4 tells you more about properly lighting a room.)
- ✔ When working with the seller's personal belongings and those who don't have the budget for appropriately scaled items, we sometimes place a number of smaller items together on a tray. We place an odd number of pieces so the taller item is displayed with an even number of shorter items. Grouping these things together and anchoring them with a tray makes the ensemble look larger and in scale with the space.

- ✔ Locate items so they're pleasing to the eye from the point of entry they'll be seen from — the *sightline*. For example, in a foyer, you might see several sightlines — the dining room, hallway, entrance to a home office, and so on. Because the buyer can see so many rooms from a foyer, you want them all to look great so the buyer wants to see the rest of the house.
- ✔ Many stagers use books for accessorizing or as a platform to provide “lift” for a smaller item. Remove the dust jackets from hardcover books, and then position the spines so you can read the title when entering the room. (Avoid controversial titles.)
- ✔ Avoid symmetry on vertical flat surfaces — a mantel with a plate on a stand and a topiary on one end of the mantel, and matching plate in a stand and topiary on the other end, for example. The look is outdated, is very formal, and just doesn't work well for staging because it doesn't create a relaxed feeling for the buyer. When working with bookcases, pack most of the collections away, making sure any books left on the shelves are of similar color and interspersed with interesting display items.

The bookcase was immediately inside the doorway of the master bedroom in Figure 8-5 — not very restful and a constant reminder that work needed to be done, filing needed to be put away. Grouping like items with plenty of space around them, enables buyers to see the bookcase as extra storage and tranquil organization (see Figure 8-6).



Figure 8-5:
Before, a chaotic grouping of accessories on a book shelf makes the master-bedroom entrance uncomfortable.



Figure 8-6: Staged, the bookshelf creates a tranquil and inviting entrance to the master bedroom.

Graduating CSP Class, New York

Adding color with accessories

Neutral is the word when it comes to staging, but remember this: A neutral palette doesn't have to be boring, even if it's beige. When used correctly, neutrals can make a subtle statement. The old '80s and '90s beige generally had pink undertones. Today's beige is taupe and has a black undertone that adds the hint of luxury to a room.

A neutral color scheme is never boring when you include texture, layering, and lighting. Add a jolt of color to a room with a picture, pillow, accessory item, rug, flowers, or even a bowl of Granny Smith apples.



When you use art and accessories to bring current color trends to your house, moderation is key. Work to put three splashes of the same color around the room at eye-level, mid-level, and floor-level, as well as three black items. Black accessories add a level of sophistication, help move the eye around the room, and ground the room. (Get more details about using color in Chapter 4.) As the eye follows a color through the room, buyers want to move through the room and into the next. We put this notion to work by staging a vacant house so when visitors opened the front door, they saw a red

accessory on the table in the entry, then a red sofa in the living room, and onto the red poppies in the art in the dining room. A hit of red in each space pulled the buyer back into the family room/kitchen area.

Hanging Mirrors and Art for Maximum Impact

Together with accessories, art and mirrors complete a room. You can use wall art and mirrors to

- ✓ Create a focal point
- ✓ Redirect the eye so buyers look where you want them to
- ✓ Enhance focal points



Pack away your small art — it eats up visual space. Large-scale items create a more restful environment that shows off the room instead of the items in it.

Determining the right size and shape for art or groupings

Balance is the most important part of the equation when choosing art and hanging it correctly. Larger pieces create a more grounded, balanced feeling in the space.



Use the two-thirds rule when figuring out where to place art and mirrors: The art piece or grouping should be two-thirds the width of the item below it.

In the staging realm, larger is better and less is most often much more, but sometimes you have to make do with what you have: If you don't own a larger piece of art and don't want to buy or rent one, a collection of smaller framed pieces can sometimes make an equal statement. When hanging smaller pieces together, think of the whole grouping as one big piece, and hang it in relation to the furniture under it.



Play around with your composition before you hang a grouping of smaller art pieces. Lay out the pieces on the floor and move them around until you have a pleasing arrangement. You're usually on solid footing if you contain the shapes in an overall geometric shape where the frames are no more than a hand's width apart.



Cut out paper shapes that match the frame sizes of the pieces you plan to hang so you can play around with where you put them. After you've figured out your arrangement, tape the papers onto the wall in the positions you decided on to create a simple guide for hanging the art.

Horizontal lines tend to elongate, widen, and emphasize a casual decorating scheme. Vertical lines tend to be more formal, add to the illusion of height, and can seem more elegant. Remember that the perimeter of the entire grouping should be about two-thirds the width of the item below it to help create the illusion of one frame.



Avoid *split compositions* — two items that are the same size and shape hung side by side and wide apart. This composition is confusing because your eyes try to see the two things as one.

Take into consideration the way the light will strike the glass and the art piece itself. You don't want the glare to make the art piece difficult to see, and art-specific lighting may be the answer for eradicating glare. For more on how lighting affects the buyer's mood, see Chapter 4.

Hanging art at the just-right height

Positioning art around furniture to create a harmonious composition confounds a lot of people and is the root of a lot of haphazard-looking arrangements. For instance, when an art piece is too high above a piece of furniture, the items are disconnected from one another and the room feels out of balance.



Anchor art to the furnishings. A good guideline is to hang art so its bottom edge is 6 inches above a sofa and up to 8 inches above other furniture.

You may have heard that you hang art at eye level, but that guideline changes depending on how the room is used and viewed. Yes, your buyers will be mainly standing in the rooms where you usually sit, but treat rooms such as the living room, dining room, and family room as if the buyers are sitting down. You want them to feel like they're welcome to sit down and stay awhile. If they decide to do just that, you've made the room feel inviting and well-balanced.

Eye level when sitting is very different from eye level when standing. Because you don't do any sitting in a hallway, you hang art higher in a hallway than you would in a living room.

Hang art in hallways at the standard art-gallery height for a picture or mirror — 54 inches from the floor to the middle of the picture. For living spaces, hang art at a level that enables you to comfortably look at the center of the piece when you're seated. Err on the low side; shoot for 6 inches above a piece of furniture.



Eye-level guidelines may not work every time, so always view artwork and mirror placement in relation to a room's furnishings and try out various heights before banging a nail in the wall. If you don't, you may be putting extra and unnecessary holes in the wall.

Conquering difficult spaces with art

One of the challenges of staging is knowing when to change the rules and how to use them to solve problems. Most of the time decorating and staging guides are for “regular homes,” but challenges may arise, and we offer the following suggestions for bringing harmony to tough spaces:

- ✓ **Large rooms:** When you need to scale down a large wall, hang a series of smaller-sized prints together. (Caution: We don't mean small; we mean smaller than one huge piece that would dominate the space.)
- ✓ **Rooms without windows:** Use three-dimensional pictures (those painted to create the feeling that you could just walk outside, or put your hand out of the “window”) of landscapes, windows with views, or doors to trick the eye and create the illusion of extra space and light.
- ✓ **Dark rooms:** Brighten any room with colorful prints of views that include a lot of sunshine.

Finding Ideas for Accessories Functional and Fanciful

In addition to decorative accessories (those that don't do anything but look pretty), you find all kinds of functional accessories that can enhance the staging goal of marketing your house — even while you're still living there. You choose functional accessories as you would decorative accessories — so that they fit the style, color scheme, and scale of the room. (Use small items in smaller spaces and larger items for larger spaces.)

Floor screens and room dividers

A great example of a functional accessory is the popular floor screen or room divider. Want to screen off a less-than-attractive area like the home office?

Use a decorative screen. You can also use screens to divide a room or fill the space behind angled furniture. You can even use a screen as a faux headboard to create height and warmth in a bedroom.

When selecting a screen, look for one that's taller than eye-level when you're standing. Your choice of material depends on the feel of the room where you plan to put the screen — you can find screens made of metal, wood, iron-work, mirrors, rice paper, bamboo, or even fabric.



Pass on photo-collage wall screens for staging. This kind of screen carries an unavoidable personal connection, and you want to depersonalize your home when you stage it.

You can use an open shelf unit for storage, display, or as a room divider to break up long, narrow rooms. But don't use as a room divider the older-style entertainment units that include two or three separate pieces of furniture and house the stereo and TV equipment. They usually were used as a focal point for a room, but you want the buyer to see architectural features that you're selling — not the furniture. Deal with this furniture by separating and dispersing the pieces throughout the house if you can't store them off-site — they generally look dated and overpower a room.

Mirrors

A well-placed mirror can visually expand a room; however, you need to use them with care. Correct placement is crucial. If you decide to use a mirror, be sure you place it so it reflects only things that are pleasant to look at and that you want potential buyers to notice.

Leaning a mirror up against a fireplace mantel generally reflects the ceiling. Not good. Hanging it so that it reflects the closet area in the hall isn't good, either.



Place a mirror where its reflection echoes greenery in a beautiful back yard or garden or so that it adds spaciousness to a bathroom. (For information on hanging mirrors, check out the section “Hanging Mirrors and Art for Maximum Impact.”)

The careful addition of accessories can highlight an area you want to show off. In the bathroom in Figure 8-7, the glass shelved niche in the bathroom almost disappears. Adding accessories brings it back to life (see Figure 8-8).



Figure 8-7:
Before, a
naked
bathroom
shelf gets
lost.

Jackson West, Reveal Estate



Figure 8-8:
Staged, the
bathroom
looks
larger and
spa-like.

Jackson West, Reveal Estate

Improvising for quick-and-easy accessories

When we're showcasing a house using the seller's things, we often look for items to fill a "hole" — a space where we feel the balance or flow around the room stops. Sometimes that means using an item in a whole new way. Here are a few ideas we've used to create what we needed to complete a room.

Staging with trays

Trays are functional items that work great in showcasing. You can use trays to set the scene in a bedroom, family room, or kitchen, and to display smaller items on coffee tables. With very little effort or expense, trays can change the feeling in a room. An extra bedroom often is just a room without personality. Place a tray with accessories on the bed — things like a hand mirror, magazine, or cup and saucer, and the accessorized tray says "relax and stay a while." (Check out Figure 8-9.) You could also use a tray in the center of a coffee table in a family room to hold books, coasters, TV remotes, and so on.



Figure 8-9:
Add a tray with decorative items to say "Welcome home."

Building a spa basket

Today's buyer doesn't want to think much beyond spa when it comes to viewing your bathroom. When we showcase a bathroom, the look we're going for is sleek, white, clean, uncluttered, and functional. We want it to be an inviting, restful place that looks like no one has ever used it.

To suggest the spa experience, gather a new loofah, rolled white towels, and stones, shells, or bath salts in a basket and create a spa environment, as you see in Figure 8-10.



Lighting a candle in the bathroom just before showing the house seems like a good idea but isn't. Although decorative and spa-suggestive, *lit* candles are dangerous to the public. Safely create a spa-like feeling in the bathroom with flameless candles. They're battery powered, made of wax, have a lifelike wick, and glow like a real candle without the safety issues.

Remember that decorative items are dust collectors; be sure to keep on top of your dusting and cleaning.



Figure 8-10: Gather a new loofah, white towels, and stones, shells, or bath salts to create a spa basket.

Uncovering Out-of-the-Box Showcasing Ideas

What if you don't have enough art to create the balance and visual flow that are so important to moving buyers comfortably through your house? Think outside the box:

- ✔ Replace less-than-stellar framed art with fabric or wallpaper. Just cut the material to fit the frame, and then glue it in place of the picture or photograph.
- ✔ Using artist canvas that has already been stretched and is available at your local craft center, paint the canvas with colors already in the room. You can also mask off sections of the canvas with blue painter's tape, paint one color, let it dry, remove the tape, and then tape off and paint another color to create a simple but effective piece of art. This technique is called *color blocking*.
- ✔ Buy fabric stretcher bars available at your local fabric and craft center, and create your own unique art pieces by using a staple gun to attach interesting decorator fabric.
- ✔ If you have a motley selection of decorator items that have seen better days, give them a coat of paint. Color unifies objects, so spray-painting items of different shapes, sizes, and textures gives you a harmonious grouping. Place the items together on a tray or another horizontal surface to create visual interest.

Remember why you're moving

After all your preparation and investment, and after the house is showcased, you may fall in love with it all over again. So what happens now? Stay strong and remember why you're moving in the first place — it wasn't because you didn't like the way the house looked or didn't like the decorating.

The "after-staging glow" is like meeting an old boyfriend or ex-spouse. Maybe he lost weight

and is looking real fine. But underneath it's just the same old person and the relationship doesn't work for you anymore. It's the same with your house. You may be seduced into thinking it would work if you stayed in your home, but remember that the house doesn't fit your needs any more and *that* is why you want to sell it.

- ✓ No end tables or sofa or coffee table? Then pinch hit. Look for items around your house that are the right height and put them to work. An old travel trunk makes a fine coffee table, for example, and a small kitchen stool or stacked wooded boxes can serve as a side table.

Your end tables don't have to match. It's okay to use different styles and colors in your arrangement.

- ✓ Mismatched dining chairs? Spray paint the frames to make them look like a set. Use a staple gun to recover the seats in the same fabric.

Chapter 9

Home: Opening Your House to Buyers and Agents

In This Chapter

- ▶ Taking pictures that show off your house
 - ▶ Kindling a house-buyer love affair from the street
 - ▶ Inviting brokers and agents to see what you're selling
 - ▶ Living (carefully) while keeping your house show-ready
 - ▶ Keeping your house at its most alluring
-

All the homework you do — the cleaning, repairing, de-cluttering, and depersonalizing — and the showcasing that make your house inviting start to pay off when you post great photos online. The majority of buyers look for homes on the Internet first, and then they drive by the house to check out the neighborhood before contacting their real estate professional, so attractive pictures are vital to successfully marketing your property.

In this chapter, we show you how important it is to take great pictures with eye-catching curb appeal and give you and your real estate professional a crash course on taking great pictures.

In addition to being photo-ready, you want your house to be *show-ready* — first-date sharp for potential buyers — sometimes at a moment's notice. We share our open house and showing checklist in this chapter so that you can make sure your house is show-ready every time buyers see your house.

Finally, we admit that living in a home while it's on the market is . . . *well* . . . inconvenient. You just have to brace yourself for the tribulations ahead, but we do offer some ideas and coping strategies for you and your family members to keep the house (and yourselves) in top form.

Romancing the Home with Photos

If you've ever fallen in love, you know the process starts with a subtle seduction. Your property needs to instigate the romance with wonderful pictures so they stand out to buyers who browse the multiple listing service (MLS) on the Internet.



If your house has been on the market for a while, take a look at the photographs on your flyers and the Internet. Would you drive by your property to take a closer look? If not, insist on new photographs after you've staged your property. Some real estate agents pay for a professional photographer to take photos of your house; many professional stagers do, too.

A cute pocket camera is nice and may serve you well for snapshots, but when you're selling your house, you need to make sure you get the best-quality pictures you can. And to do that, you need a good digital camera.

If you don't own a digital camera, buy or borrow one. A high-quality camera is one of the most important tools for marketing your house. Check out *Digital Photography For Dummies*, Fifth Edition, by Julie Adair King (Wiley) to find details about choosing a camera.

You want your pictures to reflect the great staging and showcasing work you've done and the features your house offers. A camera is capable of capturing more than the eye can see, so finding out how to use your shutter speed and ISO effectively is important. Make the following adjustments to your camera for great pictures:

- ✓ Change your ISO to 800 (on a digital camera this is an adjustment that simulates film speed).
- ✓ Slow your shutter speed down considerably so the camera is able to absorb enough of the existing light to produce a good picture.
- ✓ Use a tripod. The number one rule when you're using slower shutter speeds is to use a tripod; the longer the shutter is open, the more natural and ambient light you get into the photo, but slow shutter speeds register all the movement in your hands and make photos blurry. Unless you buy an expensive and somewhat heavier camera, an expensive tripod isn't necessary.

Keep the following tips in mind when you take photos of your house for the Internet or your marketing flyers:

- ✓ In order to get "wow shots," you want the camera to pick up the ambient light and the glow coming from any lamps and lights. Different lights produce different hues; we recommend incandescent bulbs because they cast a yellow hue that gives your photographs a warm, rich look.

- ✔ In most cases, you want to stand in the doorway to take pictures. After all, this is where buyers first see the room, and professional stagers set up rooms for the greatest appeal from the doorway vantage point.
- ✔ Shots from the corners give you the widest angle and enable you to take in as much of the room as possible in the frame.
- ✔ Shooting a picture from too high a vantage makes a room look smaller — bad idea when you're selling a house. If you're 5 feet 8 inches or taller, use a slightly lower vantage point.



Have you ever taken a picture and had it develop really dark except for the window or the light? Avoid this by turning the camera toward an object that's at a similar distance from your picture subject and has the general light level of the rest of the picture (minus the window). Then, push the shutter button partway down and hold it until the camera focuses. Without releasing the shutter button, turn the camera back to your shot of choice and complete the shot. Depressing the shutter button partway not only locks the focus but also locks the other balances including light and white balance.

Night Lights: Making Sure Buyers Find You

Regardless of where you live, skies are dark by 6 p.m. for a good part of the year. At least half of potential buyers drive by a property at night and most showings take place in the evening, so for night appeal you want your house lit up inside and out. Here are four ways to use exterior lighting:

- ✔ **Improved appeal:** Outdoor lighting is a great way to add curb appeal to a front porch, sidewalks, pathways, and garages. Add outdoor lighting to highlight trees, shrubbery, and entryways. Showcasing these exterior features doubly enhances the overall appeal of the house.
- ✔ **Highlighting architecture:** Features such as windows, decorative trim, or unique stonework set your house apart from the competition when they're lit at night.
- ✔ **Safety:** Step lights showcase a staircase and enhance your and the buyer's safety.
- ✔ **Making sure buyers find you:** The light fixtures beside your front door and garage need to be appropriate size and scale. Most houses we consult on have light fixtures that are way too small for the space. In case you aren't able to judge the correct size or scale, remember that larger is always better than too small.



Always use the highest-wattage bulb that the fixture will take. If you have only one fixture, instead of using one high-wattage light, you may want to install several fixtures so the light is spread evenly across the property.

Nothing is more frustrating to a buyer than trying to find a house number in the dark, so if you don't have adequate lighting by your house numbers you may lose a sale! Make sure that your light fixture illuminates the house numbers completely, and if the fixture has clear glass, use a clear glass bulb, too.

If you don't have landscape lighting or the budget to add it, try placing a spotlight on the For Sale sign and illuminating the front door or using string lights in bushes and trees. You may even want to use the eco-friendly solar-powered exterior lighting to illuminate a pathway, highlight the address, or enhance areas of interest such as trees and shrubs.



You may want to use a timer for exterior lights because buyers work crazy schedules, and they could be driving by your property in the early hours of the morning. When Christine and her hubby were house shopping they did most of their drive-bys at 1 a.m. because that time worked best for their schedules.

Offering Broker and Agent Tours

Broker and agent tours are one of the marketing tools real estate professionals use to expose more buyers to your property. Your agent invites other brokers and agents to tour your home, usually during a weekday morning. The brokers and agents tour your house and several other houses that are “on the tour” that day. Even though the agents might breeze through your house in just a few minutes, the benefit to you is that they see your property in person and are more likely to bring you a qualified buyer sooner.

Hiring an agent isn't the last thing you need to do to sell your house. One lady Christine staged a property for didn't want a sign on the lawn, didn't want to have an open house or a broker and agent tour, wanted to be present at every showing, and wanted her house sold fast and for the most money. How happy do you think her agent was after listing *that* house? The owner finally decided to have her house put on the broker and agent tour. The agents on tour that week brought six potential buyers through the house, and the house sold for more than the asking price.

The seller's decision to have her house on tour was a very wise step because it exposed her property to hundreds of potential buyers. This exposure and Christine's staging got the house sold fast and for more money. Even though you pay the agent a commission, you have to help your agent market your property to get it sold.

Living in Your Staged Property

Just about every time we stage a property, it finally dawns on the seller that they have to keep the house looking staged until it's sold, and we get *the look* — the one that says “oh heavens no!” Not to worry: We have some strategies you can use so your house is show-ready just about any time of the day or night.



If you don't want to hire a professional stager to do your open-house prep before every showing, ask whether the stager can provide you with some showing instructions to help you keep everything shipshape.

While your house is on the market, many stagers also provide ideas for your specific challenges. One lady we staged a property for had three children under the age of 6. Their challenge was toy pick-up, so we devised a strategy that became part of their everyday living even after they moved.

Keeping your house show-ready may seem like a lot of work, but consider everything you've done up to now — do you really want to negate all of your hard work? Of course not! Keeping the house in tip-top shape is the last part of ensuring your best return on investment.

Coping with inconvenience

Most sellers we know are surprised when we tell them that when selling a house they

- ✓ Have to expect people to stop by unexpectedly — or at least on short notice
- ✓ Live in an unnatural state with weeks of no downtime for family living
- ✓ Have to have all their chores completed daily so the house is always show-ready

What a pain! What an inconvenience! Yes, but think of it this way: Do you really think your real estate agent gets up every morning thinking, “How can I tick off my seller today?” Of course not. But getting potential buyers into your house is his job. In the grand scheme of things, it's what you want, even though it really cramps your style.

Don't want to be bothered at mealtime? Don't like keeping everything tidy? Then find your coping strategy and put it into play. For example, if you don't know how you're going to keep everything picked up, identify what or who

impedes your progress — is it your children, your husband, or you? Once you've acknowledged the problem (or the culprit), think of a process you can put in place to ensure that everything is picked up each day.

Here are some other ideas that help you cope:

- ✓ Acknowledge and remind your family members that this is a *temporary* inconvenience.
- ✓ Compartmentalize. After you've gone through each closet and cupboard, store those items that you use each day in a box, a basket, or a bin that you can pull out for use and then neatly store out of sight while the house is on the market.
- ✓ Have a task jar for each family member. You need a set of poker chips and a color-coded jar for everyone in the family, plus one jar as a bank. Put all the chips in the bank jar. Then, when someone picks up his personal area before leaving the house, he gets a chip in their jar. When somebody leaves without putting his things away, the offending party has a chip (or two) removed from his jar. At the end of the week, award prizes.
- ✓ Create a family reward night for a week of great housekeeping — maybe a meal, bowling, or a movie.



The short-term pain of keeping your house show-ready is the best way to get the long-term gain of selling the place and settling into your new one.

Prepping for last-minute showings

When an agent calls to let you know that she and her buyers will be showing up for a tour in five minutes, don't panic, and don't get angry. This could be *the* buyer who makes you the offer you've been looking for. So breathe, smile, and say, "Sure, no problem." Then take the following steps:

- 1. Do the Shuffle Duffle (see Chapter 7) to get the interior of your house show-ready.**
- 2. Turn on the lights inside (and outside if it's dark).**
- 3. Take a quick review of your lawn and house exterior.**

Make sure the wind hasn't blown garbage all over your yard, and that the kids haven't left their bikes where buyers may trip over them. If there's snow on the ground, you need to shovel the pathway to your front door.

Dealing with Fido and Miss Kitty

About half of the potential buyers who tour your house will be pet lovers; the other half won't. Even though you may consider your pets part of the family, there's a good chance that the person who buys your house doesn't want anything to do with a cat or dog. Your safest bet, then, is to make sure that there are no visible signs of a pet. That includes but isn't limited to stowing photographs, art, food and water dishes, food in the pantry, kitty litter (Stow it in the trunk of your car.) — and of course you need to get Fido and Miss Kitty off premises, too.



The best advice we have for handling the pet objection indoors is to use the Fresh Air machine by EcoQuest to eradicate pet odor and dander from your house. (See Chapter 24.)

Outside signs that there's a pet in residence are outdoor dog houses, enclosures, pet waste, leashes, or chains.

If you do have an outdoor enclosure, make sure it's clean and in good repair. The subtle message to buyers is that if you don't care enough about your pets to keep them clean, the rest of the house is going to be in bad shape, too.



Don't risk losing a sale because you don't attend to pet details. One house Christine saw recently had a yard that was the big selling feature, but you couldn't walk anywhere for fear of stepping in doggy doo. The home seller said, "Oh, we'll clean it up before we move." If she couldn't be bothered before the seller made an offer, what confidence would you have that she would do it after she knew she was moving?

If you have pets, make sure that before every showing you

- ✓ Remove all evidence of pets (leashes, bowls, food) and take your pet with you during showings.
- ✓ Ask family, friends, or a neighbor to take care of your pets until the house is sold.
- ✓ Check out your local doggy day care or pet spa for rates and hours of availability. Most of these places are wonderful, caring facilities where dogs love to go for socializing, play, and love. Because Christine travels extensively, she can attest to the love and fun her Yorkie mix, Timmy, gets from them.
- ✓ Take your pet to work with you.

Look for creative solutions for your pets. Jan recently staged a house where the family had two iguanas and some fish in residence. She suggested the iguanas take a vacation at the kid's school while the house was on the market.

Keeping Your House Show-Ready with an Open House Checklist

No matter how prepared you feel about showing your house, getting ready for an open house may take your blood pressure up a notch. In this section, we give you a quick rundown on the most important areas to address so your open house is a success and you secure the offer you're looking for.



Part of the challenge with keeping the house clean is the access to your cleaning products. To make the process easier we suggest keeping extra supplies in a variety of areas throughout the house. This way you don't have to do all the tasks at once and can use extra minutes here and there to do a task. Keep your cleaning supplies in containers you can hide or carry away before showings.



Keep a positive frame of mind throughout this admittedly difficult process. The work you do now will secure equity in your house and help you move on with your life.

While your house is on the market, make sure you do the following tasks every day:

- ✓ If the views are good open all window coverings.
- ✓ Turn on all lamps; agents will turn on the overhead lights.
- ✓ Make all the beds.
- ✓ Empty the garbage and wastepaper baskets in kitchen, bedrooms, and bathrooms.
- ✓ If you have a good sound system, play music. (Ask your stager for a Certified Staging Professionals *Music for an Open House* CD or purchase light jazz or easy listening music.)
- ✓ Pick up and put away things that should be out of sight, such as toys and newspapers.
- ✓ If you haven't arranged for your pets to visit a relative or day care, crate them away from the main showing areas or take them with you.
- ✓ Shake the front welcome mat and sweep away any dust, debris, and spider webs.
- ✓ If you're using fresh flowers around the house, check the water levels in the vases and remove any wilted flowers. If you're using fresh fruit, make sure it really is fresh.

- ✔ Wipe the sinks after doing dishes or washing your hands.
- ✔ Clean the stove top and counters.
- ✔ Sweep the floors (or use a Swiffer-type mop).
- ✔ Mop the floor every day or two.
- ✔ Make sure the bathrooms are sparkling:
 - Wipe toilet seat, rim, and lid.
 - Swoosh toilet bowl with brush; keep the brush fresh with a few drops of essential oil and water in the bowl of the toilet brush container.
 - Wipe off mirrors and faucets.
 - Squeegee shower doors.
 - Spray entire shower and curtain liner with shower cleaner after every use.

The front entry is a very important area for setting a great first impression, so make sure you keep it clear and clean on the inside and out.



Most dirt comes into the house through the entryways via people's and pet's feet. Leaving your shoes by the door keeps dirt from spreading throughout the house. But remember to keep the entry free of clutter by putting shoes in a closet or a covered basket. If you have a back entry, you might want to start using it exclusively during the time the house is on the market to keep clean-up to a minimum.

Chapter 10

Curb Appeal: Making a Winning First Impression

In This Chapter

- ▶ Dressing your house in a great exterior color
 - ▶ Leading buyers through a fabulous front door
 - ▶ Adding smart lighting to the exterior
 - ▶ Shaping up the sidewalks and driveway
 - ▶ Making sure the roof is tip-top
 - ▶ Tidying and tending the yard
-

Curb appeal — the impression your property’s exterior and yard make on potential buyers — isn’t the biggest part of the buying decision, but it does have a huge impact on home sales: Buyers decide within seconds of driving up to a house whether to take the next step and check out the inside. The vast majority of buyers view properties on the Internet and then drive by the ones that made a good impression online before contacting the sellers or a real estate professional. That means that the home-selling process starts with the curb appeal.

In this chapter we show you how to create welcoming curb appeal and ensure that your property stands out from the competition.

Color It Sold: Addressing Exterior Color

If the neon purple house with navy blue trim in Jan’s neighborhood was on the market without a new paint job, most buyers would cross it off their lists as too much work and too expensive to fix. The subliminal message is that if the exterior is purple, the rest of the house must be pretty, um, *striking*, as well. Avoid sending buyers away by refreshing the exterior color of your property the smart way.

Start by taking a look at the house's fixed elements — those unlikely to change, like the brick, roof, and siding. Match your overall color scheme to the colors of the fixed elements.



The paint and trim color should fall into a neutral palette so the house appeals to a broad range of buyers. Remember that *neutral* doesn't necessarily mean *white*. (Chapter 4 tells you more about choosing colors.)

Because color is both an art and a science, we recommend leaving it to the experts — the paint companies. They welcome questions and love to help; just be sure you're getting the advice you need instead of someone's personal choice of color.

Most paint lines have historic palettes for exterior color schemes that complement the house's fixed elements. The historic exterior colors have softer undertones and are considered more staging safe.

A strong accent color for the front door is a great way to introduce a punch of color and increase the overall appeal. We tell you more about using color in this way in the upcoming section "Welcoming Buyers with Fabulous Front Doors."



Many sellers try to get around doing exterior color work by just offering the buyer a painting allowance, but we don't recommend taking that approach. Imagine that Jan's neighbor (the one with the purple and navy house) decided to sell and give the buyer a \$5,000 painting allowance. He could save himself money by doing the painting prior to listing the house, because he could choose the paint (maybe a mid-range paint that covers well but isn't guaranteed for 20 years) and the contractor. If he doesn't complete the work before the buyer sees the house, he runs the risk of a reduced offer and of having people driving by and not even bothering to see the inside — most people can't envision past what they see.

Make sure you do some color research before you paint:

- ✔ What other color schemes do you see in your neighborhood?
- ✔ What are the current on-trend exterior color schemes?
- ✔ Are color recommendations or restrictions governed by a covenant or homeowner's association?

Doing this research early gives you optimum time to secure competitive painting bids and get the painting done without rushing the job.

Welcoming Buyers with Fabulous Front Doors

Within seconds of driving up to a house, buyers make assumptions about it that they spend the rest of the tour confirming. Does the front door look like a football team kicked it open? If so, then buyers are going to be looking for damage everywhere.

Properly prep your front door and porch or deck areas so that buyers can form positive expectations about the rest of the house as soon as they walk through your well-cared-for front door.

Here are some ideas that will add the *wow* to your entryway and build your equity:

- ✓ Replace or paint the front door.
- ✓ Clean, spray paint, or replace the hardware and door knob.
- ✓ Add a kick plate.
- ✓ Add a new welcome mat.
- ✓ Clean, paint, or replace house numbers.
- ✓ Clean, paint, or replace the light fixtures, making sure the lightbulbs work.
- ✓ Sweep the front porch.
- ✓ Add a pot of fresh flowers in the spring, summer, or fall; place an evergreen in the winter.
- ✓ Keep the front porch shoveled, salted, or sanded in the winter.
- ✓ Paint or replace the garage door.
- ✓ Paint or repair outdoor steps.
- ✓ Paint or change outdated railings.

Bright at Night: Lighting Your Property

Most buyers view properties online and then drive by those that seem promising to take a look before they call their agent to tour the house. And because a lot of people work during the day, they drive by prospective properties at night. Many buyers tell us how difficult it is to see house numbers and yards because of the lack of lighting.

Install outdoor lighting and put interior lights on timers so the property looks homey and inviting. Remember: People are busy — they may not be able to drive by until midnight.

Landscape lighting (available at your local home improvement center) creates an ambiance that alters the look and feel of the house. Place the lights to resemble a runway design that borders the sides of your driveway, add spots that highlight specimen trees or shrubs, or stagger two or more lamp styles for a more creative approach. Turn to the color pages to see the difference landscape lighting can make.

Addressing Driveways and Sidewalks

Driveway or sidewalks may be the last thing you think about when you're readying a house for sale, but the driveway and sidewalks cover quite a bit of real estate in the front yard. When they've been well cared for, driveways and sidewalks add a lot to the overall curb appeal of your house.



While you're sprucing up the yard, don't forget to edge the grass on either side of the driveway and sidewalks. If you have a narrow strip of lawn between the sidewalk and the street, we recommend you edge it even at the curb.

Repairing and tidying driveways

Take a long, hard look at your driveway: Is it dirty, cracked, pitted, or stained? If it's gravel or asphalt, are there potholes big enough to swallow up a small animal? Address your driveway issues with these staging guidelines:

- ✓ If over half of a cement driveway is pitted, cracked, or in need of repair, we recommend replacing it.
- ✓ If it's dirty, rusty, or stained with motor oil, a good cleaning may be all the driveway needs.



If you have a fresh oil stain on the driveway, sprinkle it with kitty litter. The clay in the litter wicks up the excess liquid in the oil so it's easier to clean up. Follow with a grease-cutting liquid detergent directly on the stain, scrub with a brush, and hose down the area with water. If the stain is old, it's harder to remove, so let the detergent sit on it for a while before you scrub.

- ✓ A load of new gravel smoothed over a gravel driveway as a top coat can really freshen up your curb appeal.
- ✓ Consider putting on a new topcoat of sealer on asphalt driveways, especially if the asphalt is faded or stained.

After the cleaning and repairs are done, you want your driveway to look as long and as uncluttered as the driveway to a high-end estate, so keep it clear: Park the cars in the garage, and put away the bikes, toys, soccer nets, and skateboard ramps after the kids are finished playing every day. Store the trash cans out of sight.

We realize that the kids need to play, but putting the bikes and toys away in the back yard isn't an option. You want the back yard to look as spacious as possible. Sell, store, or give away the unused toys and bikes, and find a tidy spot for the bare minimum.



If your property is on a zero lot line (having only three to six feet between your house and your neighbor's) and you share a driveway, plant a privacy bed so that shrubs and flowers between the entryways create a small but colorful privacy wall.

Making sidewalks shipshape

You and your family might rely on the back door, but buyers are going to start their tours at the front door of your house, so make sure their path to the door is in primo condition — attractive, safe, and easy to access.

Clean, repair, or replace your sidewalks as needed. **Note:** In some parts of the United States, the sidewalks by the street are considered city property. The sidewalks we're talking about are those that lead to your front or side doors.

Take a look at the shrubbery. How easy is it to get to your front door? If the landscape is taking over or is brushing into you when you maneuver your way to the front door, get out the clippers and trim back some of the bushes so buyers find an easy path to the front door.



If the best pathway to your front door doesn't have a sidewalk, you can add stepping stones, pavers, or large landscape tiles to create a path. You can find the supplies and know-how at your home improvement store. The few hours you spend adding this feature to your property really up the curb appeal and build equity.

Roofs: Tending Your House's Top

As long as you're warm and dry, you probably don't give much thought to your roof, but it's a big part of your house's overall curb appeal. If you don't believe us, just take a look at the house across the street — look at how much of the roof shows. Now imagine if it wasn't there or if it was an outrageous color! In most houses, the roof accounts for one third to one half of the overall impression buyers take away, so it must be in good shape.

Use this staging checklist to prepare your roof for its time on the housing market:

- ✓ Replace loose tiles or shingles.
- ✓ Repair leaks.
- ✓ Remove loose balls, kites, or other toys that have made their way to the roof.
- ✓ Remove dead leaves, acorns, pinecones, and loose tree branches.
- ✓ Clean out the gutters and downspouts.
- ✓ Remove moss.



If you need to replace the roof before selling the house, remember that your roof is a color, too. Choose a neutral roof color that complements the other fixed elements of the house — the brick, stone, or siding.

Gussy Up Your Yard

The goal for staging your exterior spaces is to make the yard look like it takes care of itself. Trimming the bushes, edging, and mulching the beds are easy and affordable updates that show buyers that the yard is an oasis for relaxation, not a summer-long renovation project.

In this section we give you the skinny on tidying up your yard, what to do with the outdoor recreation areas, and how usable outdoor living space helps sell your house.

Love the landscaping

Before they tour your house, buyers check out your yard. It's part of what convinces them to take a look inside — or not. If they see a well-maintained yard, then their natural assumption is that the rest of the house will be the same.

Take a deep breath, remove your personal feelings from the equation, and take a candid look at your property. Don't just walk across the street and look; drive past from both directions and see it as buyers see it — from the seat of the car. Make sure that

- ✓ The front door isn't blocked by overgrown trees or shrubs. (See Figure 10-1.)
- ✓ The shrubs you do have are healthy. (If not — get those suckers out of your yard.)

- ✔ Your flowerbeds are true to their name, not overrun by weeds.
- ✔ You can see the house number from the street.

Ready your yard for sale by following these steps:

- ✔ Remove trash, toys, animal waste, or debris from the yard.
- ✔ Move the RV, boat, snowmobile, water craft, and so on to a storage facility.
- ✔ Edge and sweep the walks and decks.
- ✔ Fertilize the lawn, let it grow, and then raise the lawnmower blade before you mow again. Longer grass casts a shadow on itself so it stays greener longer and doesn't need as much watering.
- ✔ Trim or replace the shrubs.
- ✔ Trim the trees so that they don't hide the house.
- ✔ Edge and mulch the flower beds.
- ✔ Stain or power wash the decks.
- ✔ Repair the fence.
- ✔ In winter, shovel and sand or salt the walks.

Figure 10-1:

With branches obscuring so much of the house, buyers can't see what you're selling.



A yard should be a place to relax and play, not a place that screams work. If the grass needs attention, buyers think they'll need to do yard work every weekend. The yard in Figure 10-2 has a yard in need of attention and a lot of clutter mucking up the relaxation factor.

Figure 10-2:
A yard that looks like work is a real turnoff to buyers.



Gerri Zalitch, Creative Solutions Home Staging Services

Staging nightmare: The window of opportunity may sail right by if you don't capture the interest of the buyer from the first minute they get a look at your property.

The house in Figure 10-3 looked like many others in the area; although the white trim is attractive there was nothing to grab buyers' interest. For a more attractive façade, consider a palette of three colors for your house's exterior.

Staging solution: Jennifer Teeple, Red Razberry Design Group, suggested the sellers paint the front door an eye-catching black; she also added a black light fixture, which adds weight and interest and illuminates the new house number so buyers can see it from the street.

Creating soft curving beds and repeating the black color by adding mulch captures interest of anyone who drives or walks by. (See Figure 10-4.) The addition of a bistro set on the porch welcomes and invites buyers to rest awhile.



We recommend *overplanting* (planting a large number of plants close together) to provide a lush feel in the flowerbeds, particularly in spring when flowers haven't had a chance to mature.

Figure 10-3:
Before, the house looks bland and lifeless.



Jennifer Teeple, Red Razberry Design Group

Figure 10-4:
Staged, paint, plants, and mulch work wonders.



Jennifer Teeple, Red Razberry Design Group

Check out *Gardening All-in-One For Dummies* (Wiley) to find out more about all things yard-related.

Pools, trampolines, and so on: Great fun or tremendous work?

The hot tub that means *relaxation* to you may just say *work* to a buyer. Same with a pool, pond, trampoline, or batting cage. Some buyers see only additional upkeep and a liability when these backyard “features” come into view.



If you live in a climate and in a neighborhood where all the houses have in-ground pools, you may want to consider putting in a pool. You may not get your investment back, but your house will sell sooner. If you do have an in-ground pool, it needs to be sparkling clean and in good repair.

If you have an above-ground pool or hot tub, your best bet is to remove it and clean, repair, or sod over the bare spot in the grass or deck. Same goes with a trampoline or batting cage. Just as extra stuff eats up the space and equity in the interior of the house, these extras make the yard and outdoor living spaces look smaller.

Ponds and water features are more popular these days but don't necessarily add equity to your property. If you have a portable water feature, remove it before listing your property.

Adding square footage with outdoor living spaces

An *outdoor living space* is the wraparound porch across the front of your house, the patio or deck in the back yard, a screened-in porch, a gazebo, or any designated space where the family and friends can hang out and enjoy a meal together. When prepping the house for sale, staging this space encourages buyers to imagine dreams of family gatherings and entertaining; even for smaller homes, this extra space expands the livable square footage.

As you plan an outdoor space, consider the following:

- ✓ Think of the outdoor space as another room in the house.
- ✓ Plan to set the scene with simple furniture based on the function of the space.
- ✓ Decide on the function of the space. Is it for eating, cooking, sunning, entertaining, or relaxing?
- ✓ Determine whether you have a view you want buyers to notice.

Because your outdoor room is an extension of the house, select furniture that's similar in style and relates to the function of the space. Sleek and modern aluminum in a graphite color looks great in a contemporary home. A more traditional porch looks better with a wooden settee and some wicker chairs.



Punch up the look of a wooden bench with weather-resistant throw pillows; home improvement stores have great selections.

The outdoor space is connected to the indoor spaces through a window, so keep your inside color theme going throughout the house and into your outdoor space. Here's how: If your interior decorating colors are mocha and cream with turquoise accents, simply flip flop the colors outdoors by using mostly turquoise and mocha in the furniture with a cream accent.

Plants are your outdoor accessories, so plant some lush green plants and flowers to add color and texture in cream-colored accent planters.



Showcasing outdoor spaces that flow from the inside out draws buyers through the house and into the yard. The longer they linger, the closer they are to an offer.

Staging nightmare: The house in Figure 10-5 has a lovely view and a covered porch. Buyers weren't drawn to the space because of the hole in the porch floor and because the porch didn't appear wide enough to stand in, let alone live in. With unpredictable weather in any location, a covered porch is a tremendous selling feature but before staging buyers had hardly noticed it.



Figure 10-5:
Before, the space went unnoticed by buyers.

Staging solution: After the porch was repaired and staged by Joanne O'Donnell of Chic Home Interiors, the view is different. (See Figure 10-6.) Buyers can see the narrow porch is indeed wide enough for a table and chairs, and the flowering tree highlights a hidden alcove. Property with covered, livable outdoor space and a view brought in just the right buyer.



Figure 10-6:
Staged,
buyers can
see the
porch has
plenty of
room for
two — and
a view!

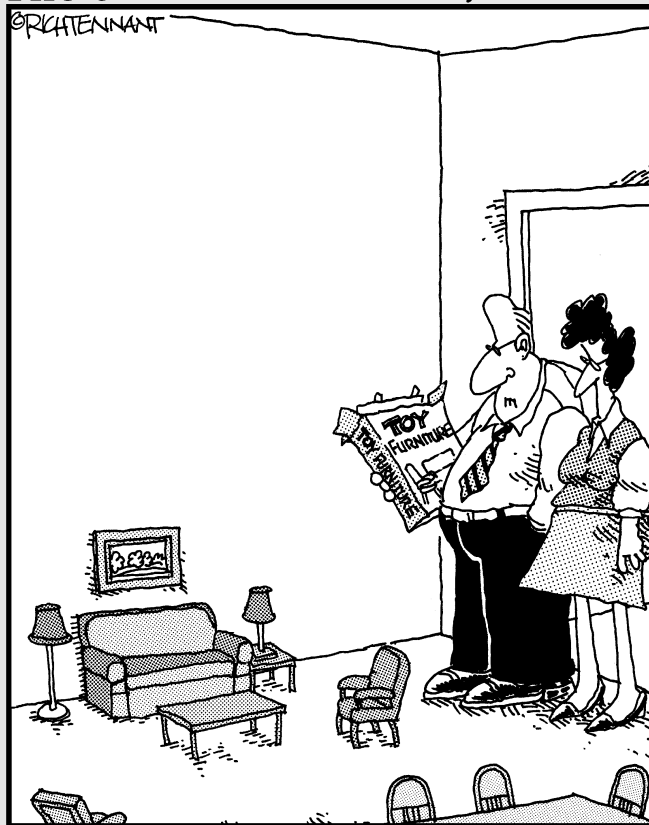
Joanne O'Donnell, Chic Home Interiors

Part III

Working Through Your House, Room by Room

The 5th Wave

By Rich Tennant



"Well, it does make the room look larger."

In this part . . .

Roll up your sleeves, take a deep breath, and get ready to do your homework. The chapters in this part provide the real meat of the book by showing you what you need to do to your house to ready it for sale — from the front curb to the backyard, leaving no closet, basement, or laundry room untouched. We show you what buyers want from kitchens and baths and how to meet their expectations in living rooms, bedrooms, offices, and more.

Chapter 11

You Had Me at Hello: Entrances, Exits, and Special Places

In This Chapter

- ▶ Creating entries with *wow*
 - ▶ Taking a closer look at sightlines
 - ▶ Remembering stairways and hallways
 - ▶ Leave a lasting impression at exits
 - ▶ Addressing unique points of entry
-

Most buyers emotionally connect with a house within the first three to six minutes of walking through the front door. Why? Because they can generally see up to five areas of the house from there. If they like what they see, they're hooked — in love at first sight.

The foyer or front entryway has a huge impact and sets the buyer's expectations for what they *think* they're going to find throughout the rest of the house. This first impression must be a *wow* so buyers can't wait to see what's just around the next corner.

Exits, family entrances, and mud rooms (where the kids, backpacks, shoes, and all the other stuff that comes with family living land) are usually what buyers see last, and can make a lasting impression, as well. You need to make sure all your entrances and exits are up-to-date, clean, and appealing.



If you keep a family calendar or schedule at one of your entryways or exits, be sure to remove and store it during showings. You don't want everyone who comes through your house to know when you'll be somewhere else.

Making an Entrance Grand

Think of a grand hotel lobby or the foyer or lobby of your favorite resort. What do those spaces say about the rest of the hotel or resort? Don't you

make an assumption about the sleeping rooms upstairs? The same thing's going on when buyers walk through your front door, so don't disappoint them.

Whether or not the front entryway is impressive in size, it needs to look as grand as possible so buyers are compelled to spend more time at your house than the others on their must-see list.

Assessing your entrance

It may have been awhile since you took a close look at what you see when you walk through the front door of your own house. Run through the points in the following checklist to get your entryways and exits ready for prime-time viewing:

- ✔ **Replace worn or damaged flooring.** If your house is priced like houses that have hardwood in the foyer but you have vinyl flooring, it's probably time to upgrade.

If you have to decide between replacing the carpet in one of the kid's rooms and updating the tile in the foyer, spend your money on the foyer. The entryway is the buyer's first impression of your house, and you want it to be a good one. Who knows? By the time they work their way back to the kid's room, they may already be in love with the house.
- ✔ **Add a mirror or artwork.** A mirror or a piece of art near the entryway welcomes buyers.
- ✔ **Clean and freshen up the woodwork, baseboards, and trim molding around the front door.** Repair and repaint it if you need to.
- ✔ **Polish the door hardware if it's tarnished.**
- ✔ **If you have side windows or windows on the door, wash them inside and out.**
- ✔ **Wipe down the switch plates and outlet covers.**
- ✔ **Clean or paint the front door so it looks brand new.**
- ✔ **Depersonalize the space.** Pack away and store all family photos and personal items.
- ✔ **Store all evidence of an animal in residence.** Find tucked-away spots for toys, food bowls, leashes, and so on.
- ✔ **Make sure that the weather stripping is in good repair.**
- ✔ **Remove the throw rugs or plastic runners.** A rug at the front door is fine, but you don't need rugs or runners trailing all the way through the front hallway. In a foyer, you're selling space and a beautiful floor, so let the buyers see the floor. If the entryway is hardwood, don't cover a square inch of it with a rug — hardwood is a selling feature.

- ✔ **Use only a plain front door mat that's in good condition.** Even if you've done everything else to update the house, when a buyer steps on an old rug or one that isn't in keeping with the work you've done to the house, she wonders what else you've skimped on. You also want to keep this entry rug generic and preferably a solid color — nothing that says “wipe your paws” or has your family name on it.
- ✔ **Make sure the wall color is neutral and on-trend.** Remove dated wallpaper, and paint over stenciling or amateur faux painting.
- ✔ **Be sure that any furniture in the foyer is on-trend and in keeping with the price point of your house.**
- ✔ **Replace small, outdated light fixtures.** If the light fixture is fairly new and in good shape, then dust off the cobwebs and make sure that all the lightbulbs work and are the highest wattage recommended for the fixture.

If your fixture has lightbulbs that are clear and look like a candle flame, clean and dust them so the light sparkles through the bulbs.
- ✔ **Make sure that the doorbell works.**
- ✔ **De-clutter the space.** If this is the spot where everyone drops their shoes, find a nearby closet to store them. Remind your family that the front door or family exit is not the shoe holding area. Extra shoes should be stored in the wearer's respective bedroom closet. If this is a popular place for the mail or keys, find a way to contain these in a basket, or in a nearby drawer, away from the front door.

Selling starts at the sightlines

Besides making the best first impression possible, another reason to take special care at your entrances and exits is because buyers see other *sightlines* (whatever other parts of the house are visible from the spot in which you're standing) from the doorways. From the entryway of Jan's house, for example, you see the stairs, the landing and hallway on the second floor, the living room, the dining room, and part of the family room at the back of the house — six sightlines.

Stand at the front door and at the other entrances and exits and take a look at all the other rooms that adjoin the one you're standing in. What do you see? Whatever you see, potential buyers see, too. You want each sightline to look neat and inviting, so buyers take the next step and tour the house.

Staging nightmare: Part of a beautiful house on acreage with incredible windows, a very large three-car garage, and a restaurant-style gourmet kitchen, the dining room in Figure 11-1 stopped buyers at the front door. It was the first thing they saw and had too much furniture and a dated look.

Figure 11-1:
Before,
when
buyers
opened the
front door,
they saw
the dated
dining room
to the right.



Jan Maresh and Char Curry, Naked Room Solutions

Staging solution: Before Jan and her business partner Char Curry showcased this house, they recommended that the sellers store their extra furnishings, art, and accessories. The dining room furniture was stored, which enabled Jan and Char to move a pub table from the library, freeing further space in that room and giving buyers a more appealing first impression. (See Figure 11-2.)

When you stand just inside the front door of your house, what do you see? Look over the following points to address some common problems with sightlines:

- ✔ You don't want to block the traffic flow or the view of the room with furniture. If you can see the back of a TV, unsightly electronics or cords, or even the back of a sofa from the doorway, find a better place for these pieces.
- ✔ Clutter isn't good anywhere in the house, so if you see piles of books, magazines, or other clutter, cull through the piles, and then pack and store whatever's worth keeping.

- ✔ Pack and store all off-season coats and clothing so half to two-thirds of the front closet is empty, showing the buyer that there's adequate storage space.
- ✔ Arrange the remaining clothes by color and length (all the long coats are together, all the red jackets, and so on), and make sure the hangers in the closet face the same direction.



Buy wooden coat hangers for your entryway closet and hang them in the closet so half of them are empty. This lets buyers know that there's plenty of storage for their guests' coats. If you have a shelf in the closet and must store gloves, hats, and scarves, store them in small storage boxes or baskets, but leave the shelf as empty as possible.

Figure 11-2: Staged, a pub table and chairs from another room made the dining room more appealing to a broader group of buyers.



Jan Maresh and Char Curry, Naked Room Solutions

And if you don't have a foyer. . .

Rather than a formal foyer, many houses have more of an entryway or landing where the front door opens into the living room. You need to make the best first impression here, too. In fact, it's even more important that everything about the entryway is clean, fresh, in good repair, and on-trend.

Staging nightmare: The house in Figure 11-3 doesn't have a foyer; you open the front door into a narrow hallway, at the end of which are the living room, dining room, and family room. The builder was unwilling to paint the walls and couldn't get buyers past the front door so they could actually see how spacious the rooms were. The living room was the first room you came to and because of the white walls, it lacked depth and looked too small for most furniture. Finally, the builder didn't want to furnish the dining room but wanted buyers to keep walking so they would see the kitchen and family room at the back of the house.



Figure 11-3:
Before, buyers opened the front door to see one bland room blending into another.

Staging solution: Jan and her partner Char Curry staged this vacant home by using color to move buyers from one room to the next. Starting at the very narrow entryway, they used an elegant narrow glass-top accent table, a silk plant, and an inexpensive red, boat-type dish to welcome buyers into the house. (See Figure 11-4.)

Beyond the entry, you see the living room through the opening above the knee wall; Jan and Char positioned the red sofa so buyers could see the size and depth of the room. Beyond the living room, they positioned a piece of art that had red poppies in it so buyers could see into the dining room through the front door and were drawn through the dining room into the kitchen and family room.

Figuring out furniture placement

When you think furniture, you probably think sofa and end tables — not the furniture you put in the foyer or entryway. But the foyer is a room, too, and it needs furniture that's the right size and scale for the space.



Figure 11-4:
Staged,
the color
attracts
buyers to
take a
closer look
and move
through the
rest of the
house.

You want the foyer to be welcoming and to evoke the right feeling — formal with a touch of elegance. Here are a few pieces of furniture and accessories we often use to create that message:

- ✔ **Sofa table:** A sofa table is a long, narrow table. You often see one positioned at the back of a sofa, but they work wonders in a foyer. A sofa table provides a function and a focal point but doesn't take up a lot of physical or visual space.
- ✔ **Seating:** If you have the room, seating sells space in a foyer. Use a small bench with accent pillows or an accent chair.
- ✔ **Storage:** You can make storage a selling point of your foyer by adding storage baskets under the sofa table or a basket or tray for mail. But remember: Keep this area neat and don't let the mail pile up!
- ✔ **Mirror:** A mirror reflects light and can enlarge the space of a foyer. (Check out Figure 11-5.)
- ✔ **Lighting:** A lamp is a welcoming element in a foyer and provides ambient lighting, which is much warmer than an overhead light or foyer chandelier.
- ✔ **Plants:** A live or silk plant, tree, or flower adds life and softness to balance all the hard surfaces of the furniture and flooring in a foyer.



Figure 11-5:
The mirror reflects the living room across the foyer and enlarges the space.

Selling Stairways and Hallways

That's right — you're selling the space in your stairways and hallways, too, so don't overlook these important corridors when you work to create that critical first impression.



Make sure that buyers have a clear pathway to see the rest of the house. If furniture is blocking the hallway that leads to the first-floor bedroom, buyers may not want to negotiate around it. For example, when you put things on the stairs that you want the kids to take up to their rooms, buyers see clutter they need to step over and may not make it to the incredible master suite upstairs. And, really — it may be better that they don't try than that they slip and fall while picking their way through your stuff.

Address the following important staging points to make sure your stairways are in good order:

- ✓ Check that the treads (the part of the stairs that you walk on) are in good repair and don't squeak.
- ✓ Wall-to-wall carpeting on the stairways needs to be clean all the way to the wall.
- ✓ A carpet runner that runs up the center of the stairs should be tacked down securely. Make sure also that the exposed parts of the steps are clean and dust-free.
- ✓ Depersonalize the space. Many people use stairways to display family photos, but this is the time to take them down and store them away for moving.
- ✓ Remove dated wallpaper or wallpaper borders.
- ✓ If the walls haven't had attention in awhile, patch, repair, and touch up the walls, and then repaint with a neutral color. (See Chapter 4 to find out about Staging Safe colors.)
- ✓ Add a large piece of colorful art to the wall at the landing to draw buyers upstairs.
- ✓ Run your hand along the length of your railings and banisters. Are they clean and smooth? If not, the subtle message to buyers is that there are other neglected areas of the house, so get out the wood polish and go to town.
- ✓ Consider updating your banisters and railings.
- ✓ Check that the light fixture is clean and on-trend, and dust off the cobwebs. If you have lighting on the stairs, make sure all the bulbs work so they can light the way to the next floor.



Like all the other places in your house, stairways need to be neat and clutter-free. If your family is in the habit of stacking on the stairs whatever needs to be put away upstairs, break it. Keep the stairways picked up while the house is on the market. If you have one of those handy stair-shaped baskets that hold mail and other stuff, pack and store the basket (and whatever's in it).

Like stairs, hallways get you from one area of the house to the other, so keeping them clean and clutter-free is critical. You also need to consider the following when you stage your house for sale:

- ✓ Remove the runners or throw rugs in a hallway so buyers can see the flooring.
- ✓ Pack away family photos, and then patch and repair the holes in the wall. If necessary paint with a neutral color.
- ✓ Check that the baseboards look fresh and clean. If not, a fresh coat of paint works wonders.
- ✓ Hallways are generally dark, but most have overhead lighting or sconces to light the way to the rest of the house. The lighting needs to be clean and on-trend. Remember to use the highest wattage bulbs that the fixture recommends.

Exits: Stage Them Right!

The entrances and exits that a family uses regularly are generally places where coats are hung, shoes are kicked off, and backpacks dropped. They're also most likely the last places buyers see when they tour the house. The last place buyers see leaves a lasting impression. Address the points in the following checklist to make sure your exits are positively memorable:

- ✓ Keep the clutter to a minimum, floors swept, and counters dusted.
- ✓ Utilitarian pieces like a keyboard, message center, or bulletin board are okay as long as you keep them neat.
- ✓ If you have coat hooks in this area, rather than piling several coats on top of each other, hang a maximum of two coats on each hook to make sure buyers see the handy coat storage instead of a place to pile up extra coats.
- ✓ If there's a broom closet or a multifunction closet in your mud room, keep it halfway full, storing out-of-season clothing and neatly hanging up mops, brooms, and any other equipment that's there.
- ✓ Good lighting is important in these areas, too, so check that you have the highest wattage bulb for the fixture. While you're at it, make sure the switch plates are clean, and check that the exterior light fixtures work and have the proper wattage bulbs.

Handling Unique Spaces at Exits and Entrances

Additions to a house sometimes create a unique sellable space. Sometimes additions can look like an afterthought just tacked onto one end of the house, but they can add a lot of extra square footage. The trick is to show buyers how to use the space so they see it as a plus. Here's what a graduating Certified Staging Professionals class did to help move buyers to that frame of mind.

Staging nightmare: An odd room that had been added to a kitchen also had a doorway to the living room at the far end. (See Figure 11-6.) It also had an outside exit to the back yard. It was a nice addition to the house, but the home sellers didn't know how the room should function to maximize the space.



Figure 11-6: Before, this extension to the kitchen wasn't a functional space.

Staging solution: The stagers in this project borrowed chairs from another part of the house and positioned them so buyers could imagine themselves relaxing in front of the fireplace. (See Figure 11-7.) They pulled the table and chairs away from the wall and angled them to create a wide pathway to the kitchen from the back door and from the back door into the kitchen. Angling the table this way also opened up more room at the entrance, making it less crowded for the buyers coming in.



Figure 11-7: Staged, the room invites buyers to the beautiful back yard and provides space for reading and visiting.

Chapter 12

A Whole Lot of Living to Do: Living, Family, and Rec Rooms

In This Chapter

- ▶ Defining the living spaces
 - ▶ Looking into formal living rooms
 - ▶ Maximizing family rooms
 - ▶ Making rec and bonus rooms shine
 - ▶ Running down a DIY checklist for living spaces
-

Barring unusual circumstances, you don't sleep in the bathroom or cook in the home office, but distinctions are less clear among the boundaries of living spaces: living rooms, family rooms, great rooms, and so on. Because these public areas are important to family and everyday living in any house, in this chapter we help you look at the function, focal point, furniture placement, and upgrade elements (new paint, say, or more modern light fixtures) of each room that help you sell your house faster.

From Formal to Laid Back: The Family of Living Rooms

In houses that have a living room and a family room, owners tend to reserve the living room for special occasions or guests, and the room is usually more elegantly decorated. The family room is more casual. It's the informal place where you see toys and personal items, the room where children play. Families and frequent visitors come together in a family room to relax, watch TV, have an informal meal, and so on.

A fireplace warms any room

A fireplace automatically becomes the focal point of a room. But that doesn't mean it's automatically a positive focal point. Here are ways to avoid common errors sellers make when the fireplace is the focal point of a room:

- ✔ **Repair and update the features of the fireplace.** To give a fireplace a face-lift, you can repaint the wood or brick, change the proportions of the mantel, or update the look with newer materials. If the brick, tile, or stone is broken, you can have it repaired. You can even replace or reposition the mantel to restore the fireplace and ready the room for sale.
- ✔ **Make sure the artwork is in scale with the fireplace.** The main artwork piece that you hang above the fireplace should be the same width as the fireplace opening.
- ✔ **Keep mirrors off your mantle.** Leaning a mirror on the mantle usually reflects the ceiling — not very attractive. Save the mirrors for walls where you want to reflect a feature of the room or a great view.
- ✔ **Keep the mantle uncluttered.** We often see a lot of small things clumped together on the mantle or things that are the wrong color or size. Balance is important, so choose items for the mantle that have different heights but are similar in weight and color.

You can create a wonderful effect on brick or stone fireplaces by using up lighting or by installing recessed down lights in the ceiling over the mantle. We tell you more about lighting in Chapter 4.

The line between the living room and the family room can be blurred depending on where you live. Builders of some newer houses have eliminated the formal living room altogether in lieu of a *great room* that combines formal and informal living spaces and is often right off the kitchen.

Some houses also include a *recreation or bonus room*. Usually located in the basement or over a garage, this multipurpose room is often used as a game room or as a hangout for children or teenagers.

Bringing Luxury and Elegance to Living Rooms



If your property has a living room and a family room, stage the living room as a formal space for reading and entertaining. You want buyers to see the room as an elegant and formal place to entertain their own guests. If your house has one room that is used as living room–family room combination, treat it as a family room but work to eliminate distractions like the TV (by hiding it in an armoire, for example).

Determine your focal point (see Chapter 5). Often living rooms have a fireplace — a fixed and attractive focal point. The focal point is what you're selling in the room, so you want the shape of the room and the furniture arrangement to help buyers to notice it.



To make a room feel more formal, place accessories in a symmetrical configuration and align furniture so that it's parallel to the walls instead of angled. But be sure it still feels welcoming and inviting by adding lamps and a live or silk green plant.

To make your living room elegant, use formal accessories such as crystal vases, large floral arrangements, and elegant frames on artwork. Rather than adding a punch of color with the accessories as you would in other rooms, use complementary, understated neutral colors — linen, creams, whites, taupe, or black — to make the room feel spacious.



Groupings of candlesticks or vases, or a combination of accessories together in a group and in odd numbers are more interesting than those in even numbers. Three is a good number for groupings in most cases.

Pay close attention to scale and balance, and vary items by height and width, placing the large and tall items at the back. For example, if you have three candleholders of three different heights, place the tallest in the back, the next-tallest to one side but just forward of the first, and the shortest candle and holder on the other side of the tallest one, but slightly in front of it. This adds interest and dimension to the space.

Staging nightmare: The fireplace is the focal point of the room shown in Figure 12-1 and is crowded by the furnishings; the furniture layout doesn't maximize the use of room. Buyers leave with an impression that the room is crowded and cluttered.

Staging solution: The sellers began their relocation process by packing up and storing their furnishings, and then the stager used her own furniture inventory to stage the room. Joanne O'Donnell, CSP, of Chic Home Interiors, took the opportunity to highlight the beautiful fireplace and great windows. (See Figure 12-2.) She used two seating vignettes to make full use of the large room while still giving that feeling of comfort that will make potential buyers instantly feel at home.



Figure 12-1:
Before, the
furniture
looks heavy
and eats up
space.

Joanne O'Donnell, Chic Home Interiors



Figure 12-2:
Staged, the
living room
encourages
buyers to
imagine
entertaining
friends and
family and
creates an
accommodating
flow for buyers
through the
room.

Joanne O'Donnell, Chic Home Interiors



Add warmth and a classic look to the formal living room by adding these upgrades: fresh paint, hardwood floors, new carpeting, upgraded or repainted baseboards and crown moldings, and new hardware, doorknobs, and light fixtures.

Staging nightmare: The small living area in Figure 12-3 is overcrowded, but the seller insists on having the piano to use during the time the condo is on the market. Small spaces create a bigger-than-usual challenge for stagers because they have to expand space visually yet accommodate living.



Figure 12-3:
Before, buyers can't see the room's features or understand its function.

Annie Caya, HD Staging

Staging solution: By rearranging the furnishings and bringing in some accent pieces, Annie Caya, CSP, of HD Staging directs the buyer's eyes to the focal point of the room — the window. (See Figure 12-4.) By accommodating the piano and still making the room look large, Cava subtly told the buyer that the room has plenty of space.



Figure 12-4:
Staged, the
room is
spacious
and
welcoming.

Annie Cava, HD Staging

Finding Focus and Balance in Family Rooms

Families work, play, and rest together in the family room, which may be used as a reading nook, a game room, a space to do homework, and as an entertainment center where family and close friends watch movies and play video games.

Furniture placement in a family room should show off the many functions of the room:

- ✓ Create a conversation area and a reading nook.
- ✓ Group the sofa and other seating in the room near the fireplace.
- ✓ If you have room, create a game area, with either with a table for board games and cards or a computer station.



A multifunction room calls for flexible lighting. Include functional task lighting with lamps on end tables and overhead lighting. You really need both types of lighting in a room to make it feel welcoming, so if you don't have end tables, either buy one or two for the room, or use something else as an end table. (In a pinch, you can stack leather suitcases to create one.) For more on properly lighting a room, see Chapter 4.

When you choose the focal point for a family room, look for architectural features that stay with the house. Showcasing your flat-screen TV may turn off buyers because they may not have a flat-screen TV and therefore not be able to envision themselves in the room. You don't need to ditch the TV altogether, just remember not to make it the focal point in the room.

The family room is the most logical place to store the family's collection of books, games, DVDs, CDs, and computer software, so many family rooms have built-in shelving. But built-in bookcases can make a room look crowded and dark.

Staging nightmare: The family room in Figure 12-5 has a beamed cathedral ceiling, stone fireplace, and very large windows facing acreage and water. A large wood bookshelf wall separated the kitchen from the family room but was so overloaded that it gave the room a very heavy feeling.



Fig 12-5: Before, the overloaded bookcase wall overpowered the family room.

Staging solution: Stager Susan Crema-Martin of Martin Designs suggested removing most of the personal items and books, rearranging, and adding some interesting pieces made the bookcase less daunting. (Check out Figure 12-6.) Neutralizing the space enabled buyers' eyes to move much more freely from the bookcase around the room to the dining area and the outdoors.

Figure 12-6: Staged, the bookcase looks neat and functional without overwhelming the room.



Susan Crema-Martin, Martin Designs



When you're selling your house, you want to remove all personal items and collections, including books, DVDs, and CD collections.

Staging nightmare: The outdated family room in Figure 12-7 presented a series of challenges:

- ✓ Addressing the bowling-alley shape of the room
- ✓ Facilitating traffic flow in and out of the adjoining patio room
- ✓ Showcasing the beautiful view of the garden and private lake in the background
- ✓ Featuring the large two-story fireplace
- ✓ Enhancing the other architectural elements and distracting buyers' eyes from the homeowners' furnishings

Figure 12-7: Before, dated carpet and a haphazard furniture arrangement kept buyers from seeing the fireplace and great view.



Lisa Dickson, *Decorating in a Day*

Staging solution: Lisa Dickson, CSP, of *Decorating in a Day*, won the 2007 USA Innovator of the Year title with her innovative approach to a staging challenge (see Figure 12-8). Here's what she did:

- ✔ Replaced the carpet with a neutral *frisee* (a popular carpet with a twisted yarn and mid-length pile) that complements the fireplace material instead of clashing with it.
- ✔ Divided the seating arrangement into two distinct zones: The main seating area featured two sofas angled opposite the fireplace; the second consisted of a conversation and a reading area, directing the traffic in and out of the patio room and drawing the eye towards the rear garden view.
- ✔ Enhanced the fireplace with a large-scale piece of art in vibrant colors flanked by two tall and slender silk arrangements.
- ✔ Repeated the color red in the art throughout the room with pillows and throws, softening the room.
- ✔ Placed silk trees in the room to add softness and to balance the architectural materials.



Figure 12-8: Staged, the room holds fewer distractions and feels more open and inviting.

Lisa Dickson, *Decorating in a Day*

Getting the Great Room into Selling Shape

Some properties may not have a formal living room and instead have a room open to the kitchen that combines a family room with the dining room and study. Builders call it the *great room*. It's designed for convenience — a place where kids can play or do homework as Mom works in the kitchen while watching TV. The challenge in showcasing this space is that great rooms are generally larger than family rooms and thus have several areas that serve different functions. How do you show all this function in such a large space?

When selling the great room, the focal point might be a fireplace, windows, a built-in bookcase, or the view. Place the furniture to highlight these features. You also want to accentuate the open concept and need to create separate functions within the space.

Warm up the great room by grouping furniture in conversation areas 8 to 12 feet in diameter. Ground and separate these spaces using area rugs, and cozy them up using accessories like throw rugs, pillows, and artwork.

Throw in the pillows!

Adding throw pillows and throws (small, colorful blankets that usually are placed over the back of a sofa) to a living room, family room, or great room adds a punch of color and interest to a room and new life to the space you're selling.

Check out decorating magazines to get a fix on what's popular in pillows and throws, and then consider the following points when choosing them:

- ✔ **Color:** Everywhere else we recommend that you neutralize the space but here's where you can go wild with color. Well, not wild but *adventurous*. Find out what colors are popular by visiting a few model homes or by going to your local paint store and asking one of the paint sellers what's popular. Choosing today's trends shows the home as modern and on-trend.
- ✔ **Texture:** Mix two or three fabric textures to offer depth and character to any room. Consider the season before you shop: Lighter-weight fabrics like linen make sense for summer, and heavyweight fabrics like suede or fur work for winter.
- ✔ **Presentation:** Choose different sizes and odd numbers of pillows. When placing them on a sofa or love seat, leave room for sitting — too many pillows can overpower a room. Place three pillows straight up and evenly spaced along the length of a couch. If you use a sofa and love seat in an L-shape, place the pillows on the opposite ends of each piece of furniture (like parentheses at either end of a phrase).

Set the stage with small vignettes of accessories:

- ✔ Use a small stack of books under a lamp on an end table.
- ✔ Turn a book upside down with a reading lamp and reading glasses.
- ✔ Place a basket of knitting needles and wool next to an upholstered chair.



Although we're generally not fans of putting area rugs on top of carpeting, adding an area rug in a carpeted great room helps define a conversation area from a reading or play area. But if you're adding more than one rug in a room choose rugs that are similar in style and color so you don't end up with a crazy quilt of carpets.

Staging nightmare: The floors in the great room in Figure 12-9 were wonderful, but wood on wood tends to make a room feel bottom-heavy. The arrangement neglected the fabulous window to the left of the dining table and didn't properly address traffic flow.

Staging solution: Joanne O'Donnell, CSP, of Chic Home Interiors, rearranged the furniture, replaced a few pieces, and added accessories to show off to buyers the fireplace, great hardwood floors, and the view from the expansive windows. Figure 12-10 shows you the results.



Figure 12-9:
Before, the
furniture
doesn't
highlight the
great
features in
the room.

Joanne O'Donnell, Chic Home Interiors



Figure 12-10:
Staged, the
buyer can
see more
than one
function —
and the
view!

Joanne O'Donnell, Chic Home Interiors

Staging a Recreation Room, Bonus Room, or Basement

The recreation room or bonus room comes in many flavors: In some cases, it's the resting place for old furniture and in others it holds the laundry center or the pull-out couch for guests and the kids' sleepovers. It might be a music or game or rumpus room, and it's often the most cluttered and lived-in room of the house.

Staging nightmare: Part of a lovely 4,000-square-foot home that had a formal living room and a great room, the living space in Figure 12-11 needed to be distinguished as a special recreational space.

Staging solution: Joanne O'Donnell, CSP, of Chic Home Interiors talked with the homeowners about several possibilities for the room, including bringing in a rented pool table. The homeowners fell so in love with the idea that they decided to purchase this beautiful table for their new home and use it for staging while this home was on the market. O'Donnell also added two comfortable leather chairs arranged around a chess table, and a flat screen television to complete the room. Figure 12-12 shows the results of the transformation.



Figure 12-11:
Before, the
bonus room
has no
discernable
function.



Figure 12-12:
Staged, the
bonus room
is a great
place for
family fun!

Joanne O'Donnell, Chic Home Interiors



Consider using a game board as an accessory. A nice chess or checkers set sets the mood for family fun.

A rec room or finished basement is a real selling feature, but not if the basement is dark and depressing. You can get more buyers excited about the property by turning a finished basement into a well-staged multifunctional room.



If your rec room doubles as a laundry room, partition off the washer and dryer. Oriental screens provide a functional partition and still allow light to filter through.

Fresh paint on the walls improves the mood of the room, and if you have windows in the basement, clean them until they sparkle. Lighting is another mood maker, so remove any existing fluorescent lights, which are harsh and add unattractive light to the room.

Add a table and lamp or floor lamp beside a reading chair. Place furniture for entertaining and to highlight the focal point of the room, then hang art and accessorize as you would to a great room.



Remove all clutter. Pack it up early and donate anything you don't want to move with you to Habitat ReStores (www.habitat.org).

Getting Your Rooms in Shape with a DIY Checklist

Use the following list to make sure that your living, family, bonus, and rec rooms are shipshape for potential buyers:

✓ Remove

- All collections and personal items
- All valuable items (remove them from the property)
- Any signs of pets, including dog beds, scratching posts, food dishes, and so on
- Ashtrays, and consider using an air-cleaning machine if anyone smokes in the house
- Children's toys and games (or hide them in a covered basket)
- Two thirds of the books on the shelves

✓ Clean, and keep clean

- Carpet
- Walls
- Baseboards
- Windows
- Doors
- Electronics
- Light fixtures and switches
- Furniture (and the floors underneath it)

✓ Repair or replace

- Any nail holes from removed artwork
- Carpet if needed (Often a professional clean can bring the new back into your carpet. Replace outdated carpet.)
- Outdated or damaged light fixtures
- Damaged trim or edging

Chapter 13

A Feast of Dining Room Staging Ideas

In This Chapter

- ▶ Readyng the room from chandelier to china cabinet
 - ▶ Placing (and reducing) dining room furniture
 - ▶ Finding furniture solutions
-

Families gather and make memories in dining rooms — even if they use these rooms only a few times a year. Although the room can seem like a waste of space, you do need to treat your dining room as a dining room while your house is on the market so that buyers can imagine all the wonderful family celebrations they'll have there. In this chapter, we walk you through prepping your dining room from the bottom up and share some strategies that help buyers imagine themselves in this elegant space.

New trends in housing show that the size of the eating area is increasing to accommodate a more relaxed yet family-sized dining space. Even though most people eat out or on the run, when it comes to family times, buyers want to know that the whole family can fit around the table.



Because dining rooms are little used, they tend to morph into home offices, craft rooms, homework stations, home gyms, and so on. If your dining room has lost its original function, you need to bring it back around. Even though the dining room is probably the least-used room in the house, buyers want to know there's a space where their family can gather for those special occasions.

The dining room is often visible from the foyer or front entryway of the house, which means making that room elegant and welcoming for buyers is particularly important. You want to make sure they're tempted to take a closer and longer look at your property.

Take the steps you find in this chapter to get your dining room ready for buyers' eyes.

Running Through a Dining Room Staging Checklist

Just like every other room in the house, you want the dining room to be clean, neat, clutter free, and in good repair, so your first step is to take a cold hard look at it and clean out, pack, and store anything that doesn't say "dining room." After that, get busy and address all the other details that make your dining room a selling point.



You never know who will be looking at your house, so don't leave out your religious or political books or icons, and clear away any evidence of beer, wine, or liquor. You run the risk of offending a potential buyer if you leave these things on display.

Sprucing up the flooring

Dining-room flooring tends not to get as much wear as that of other rooms, but it can end up with some unappetizing stains. If the carpet is worn or if it has some stains from the last dinner party or your son's birthday party, then clean or replace it. If you have hardwood, check that the floor is clean and in good repair. You may also want to add an area rug to show off the hardwood floors and dampen some of the sound, but make sure it's large enough so the table and all the chairs fit on it.

Staging nightmare: After removing the dated window treatments from a dining room with lovely wood floors, the dining room echoed and felt very cold.

Staging solution: The dining room was the first room off the entryway, so it needed some warmth and punch. We'd used red throw pillows as the accent in the adjoining room, so we pulled the same red into the dining room by adding an area rug. The red rug brought out the richness of the hardwood floors, stopped the echo, and added warmth to the space.

Getting light right

A lighting fixture can make your dining room memorable — in a good or bad way. Make sure yours is clean, on-trend, and appropriate to your house.

If you plan to leave your current light fixture in place, then clean it by wiping off the individual shades, light bulbs, and crystals. If you love the fixture, then take it down, pack it away, and store it for your new house. You don't have to spend a lot of money on a replacement, but make sure you buy something that's up-to-date and in keeping with the style of your house. For example,

don't install a traditional fixture in your dining room if the house is clearly contemporary in style.

Also, check that you have the highest wattage light bulbs in place (check this by peeking inside the light socket for maximum bulb wattages).



Install a chandelier or light fixture 30 to 42 inches above the table top and make sure it's in proportion to the room. For dining rooms with 8-foot ceilings, determine the diameter of the light fixture by adding the length and the width of the room as if the dimension was in inches (12 feet is equivalent to 12 inches). For a room that measure 15 feet by 15 feet, the light fixture should be 30 inches in diameter (15 plus 15 equals 30). Add another inch to the diameter of the chandelier for every foot of ceiling height above 8: A fixture in a 15 by 15 room with a 10-foot ceiling should measure 32 inches in diameter.

Readying the room

Run through the following checklist to get your dining room ready for buyers' inspections:

- ✓ Clean and freshen up the woodwork, baseboards, and trim molding around the doorways. These areas must be sparkling clean or freshly painted.
- ✓ Clean or replace switch plates and outlet covers. If they're decorative, then replace them with new, plain covers in either white or cream.
- ✓ Open or remove heavy or out-of-date window treatments. Take a look at the view out the dining room window. Is it a pretty garden? Then open the drapes and the window blinds to show it off and let in all the natural light possible. If the view out the window is the siding on the house next door, tip the louvers up to let in the light without letting in the view. Alternatively you could place an airy palm tree close to the window so the light still gets in but the eye is distracted from the view.
- ✓ Wash the windows so they're sparkling clean. Make sure the windows work smoothly and don't squeak.
- ✓ Oil squeaky door hinges.
- ✓ If you have built-in storage, replace any drawer pulls that aren't on-trend and in good repair.
- ✓ Make sure that the wall color is neutral and on-trend. (Chapter 4 tells you more about choosing colors.) If you have wallpaper or a border older than 5 years old, consider removing it.
- ✓ Bring color to the dining room by adding art to the space. (See Chapter 8 to find out more about using accessories.)



- ✓ Check that the ceiling is in good repair. Patch any cracks and repaint the entire dining room ceiling.

Repaint only a patched area, and you send a red flag to home inspectors. Play it safe and paint the entire ceiling.

Placing Furniture — But Not Too Much of It

Dining rooms in many homes are small; dining room furniture is often large. The problem in showcasing a dining room is to make it look roomy enough to accommodate you and your extended family. More often than not, we end up removing furniture from the dining room to make it look bigger.

Most dining rooms include a dining room table, six to eight chairs, a buffet or sideboard, and a china cabinet that add up to too much furniture for the space. Figure 13-1 shows you a typically overstuffed dining room, and Figure 13-2 shows off the open feel of a scaled-back furniture arrangement.



Figure 13-1:
Before,
too much
furniture
makes
the dining
room feel
crowded.



Figure 13-2:
Staged,
dining
rooms look
larger and
less
cluttered.

Jan Maresh and Char Curry, *Naked Room Solutions*

Have you been to a retail store and felt like you could hardly see anything because the displays were too crowded and close together? Maybe you got out of there as fast as you could because you were just uncomfortable. Not having enough room to pass between the merchandise and displays without knocking into something else will do that to you.



Lack of adequate walking space is an uncomfortable situation when you're in a retail store, but it's intolerable in a house for sale. Jan calls this walking space *butt-brush room* — enough space between and around the furniture so your butt doesn't brush up against something else. A distance of about 24 to 28 inches provides ample butt-brush room.

More often than not, dining rooms don't offer enough butt-brush room because there's a dining room table, four to six chairs, a china cabinet, and a sideboard or buffet. These extra pieces of furniture just weigh down the room. Test the space to see whether you need to walk sideways to get around the dining room. If so, keep the china cabinet and store the sideboard or use it in another room. If you do have room to use it in the dining room, use your accessories sparingly; rather than spreading accessories the length of the sideboard, simple art above it and an orchid on it is better.



Sometimes the china cabinet overpowers the dining room. In that case, take off the *hutch* — the part that holds the glassware and china. Removing the hutch can really open up the dining room and give it a more spacious feeling.

You want your dining room to be a spacious, elegant room for family gatherings and entertaining. In the following sections, we show you ways to put together such a room.

Table and chairs

You want the dining room to look as spacious as possible, so in most cases, we recommend removing a leaf from the table and leaving fewer chairs around the table than came with the dining set. The room looks more spacious with a smaller table and four chairs (or a maximum of six chairs). Store the extra chairs or use them in another part of the house, but don't put them in the corners of the dining room — they look like you didn't have the space for them around the table, and by leaving them you're eating up the equity in the room.

If at all possible, avoid using a tablecloth on the table because it visually gobbles up space in the room, as you see in Figure 13-3. Use a simple center piece, like the one you see in Figure 13-4 and a table runner instead. We also recommend not setting the table with dishes and flatware — it looks too contrived.

You want to center the dining room table under the light fixture, but you don't have to play it straight. Professional stagers sometimes angle the table to improve the flow of the room, as you see in Figure 13-5.



Figure 13-3:
Before,
the dining
room is
unappealing
and visually
crowded.

Figure 13-4:
Partially staged,
removing the
tablecloth
opens up
the space in
the dining
room.



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Figure 13-5:
Staged,
angling the
table can
create
better flow
in the dining
room.



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This room was staged during a Certified Professional Stagers class event, so all staging took place without the stagers bringing in any items that weren't already in the house. We recommended to the owner that he bring in some art and consider painting the walls or the trim so the contrast wouldn't be such a distraction.

Arranging the china cabinet

If you have a small dining room, you may be better off removing your china cabinet and storing it elsewhere. If your dining room is large enough, and especially if you have an attractive niche in the dining room that you want buyers to notice, by all means keep the china cabinet.

Many china cabinets are in two pieces, with the hutch resting on a cabinet base. When this is the case, we often remove the hutch and use the base cabinet alone to visually open up the space.



Another nice thing about splitting up a china cabinet is that you can use the base cabinet in another part of the house — as a sofa or entry table, or as a sideboard in an eat-in kitchen.



China cabinets are great places to . . . cram everything else that doesn't fit in the kitchen cupboards. If you use the china cabinet to stage your house, pack and store two-thirds to three-quarters of all the holiday plates, cups, and décor. Then display one place setting of china per shelf or section so the plate is centered on the shelf in front of a glass door.

Setting up a buffet or sideboard (or not)

To figure out where to put your sideboard, take a look at the ceiling. What shape is it? If it's rectangular, then try placing the sideboard on one of the short sides of the rectangle. Doing so makes your dining room look more spacious.

Wherever you place your sideboard, make sure that when the dining room table and chairs are in place, you leave enough space for walking between the table and buffet. You need at least 24 inches for clearance. If you can't leave this much clearance no matter which wall you put the buffet on, then remove it from the dining room altogether.

Softening the room with plants and ambient lighting



The first place the eye rests in a room is the back right corner, which is where stagers often place a tree in the dining room. Because the dining room has a lot of hard surfaces (the wood or glass-top dining room table, wood or iron chairs, china cabinet, and sideboard), a tree or tall plant adds softness, texture, and balance. For great mood lighting at night, we also like putting an up light on a timer and placing it under the tree. The light filters through the leaves, creating additional texture in the room.

Floral arrangements bring nature and color into the room, and the center of the dining room table is a great place for one — but don't go too crazy. You want buyers looking at the room, not the floral arrangement.

If you have a buffet or sideboard in the room, add soft lighting with a lamp or two. If you use buffet lamps (a pair of matching lamps that are relatively tall and thin), forego arranging them symmetrically on both ends of the buffet. Instead set them next to each other, raising one higher than the other by elevating it on a book. This arrangement is more on-trend and appeals to the younger buyer.

Adding artwork and mirrors

The dining room is a perfect place to add color, and the easiest way to do so is by adding artwork. Rather than using small art pieces, make a statement with one large piece of art or a grouping placed closely together so that the pieces look like one large piece of art. If you want to highlight a view, consider placing a mirror to reflect the view and to bring additional light into the room.



If the artwork is going over a buffet or sideboard, place it so that its bottom edge is 4 to 6 inches higher than the surface of the furniture. When placing art on the wall itself, place it at art-gallery height — 54 inches from the floor to the center of the picture.

Accenting with accessories

Use accessories sparingly or not at all in a dining room. You want buyers to admire the floors or the cove ceiling, not your accessories. Larger crystal and silver objects add elegance and texture, but as is often the case, less is more. Take a look at Figures 13-6 and 13-7 to see the big difference that paring down to minimal accessories makes.



Figure 13-6:
Before, the random accessories make this dining room look heavy and dated.

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Figure 13-7:
Staged, using the same furniture and fewer accessories, this dining room is updated and ready for entertaining.

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Improvising to Set Up Your Dining Room

Sometimes dining room furniture just isn't available for staging your dining room, so in this section we give you a few ideas that may help create the ambiance without costing an arm and a leg.



Bear in mind that makeshift staging solutions put you at a distinct disadvantage to other staged houses in the marketplace. Our professional advice is that you find the budget for rental furniture, buy dining room furniture that you can move to your new house, or borrow a table and chairs from a friend or relative.

Making your own table

In a pinch, you can fashion a dining room table by using two saw horses (or a smaller table you can use as a pedestal), with a sheet of plywood on top. For a smooth look to the table top, cover it with a piece of felt, and then put a tablecloth over the felt-covered plywood. *Voila* — a dining room table.

What to do when you don't have dining room chairs? The host and hostess chairs (those at either end of the table) can be different from the others at the table, so if you can, borrow them from another part of the house. The side chairs can be inexpensive but nice folding chairs. We like the kind that have a wood back and an upholstered seat, and you can take them with you after the house sells.

Borrowing or renting

We believe that a furnished dining room is so important to the overall feeling of your house that you may want to borrow or rent a table and chairs. Ask your friends or family members (preferably the ones whose style matches yours) to temporarily give up their dining room furniture for your good cause. Or rent furniture from your staging professional or local furniture rental source. Remember to keep the room simple and on-trend.

If you don't have a table or need to take the table with you when you move, rent a table. Renting an on-trend table and chairs, transforms the eating area in Figure 13-8 into a place most buyers can see themselves having a meal together or entertaining friends (see Figure 13-9).



Figure 13-8:
Before, this
kitchen is
dated.

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Figure 13-9:
Staged with
rentals, the
kitchen gets
an instant
update.
Even the
light fixture
looks better!

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When You Don't Have a Formal Dining Room . . .

Some houses don't have a formal dining room, but there's always a place in the house where family members can gather to share a meal. To identify the eating space and secure it in the mind of buyers, stack three or four plates on the table as if you were getting ready to set it. Then arrange drinking glasses and stack the napkins near the plates. Finish the table by including a floral arrangement or a bowl of fresh fruit as a centerpiece.

The eat-in kitchen in Figure 13-10 was the only place the family had for dining, but it also ended up being a chaotic drop zone for all the family's stuff. After the beer bottles, backpacks, and other kitchen clutter was packed away and the large hutch was relocated, this eating space (see Figure 13-11) is comfortable for family dinners and entertaining.



Figure 13-10:
Before,
relaxed
dining?



Figure 13-11:
Staged, a
family
gathering
place.

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Chapter 14

Cashing In on Kitchens and Baths

In This Part

- ▶ Finding easy-on-the-budget kitchen upgrades
 - ▶ Selling the spa message in your bathrooms
 - ▶ Fixing what ails your kitchen and bathrooms with a DIY checklist
-

If you want to get top dollar for your house, then your kitchens must sparkle and your bathrooms must look like they've never been used. Why? Because most buyers are willing to pay a premium for a house that doesn't need any major work. If buyers see that the appliances are old and worn and the bathroom fixtures are blue or mauve, they make the assumption that the rest of the house is outdated and want a major discount. Don't let buyers chip away at your equity. The investment you make up front in the kitchen and bathrooms yields your best return on investment. An updated kitchen gets your house sold faster.

If you don't read and follow our advice in any other chapter in the book, read this one. We offer strategies to get the best return on your kitchen and bathroom investment. These upgrades don't have to be as expensive as you may think.

Kitchens: Staging the Home's Focal Point

Just like every room in the house has a focal point, every house has a focal point. In most cases it's the kitchen.

The kitchen is the hub of the home; it's the place where families prepare and eat their meals, plan their activities, make phone calls, check messages, pay bills, have family discussions, and so on. Many kitchens these days even include a computer that's a homework station for the kids and an easy recipe source for the cook in the family. TVs — on their own or set into the appliances — are common.

Buyers want organized, flexible, updated kitchens. Along with being the focal point and most publicly used room of the house, the kitchen is the most costly room to remodel. Buyers know that if the kitchen is not what they're

looking for, then they can expect to invest thousands of dollars to upgrade a kitchen to what they really want. In most cases, they'd rather pay more up front for a house with an upgraded kitchen so it's covered in the mortgage.



You get a higher return on your investment when you remodel a kitchen than you do for any other room in the house — anywhere from 75 to 90 percent.

Preparing this room for sale means checking out the competition. What do houses selling in your price range offer? How does your kitchen compare to those? Look at floors, countertops, appliances, fixtures, lighting, and the overall size and feeling of the room.



The kitchen displays more personal items than you may think, and a fridge full of drawings, magnets, notes, and photographs is very distracting to a buyer. Make sure you depersonalize the space, including the countertops. You need only a few minutes to store coffee pots, toasters, and other small appliances that sit on your counters. Doing so makes the kitchen look bigger and the counters more spacious; that leads to more equity in your pocket.

Upgrading on the cheap with paint

After you've lived in a house for awhile, it's easy to be house blind — blind to the flaws and everyday wear and tear. So look at your kitchen carefully. Is there food splatter all over the woodwork? Stencils that you sponged onto the walls in the '80s? It's time for updating, and the walls are a great place to start. A new splash of paint can go a long way to create a refreshing, warm, new look.



One of the top three features buyers look for in a home is fresh paint. Paint the walls if they

- ✓ Are dull or old-looking
- ✓ Are painted in outdated colors
- ✓ Are covered with wallpaper
- ✓ Have a wallpaper border or stenciling

If your kitchen leads into a family room or great room, don't separate the multi-function room by using different paint colors. Using the same base color on the main walls makes both the kitchen and adjoining room look more spacious.

A light neutral paint is the safest and most effective option when staging a kitchen for sale. For more information on making the right color choices see Chapter 4.

Brightening the room

Bright and airy kitchens sell; dark kitchens don't. As in every room in the house, your goal in the kitchen is to let in as much light and to make the windows look as large as possible. Windows are selling features. Take the following steps to highlight yours:

- ✔ Remove valences and swags — they make windows look smaller.
- ✔ If you're unable to remove the valences or swags, hire someone to remove them for you. At a minimum, open all blinds, shades, and curtains for showings and open houses.
- ✔ Clean all windows until they sparkle. Consider hiring a professional window cleaner if you don't have the time or energy.
- ✔ Remove and store the window screens to make the windows look more clear and sparkly.

In addition to natural light, use electric lights to your advantage in the kitchen. Turn on all the lights in the kitchen before showings or open houses. Consider adding lighting to your kitchen. Under- and above-cabinet lighting makes otherwise shadowed areas bright. These lights are relatively inexpensive and easy to install. Be sure when you install them that you don't leave wires showing.

Staging nightmare: The galley kitchen in Figure 14-1 is in a 1984 condo in Oakland, California, and owned by an elderly couple who were downsizing. The stager, Joanne O'Donnell of Chic Home Interiors, needed to keep the costs down while optimizing the return on the owners' investment. The kitchen had old appliances of different colors and styles; old plywood cabinets that were in bad shape, unattractive, and dated; a tile counter and linoleum flooring that were very dated and had busy patterns. The property needed a lot of work on a tight budget, so O'Donnell looked for inexpensive solutions.

Staging solution: Careful color choices in the room deemphasized the variation in color of the appliances, cutting the cost of replacing or refinishing them, so the stager painted the walls and cabinets. Doing so brightened the room considerably, and inexpensive hardware from Ikea really updated the look. She also replaced the dated vinyl and had the tile refinished by a bathtub refinishing company. Figure 14-2 shows the results.

The limitation imposed by tile refinishing was that O'Donnell had only two color choices — white or bisque, but the service is widely available and an inexpensive alternative to replacement.



Figure 14-1:
Before, the
kitchen
looks old
and dated.

Joanne O'Donnell, Chic Home Interiors

Adding a splash of color

We recommend you paint the kitchen a neutral color and then add a spark of color to draw the eye to a special view or to engage buyers' emotions. Adding color to a neutral kitchen is easy! Using natural props can help the buyer connect to the room:

- ✔ An open cookbook can encourage buyers to envision their own cookbooks on the counter.
- ✔ Baskets of fruits, vegetables, and other edibles like bread help buyers see themselves preparing and consuming their own meals in the room.

We don't recommend plastic food unless it's realistic. Many professional home stagers carry fake food and props that look real. Two Hot Peppers, Inc. (www.twohotpeppers.com) carries a variety of props, from vegetables to real-looking chocolate cake.

- ✔ Strategically placed flowers and vases add a splash of color and warmth and draw the eye in both bathrooms and kitchens. Be careful with size and scale, especially in smaller bathrooms. You don't want to overpower the room with the wrong size flower arrangement.



Figure 14-2:
Staged, the
kitchen
looks fresh
and up-to-
date.

Joanne O'Donnell, Chic Home Interiors

Kimberly Stowe won the title of CSP 2007 Innovator of the Year for transforming a boring old kitchen (see Figure 14-3) into a luxurious one for under \$1,200. Stowe moved the dishwasher, replaced one set of cupboard doors, and created a new look on the existing cabinet doors for just under \$20 each by

- ✓ Creating a frame around each existing cabinet door by using baseboard moldings
- ✓ Inserting a wainscot panel on each door front
- ✓ Adding stylish, cost-effective metal hinges and handles

Because there was only room for a single sink, the splash of luxury was an upgraded single sink.

Stowe, a CSP and property investor herself, knows space is at a premium in a small kitchen, which helped her decide to create the kitchen island. The approximate cost of the island was only \$189.



Figure 14-3:
Before, the kitchen looked dated, cramped, and small.

Kimberly Stowe

Stowe created the island using

- ✓ A refurbished table top
- ✓ Fence posts for legs
- ✓ Medium-density fiberboard (MDF) for shelving
- ✓ Baskets for storage
- ✓ A frosted vinyl tablecloth under glass for a sandblasted effect because an actual sandblasted glass top wasn't in the budget
- ✓ Matching wainscoting around the exterior of the island to coordinate with the door fronts

Stowe's work (Figure 14-4 shows the results) paid off: The property received a full-price offer on the first day.



Figure 14-4: Staged, the room is an incredible family-friendly kitchen.

Kimberly Stowe

Refinishing cabinets

One of the most cost-effective ways to give your kitchen or bathroom a new look is to refinish the cabinets and door fronts. Follow these steps:

1. Remove all cabinet hardware.
2. Clean the cabinet surfaces with a degreaser such as Dirtex, available at your local paint store.
3. Lightly sand the surfaces that will be painted, re-stained, or varnished.
4. Using a tack cloth (a sticky gauze-like cloth that sawdust sticks to and is available at your local home improvement or paint store) to thoroughly dust off each surface so it's smooth and dust-free.
5. Apply primer — ICI Dulux's Gripper is a great one — and let it dry.
6. Apply the paint or varnish, following the directions on the product you use.
7. Allow the paint or varnish to dry completely.
8. Install new hardware.
9. Install your gorgeous new door fronts for that updated kitchen buyers will love.

Countertops: Paint, replace, or reface

Nothing says old and tired more than an outdated countertop in a kitchen or bathroom. Luckily, you have some relatively inexpensive options for upgrading countertops.

Granite is king in countertops because of its performance, resistance to heat, and air of luxury. But instead of upgrading to costly slab granite, you can achieve the same luxury in your kitchen by using large-scale tiles with very narrow grout lines for a fraction of the price.

Laminate (what you may know as Formica) is still a cost-effective option for updating your countertops. It comes in many different colors, styles, and textures — we've even seen a version that's a dead ringer to granite. Just remember to use a style and color that won't be outdated quickly. When in doubt, you can always contact your professional stager for advice and installation resources. As with the other larger surfaces in your house, stick to neutrals when replacing the countertops.



Another great option is a new eco-friendly process called Global Countertop System that allows you to resurface wood, arborite, or laminate countertops with a beautiful new surface. This method doesn't require you to disconnect plumbing or take out built-in sinks, trash compactors, water filtration systems, and so on. It dries in hours, cures in days, and is strong and durable. For more information on this process visit www.ecostreetcountertops.com.

If you're selling an older home and the countertops need to be replaced, consider painting them. It's cheaper and looks great. You can find a number of paint products formulated to be used over the existing countertops and offered by just about every paint manufacturer. Some even resemble granite.



Painting countertops isn't a long-term solution. The average life for this counter refinishing treatment is 2 to 5 years.

Treat cracked, damaged, or old countertops with a skim stone refinishing product like Venetian plaster. Most paint manufacturers make a product like this, and you can find them at your local home improvement store. The finish is a rough, stone-like texture that adds an organic, natural look. If you use one of these products, make sure you also use the finishing sealant to protect the new surface and prevent any toxicity from transferring to foods.

Focusing on flooring

Current flooring is one of the top three selling features buyers look for in a house. Upgrading the floor can be another high-dollar item in your staging budget, but if the flooring is cracked, peeling, or really outdated, spending

the money up front prevents a costly markdown later on. Here are a few points to keep in mind about your floors:

- ✔ **Hardwood flooring:** If you have worn hardwood floors, consider having them screened and resurfaced. It's much cheaper than replacing the flooring and, providing the floor is in good shape, the process makes the floors look like new.
- ✔ **Vinyl flooring:** If the vinyl flooring in your bathrooms, kitchen, and utility rooms are worn, torn, and outdated, replace them. Today's vinyl flooring can look like tiles and does an amazing job of giving the room an immediate facelift (or floorlift).
- ✔ **Carpet:** Unless you live in a high-end property, you don't have to use the highest grade carpet to replace any that's worn out. Most sellers do well to purchase a grade of carpet (Berber, sisal, or short pile) that's on the low end of medium-grade and use a good quality carpet pad.



Look for acrylic floor tiles by most of the major tile brands available in your local home improvement center. They come in a variety of styles, including those that look like Italian ceramics and are installed much like ceramic tiles. The good news is that they can be found for as low as \$1 per square foot.

Addressing the appliance issue

Sellers often underestimate how much of a detractor their appliances are to buyers and forget that buyers are looking at many different properties, not just theirs. If the large appliances are old and outdated, consider these options to keep the kitchen from being the reason a buyer doesn't put an offer on the table:

- ✔ Buy new appliances and take them to your new house after the sale. Even though you don't include them in the sale, do consider them as a bargaining lure for a purchaser. By all means make sure they will fit into your new place but don't be too stubborn to leave them if the buyer wants to buy the house with appliances included. The investment in appliances helped secured your sale. Obviously our recommendation is not to purchase top-of-the-line appliances for this purpose.
- ✔ Buy new appliances and include them in the sale of the house. This option increases the value of the property. You can purchase new-model appliances with fewer features to keep the price down, but because this is a major purchase, be sure that your choice fits the price point of house. You can get nice-looking used appliances that are less than 3 years old at extremely low prices. Check out the classified ads or try the Habitat ReStore in your area.

- ✓ Rent new appliances. Find a local store willing to rent appliances to you for a month or two, or try a furniture rental supplier. You can even offer to advertise for them: If the home sells to a buyer who doesn't have appliances, you can recommend their store.

Bathrooms: Tackling Tub, Tile, and Toilet

When your house is on the market, your bathrooms should look like no one has used them. If yours are looking less than new, it's time to look at some reasonably priced upgrades. In this section, we share what buyers are looking for in bathrooms and how you might whip yours into shape.

Here are a few selling features that every buyer would count as a plus, no matter what the trend is:

- ✓ **Large master baths:** You get extra points for adjoining dressing areas or walk-in closets.
- ✓ **Separate vanities in master baths:** People like personal space. (And you don't get more personal than a bathroom.)
- ✓ **Spa features:** Whirlpool tubs, separate shower enclosures, and multiple showerheads make a good impression.



Luxury sells every bathroom. Don't think *bathroom*, think *spa* — a mini resort on your own property, a place where fluffy towels, candles, and warm lighting create the feeling of comfort, relaxation, and privacy.

Upgrading bathrooms is never flushing away money

You get a high return on your investment when you upgrade your bathrooms, and the great news is that bathrooms are also the easiest and most affordable rooms you can give a facelift. Low-cost upgrades do a lot for your overall look. Replace the taps and shower fixtures, for example. You can upgrade your showerhead with a low-grade energy-saver model for as little as \$6.



If you have a bathroom suite in which the sink, tub, and toilet are any color but white or off-white, you need to seriously consider replacing or reglazing. Nothing says “old and outdated” more than a colored toilet. To update, try one of these options:

- ✓ Reglazing provides a new pristine surface on tile and tub surfaces at a fraction of what you'd pay to install a new tub. Visit www.bathmaster.com.

- ✔ Install new shower and bathroom acrylic liners right over your existing tub or shower. Take a look at the process by visiting www.bathfitters.com.
- ✔ Instead of replacing, consider surface restoration for bathtubs and countertops in kitchens and baths. You can save up to 75 percent on remodeling costs by using this new “green” service to repair or change the color of tiles and fixtures. Check out your options at www.miraclemethod.com and www.beautifulfinishes.com.
- ✔ Find great replacement bathroom and kitchen fixtures for low prices at your local Habitat for Humanity ReStore (www.habitat.org/env/restores).

Showcasing with towels and shower curtains

Plenty of great towels create big impact for little money. Make sure your family knows that these towels are for show only. The good news is that towels are an investment you can take with you to your new home. Big and fluffy towels say *luxury*. Use white or cream and one accent color.



Consider folding or rolling towels to decorate the counter or side of a tub. Upscale resorts do so, and if you do too, you’re selling the space as a restful place to unwind and rejuvenate.

After you do the work of updating fixtures and making sure the bathroom is spick-and-span, add a new shower curtain, liner, coordinating towels, and spa basket to bring a brand-new-bathroom feeling to the space.

Replace your shower curtains if they’re damaged, dull, well-worn, a bright color, or outdated. We recommend white or cream fabric curtains rather than plastic because fabric adds extra warmth to the room. Always replace the shower liner.



Keep your shower curtain two-thirds drawn so buyers can look at the tub or shower without feeling like they’re invading your privacy.

Adding artwork and accessories

When staging the kitchen we don’t want the artwork or the accessories (including flower arrangements) to draw buyers’ eyes away from the structure of the room. In the bathroom, you want artwork and accessories to soothe, calm, and rejuvenate, so don’t use bold colors; select colors for your artwork and accessories that are already in the room.

The bathroom in Figure 14-5 is overpowered by an enormous flower arrangement. Not only does it take up precious counter space, it's the focal point of the bathroom — instead of the actual selling features like the tub, double sinks, and great-looking countertops.

Replacing the mammoth flower arrangement with a smaller one and putting neatly folded towels on the counter enabled buyers to focus on the master bath's features. (See Figure 14-6.)

Check out Chapter 8 to find more information about choosing and using art and accessories.

Handling mirrors and medicine cabinets

Think of glamorous bathrooms you've seen on TV or have personally experienced at a great hotel or resort. What do they have in common? Mirrors. If yours are small and outdated, expect buyers to notice them, get dollar signs in their eyes, and start angling for a markdown. If your mirrors are clean, bright, and on-trend, expect buyers to remember the good feeling they had walking into the bathrooms.

The following tips help you create the spa experience buyers look for:

- ✓ Really clean your mirrors and make them shine.
- ✓ Old medicine cabinets make a bathroom feel dated. We suggest you replace them with drywall (if the medicine cabinet is on a side wall) or a framed mirror if the cabinet is over the sink.
- ✓ Make a small bathroom look bigger by hanging a large, framed mirror from counter to ceiling.



If you have a dated wall-hung mirror that attaches with clips to the wall, check into a great product called MirrorMate. The MirrorMate frames attach to the surface of your existing mirror and are custom cut to cover clips and hide the edge of the mirror so it looks like a framed picture — very cool. Find out more by visiting www.mirrormate.com.

Spotlighting your lighting

Lighting plays a big role in creating the spa feeling popular in today's bathrooms. Buyers are attracted to luxury or contemporary styling. Luxury looks include a chandelier with glass or crystal pendants or one that emulates wax candles and is controlled by a dimmer switch. Contemporary style is more streamlined and not ornate.



Figure 14-5:
Before, the
flower
arrangement
is the focal
point.

Graduating CSP Class



Figure 14-6:
Staged,
buyers see
the cabinets
and counter
tops.

Graduating CSP Class

You usually see light fixtures hung over the bathroom mirror and shining light down or up. Actually, the best placement for light in the bathroom is at both sides of the mirror; this placement gives the best light diffusion.

The size and scale of light fixtures depends on the overall size of the room and the targeted buyer you're aiming for. Whatever lights you choose, make sure that all of the bulbs are the same wattage, and that none are missing.



Flameless candles create ambiance in a bathroom. They come in various sizes and shapes and don't break the bank. You can find them at www.stagingmall.com.

Ensuring tip-top toilets

Your mantra when you think about the bathroom is “Make it look like it's never been used,” and that of course applies to toilets as much as to tubs. If your toilet seats are damaged, worn, or stained, replace them with new ones. For the small price of a new seat and a good toilet cleaning, your bathroom looks pristine again.



The caps that cover the bolts on your toilet have a way of disappearing, and the ones that stay easily become worn-looking. Remember to replace them so that buyers see nice, new, clean caps over the bolts.

We strongly recommend you consider replacing a toilet if it's colored, chipped, stained, grungy, or broken in any way. The preferred replacement color is white. The newer models of low-mount toilets use less water to flush and therefore give you a marketing edge.

Upping the Wow Factor with a DIY Staging Checklist

An extra bit of effort and elbow grease helps those offers come flooding through the door. Run through the checklists in this section to make sure you haven't missed a thing when it comes to readying your kitchen and baths.

Kitchens

Glance through the following list to ensure your staging is complete:

✓ Remove

- Dirty towels and oven mitts.
- Anything you don't use on a daily basis.
- Small appliances. (Put them in the cupboard.)
- All family photos, collections, and personal items — especially from the refrigerator.
- Condiment and spice racks.
- Extra shelving, which implies that there isn't enough cupboard space.
- Wallpaper, wallpaper border, or stenciling. (Repaint for a fresh, clean look.)

✓ Keep clean

- Stove top, oven, burners, overhead fan.
- Large appliances like fridges and freezers — even inside! Buyers *will* open them, especially if you're including the appliances in the sale.
- Floors, walls, baseboards, and windows.
- Garbage containers. Empty them before showings and open houses.
- Light switches and fixtures.
- Sink.

✓ Replace or repair

- Faucets. Check for leaks, grit and cracked seals, and low water pressure.
- Dated light fixtures.
- Dated countertops.

✓ Before an open house or showing

- Add a fresh flower arrangement or bowl of fruit.
- Open the blinds and drapes.
- Remove leaves in tables to create more space.
- Turn on all lights.

Bathrooms

Run through this quick list to ensure that you cover all your bases as you stage your bathrooms:

✓ Remove

- Personal items, including hair dyes, irons, shampoo, toothpaste, and brushes. Store in a closed basket under the sink if necessary.
- Kids' toys.
- Rubber mats.
- Covers for toilet tanks and seats, and be sure the toilet seat is down!
- Trash cans, cleansers, plunger, and toilet brush.
- Carpets or scatter rugs.
- Medicine cabinets. They're outdated; consider replacing them with mirrors.
- Wallpaper, wallpaper borders, or stenciling. Repaint in a neutral color.

✓ Keep clean

- Grout and ceramics. Remove any signs of mold, rust, or stains.
- Floors, walls, and windows.
- Light fixtures.
- Sink, tub, toilet, and shower.

✓ Repair or replace

- Shower curtain. Replace plastic curtains — or worn or outdated fabric curtains — with new fabric curtains to add a cozy, fresh look to the room.
- Tub surround. Caulk if needed.
- Bars of soap. Bottled liquid soap stays looking new and doesn't get gooey or slimy.
- Broken seats, hinges, faucets.
- Towels. Buy new, fluffy towels for showcasing.

Chapter 15

Inviting Sweet Dreams with Beautifully Staged Bedrooms

In This Chapter

- ▶ Prepping bedrooms for buyers' eyes
 - ▶ Selling the spa feeling in the master suite
 - ▶ Welcoming guests in a cozy bedroom
 - ▶ Tackling kids' rooms
 - ▶ Running through a DIY checklist
-

Bedrooms are the most private rooms in the house, but when you put your house on the market, those private spaces go public. Are your bedrooms ready for the parade of buyers? They aren't if your master bedroom says "laundry folding area" instead of "luxury hotel suite" or if the kids' rooms look like the off-site headquarters for Batman or Barbie.

Staging bedrooms to sell means making the master bedroom a restful haven, the kids' rooms great places to sleep and study, and the guest room a welcoming, serene spot for family and friends.

In this chapter, we share staging secrets that deliver appealing lifestyle messages and help buyers feel that every room in the house is move-in ready.

Getting Bedrooms Ready for Buyers

Quick — company's coming over and you have to stash the extra laundry and family mail somewhere. The bedrooms are safe, right? Because bedrooms are the most private spaces in the house, they're a popular catch-all, but that changes completely when your house goes on the market.

Prepping from the laundry pile up

Bedrooms need to be clean, uncluttered, charming, and as gender-neutral as possible. Start your bedroom staging by removing or storing

- ✓ Anything that doesn't relate to the function of the room. If you're using an extra bedroom as a hobby or music room, convert it back to a bedroom. Buyers often lack imagination, and you don't want them leaving your house saying, "Boy, that was a great house but there weren't enough bedrooms."
- ✓ Collections, collectables, personal photographs, certificates, degrees — anything personalized with a name.
- ✓ Valuables — jewelry, coin collections, guns, and so on. Store all your valuables in a safe place off-site or in a safety deposit box.
- ✓ Extra books and magazines. If you like to read in bed, store your reading material in a basket that you slide under the bed.
- ✓ Anything left on the floor that shouldn't be there — dirty clothes, extra shoes, sports equipment, toys, a ham sandwich.

Opening your closets

The second most-desirable selling feature in a house is adequate storage space, so know that buyers are going to be looking in your closets. Show off your closet space to its best advantage by

- ✓ Reducing by half what you have in each closet — on the hanging rods and on the shelves. Remove and store off-season clothes so buyers can picture how their things will fit in the available storage.
- ✓ Leaving some attractive hangers empty to indicate that the hanging rods provide plenty of room for clothes; use padded hangers for the added feeling of luxury.
- ✓ Picking up everything from the floor.
- ✓ Arranging what remains in your closet as it would be displayed in a department store. Hang shirts with other shirts; make sure they're all facing the same direction and color coded. Hang short pieces with other short pieces and longs with longs. If you can, use only matching hangers.

If you have closet cubbies, neatly store sweaters and personal items in baskets or non-see-through boxes or baskets. Figures 15-1 and 15-2 show you the difference baskets make.

Even though most buyers aren't as organized as your closets make you appear, they want to be. Organized storage is just another reason for them to view your house as move-in ready.

- ✔ Remove back-of-the-door storage, which implies that the closet doesn't have enough storage space.

Figure 15-1:
Before, the closet shows stuff instead of space.



Joanne O'Donnell, Chic Home Interiors

Figure 15-2:
Staged, this closet looks organized and enormous.



Joanne O'Donnell, Chic Home Interiors

Being careful with color



When you stage your house, you need to neutralize the color on the walls — and that includes every bedroom from the master suite to the nursery. Remove any wallpaper or wallpaper borders. We know this may seem especially harsh if you remember taking trips all over town to choose just the right border for your son’s sports theme or your daughter’s “big girl” room. But you want bedrooms to be move-in ready, no matter who the next residents may be.

Check out the other wall colors you have going on in each bedroom. Any wall that isn’t neutral needs to be. Remember that *neutral* doesn’t mean white. Safe bedroom colors are cream, warm gray, and soft sage green. Chapter 4 tells you more about choosing colors.

You don’t want potential buyers to walk into a girly pink room if that’s the room they’ve decided would make a great home office. When rooms need to be painted, all the buyer sees is extra work, time, and expense. Eliminate that objection before it comes up by neutralizing.

You can bring color into a neutral room with bedding, art, and accessories that you can take to your new home.

Staging nightmare: The challenges for the bedroom in Figure 15-3: no budget, a very low bed frame attached to a headboard, nondescript furnishings, and no color. And just take a look at that bedspread — you can hardly get past it to notice the beautiful parquet floors. The bedroom looked boring, plain, and uninteresting.

Staging solution: Using creativity and resourcefulness, Certified Staging Professional graduates removed the headboard and utilized bedding and accessories that added warmth to the room. Figure 15-4 shows the results.

Figure 15-3:
Before, the
bedroom
looked
boring and
non-
descript . . .
except for
the
bedspread.



Graduating CSP Class

Figure 15-4:
Staged,
using what
the owner
already
owned, this
master
bedroom
became a
retreat
buyers
could
imagine
coming
home to.



Graduating CSP Class

Lightening and brightening bedrooms

When staging a house for living, most people want bedroom lighting to be soft and romantic, with task lighting available for reading. When staging a house for sale, all the bedrooms need to be bright and well lit to send a message that the rooms are clean and spacious. You might need to bring in additional lamps or light-reflective surfaces. Here are a few more ideas to help enhance the room:

- ✓ Make sure the overhead lighting works and that the fixture is clean and on-trend.
- ✓ Put the strongest light bulbs recommended in the light fixture(s) and in any table lamps.
- ✓ If you have ceiling fans, dust them and make sure they don't wobble, wiggle, or squeak. If there's a light kit attached to the fan, clean the bulbs and make sure the glass globe is clean, too.

Positioning the furniture

When setting up any bedroom, the bed is first piece of furniture you place, but it's not necessarily the focal point of the room — it only becomes a focal point when the room offers nothing else to showcase.

Before you position the bed, look at what you're selling in the room: Is there a view, a bay window, an adjoining porch or deck? If so, you may want to angle the bed to direct the buyers' eyes to those desirable features of the room.

Many people consider the bed to be the focal point in a bedroom. Way too often people discount the true focal point, or bedroom dimensions make it difficult to showcase any item but the bed. If you do have the space, ensure that the buyer's eye is drawn to the room's true focal point.



In a rectangular room, try positioning the bed on a long wall. In a square room, consider placing the bed on an angle. If the room has a bay window, consider placing the bed in the bay — the room looks bigger, and you show off the windows.

Position the chest of drawers or dresser on the same wall as the door so that buyers don't see hard surfaces when they look into the bedroom. Dressers and night stands should be clutter-free. (Be especially careful to remove medications and valuables.) You want soft lighting in the room, so add a lamp or two or three to the room. Strive for triangular placement of lighting (meaning a lamp is placed at each point of an imaginary triangle in the room), which gives the best overall diffusion of light.

Addressing bedding

Launder or dry clean the bedding to freshen it up, or buy new bedding that you can take to your new home. Large-scale patterns may distract buyers, so if your bedding has a big, bold print, flip over the bedspread; usually the other side is more neutral and makes the room feel more tranquil (read: *saleable*). If the bedding is too busy, buyers have a tendency to stop looking at the room and start looking at the bedding. In that case, they have mentally stopped buying the house.

Decorative pillows make a bed look sumptuous. When you're staging a bedroom, put beautifully pressed pillow cases on a pair of pillows, and rest them against the headboard. Add at least a pair of pillows covered in matching *shams* (decorative pillow covers that match or coordinate with the bedspread or comforter). Finally, place throw pillows in front of the shammed pillows.



Avoid strong floral patterns or country quilts. This particular style doesn't appeal to all buyers and looks dated.

Mastering the Master Bedroom

Close your eyes and imagine a luxurious hotel room. After you get a firm image in your mind, take a look around your master bedroom. Does it say relaxed luxury or is this week's laundry hanging on the treadmill in the corner?

If your reality is the latter, then it's time to return the master bedroom to its intended use — an inviting couple's retreat and center for relaxation and — *ahem* — restoration.

Figure 15-5 shows a well-staged master bedroom that looks relaxing and restful. The monochromatic color scheme is a soothing background for the throw pillows that bring out the color in the hardwood floors. The dark furniture shows up nicely against the tan walls, and the two matching throw pillows on the bed show buyers that this is definitely a retreat for two.



The master bedroom should look like a retreat for two. Convey this to the buyer by showing two pairs of pillows on the bed — two sleeping pillows, two pillows in shams, two toss pillows. Using layers of pillows builds a bed that suggests to buyers climbing in and getting a good night's sleep. Use this same "built for two" notion when you add accessories — place a pair of gender-neutral prints on the wall, a pair of candles or a pair of bird figurines on the dresser.



Figure 15-5:
A master bedroom is a luxury suite for two.

Darren Brand, Designed to Sell

Finding the function



The master bedroom needs to be . . . a master bedroom. You want it to look like a place to sleep and relax. If you're doing anything else there that requires furniture or other items that stay in the room, you need to move, pack, and store those things. Especially anything that says "work."

Here are the subtle messages buyers see when the master bedroom is a multi-purpose room:

- ✓ **Home gym:** That treadmill in the corner reminds a buyer that she just doesn't have enough time in the day to work out. And when you think about it, is gym equipment the last thing you want to see when you go to sleep and the first thing you want to see when you get up in the morning? Just looking at it can wear you out.

If you're using the treadmill as extra closet space, draping it with clothes clean and otherwise, you're telling the buyer that you don't have enough storage space in the bedroom. Your best bet is to get the treadmill out of your bedroom altogether.

- ✓ **Home office:** Some master bedrooms have an adjoining sitting area — great for relaxing and catching up on your latest recreational reading, not so good as an extension of your office.

Clear out the work-related reading materials, laptop, desk, and reference materials. But for every rule there is an exception. If the bedroom really is the only place for your home office, make sure it's clean and orderly, and then add art and greenery to warm up the space. Figures 15-6 and 15-7 show you the difference between a home office that deters buyers and one that keeps them interested.

- ✓ **Laundry room:** You need a place to fold laundry and iron the occasional outfit, sure, but the master bedroom is not that place. Buyers don't want to be reminded that washing and ironing the family's laundry are ever-present tasks.

If your master bedroom is an extension of the laundry room — the spot where the family's clothes are collected, folded, and pressed — equipping each bedroom with its own lidded clothes hamper gets everyone else's clothes out of your room. Find another place for the iron and ironing board, and store them away when you're not using them. If you have five minutes to get ready for a showing, extra clutter can go into the hampers in each room or in the "shuffle duffle." (Turn to Chapter 7 to find out about doing the shuffle duffle to keep rooms looking neat.)



Figure 15-6:
Before, the office is crammed into the bedroom and looks messy.



Figure 15-7:
Staged, the
office set-up
looks neat
and tranquil.

Joanne O'Donnell, Chic Home Interiors

- ✔ **Music room:** In some cases, you just can't find another place for that keyboard or guitar. If you can't move them out of the room, then at least move them so they aren't visible from the open doorway, where they're more likely to become a distraction.

Keeping instruments in the master bedroom clutters the room and detracts from its tranquility.

Creating the lifestyle message

The message you want to send to buyers looking at your house is that the master bedroom is a haven away from the rest of the world — even though this may not truly reflect the way you use it.

Use the following tips to create this refuge:

- ✔ Use neutral, plush bedding (and towels if the master bath adjoins the master bedroom; find out more about showcasing your bathrooms in Chapter 14). Plush bedding gives buyers the message that the bedroom is a great space to relax.

- ✔ Use four to six pillows: two with shams, at least two with solid pillow cases. Pillows send the message of luxury and a feeling you can “sink” in, relax, and get a good night’s sleep.
- ✔ Use a bedskirt or a bedspread that goes to the floor. You want to cover the bedsprings and add softness to the room.
- ✔ If the room is spacious enough, create a sitting area with a chair or two and a small side table and lamp. The sitting area says that the master suite is a great place to read quietly and unwind at the end of the day or a place to enjoy quiet time with a loved one.

Placing furniture in a master

A lot of master bedrooms we showcase have too much furniture. You want your bedroom to look peaceful and spacious, so really evaluate what you have in the space. Does the room look crowded? If so, then remove and store some off-site.

Staging nightmare: We showcased a master bedroom in a house that had very large wood furniture. The king-sized bed had a heavy bookcase-type headboard. The room also had a dresser with an attached mirror and hutch, and a large bureau. The room was big, but the dark, heavy furniture took up a lot of visual space.

Staging solution: We recommended that the owner remove the hutch from the dresser and the headboard from the bed. Then we positioned the bed to showcase the bay window. This opened up the room and gave it the retreat-like effect we were going for.

Welcoming Buyers to the Guest Room

In real life, your guest room may serve as a catchall for odds and ends, but when you’re staging, the room needs to say nothing but “Welcome, guests.” That means stripping away anything that doesn’t contribute to a warm, cozy night’s sleep.

If you’re using one of the your bedrooms for something other than its intended purpose — as a kid’s play room or toy storage, a hobby room, or an office — restore this space to its original function as a secondary bedroom or guest room. You want this space to be organized and gender-neutral so buyers can easily imagine their children or their guests resting comfortably.



The guest room should look like a serene place for an overnight visit. Here are some ideas for creating this retreat:

- ✔ Use neutral, solid-colored plush bedding — a very on-trend look and simple enough that buyers can focus on the room instead of the bedding.
- ✔ Use white or cream sheets, which give the room a feeling of a luxurious bed and breakfast.
- ✔ Add two to four pillows to the bed — two with shams and two with solid pillow cases to add subtle softness to the room.
- ✔ Include a bedskirt or use a bedspread that goes to the floor to cover the box springs and add softness to the space.
- ✔ Add a tray with a tea set or a spa basket.
- ✔ Clean out the closet so the floor is empty; hang a few padded hangers and a bathrobe or two in the closet.

Even though most bedrooms have overhead lighting, add a lamp to the dresser or nightstand for an additional layer of light in the room.

Accessories like silk flowers, green plants, books, artwork, or a mirror cozy up the space.

Taming Kids' Rooms

Kids' rooms can be a challenge when you're selling a house. You don't want to move the kids out, but you need to contain all the toys, awards, artwork, team pennants, and so on to give buyers the room to see their own kids in these spaces or to imagine themselves in them, working on the computer or doing some yoga, maybe feeding their scrapbooking habit.

Showcase kid's rooms as places for sleep and study. Kid's rooms often are colorful, so if you have time to neutralize the color on the walls, do it. If not, work around the color by using a lot of white to break the color impact.

Staging nightmare: The boy's room in Figure 15-8 had a sports theme. The walls were painted Toronto Maple Leaf blue — definitely not a great color when selling a house. Susan Crema-Martin, CSP, Martin Designs, had a challenge on her hands when a homeowner asked for help the day before an open house.

Staging solution: The owners didn't have time to repaint (although Susan certainly recommended it), so Susan moved out the bunk beds and moved in a double bed, nightstands, lamps, and art from other parts of the house to create a great-looking room that would work for almost anyone. (See Figure 15-9.)



In a kid's room as in any room, you want to show as much closet storage space as possible, so if the closets are full, we recommend you remove at least half of what's in them, packing and storing the unused toys and games, preferably in off-site storage, and then donating the rest.

A child's room is a place to sleep and study. Besides the bed nightstand and a desk or dresser, here are some ways to help sell the space:

- ✓ Keep a minimal number of toys.
- ✓ Set up a small table and chairs with a puzzle or board game in process.
- ✓ Replace wall posters with appropriate framed art.
- ✓ If the bedding has a sports or cartoon theme, turn it over so it's solid-colored and more gender-neutral.



You don't know who will be touring your house, so remember to remove anything that has your child's name on it.



Figure 15-8:
Before, a
kid's sports-
themed
room.

Susan Crema-Martin, Martin Designs



Figure 15-9:
Staged, a
great
second
bedroom.

Susan Crema-Martin, Martin Designs

A nursery needs to say “safe, clean, and restful” and evoke memories of pleasant childhood times gone by. Use these items to communicate that message to buyers:

- ✓ Cradle
- ✓ Bedding
- ✓ Rocking chair
- ✓ Rocking horse

Make sure you remove and stash diaper pails and eliminate all offensive smells before buyers tour the house.

Staging nightmare: The nursery in Figure 15-10 was cluttered and didn’t communicate to buyers that the room was a good space for play and sleep.

Staging solution: Packing away half of the toys and rearranging the room to show off the space (see Figure 15-11) enabled buyers to imagine their child spending hours of happiness and play in this inviting nursery.



Figure 15-10:
Before, this nursery is full of toys and chaos.

Graduating CSP Class



Figure 15-11:
Staged, the nursery is a wonderful place for little ones to sleep and play.

Graduating CSP Class

Making Bedrooms Their Best with a DIY Checklist

Just like every other room in the house, you want each bedroom to be clean, neat, and clutter free. Here's a DIY checklist to help you get started:



- ✓ **Thoroughly clean the floors.** If the carpet is soiled, then have the carpet professionally cleaned. If it's worn, look at your budget to see whether you can afford to replace it.
- ✓ **Clean and freshen up the woodwork, baseboards, and trim molding around the doorways.** These areas must be sparkling clean or freshly painted.
- ✓ **Clean or replace switch plates and outlet covers.** If they're decorative, then replace them with new, plain covers in either white or cream.
Clean your switch plate and outlet covers by running them through your dishwasher on the top shelf.
- ✓ **Wash the windows so they're sparkling clean.** Also check that the windows work smoothly and don't squeak.
- ✓ **Replace window treatments if they aren't on-trend.** Bring in the most light in each room by opening the drapes or curtains. If your curtains are in good shape, just wash and iron them.
- ✓ **Replace dated overhead lighting.**
- ✓ **Clean out and organize the closet.** Remove and store out-of-season clothing; pick up everything off the floor.
- ✓ **Oil door hinges if they squeak.**
- ✓ **Repaint bright walls with a neutral shade.**
- ✓ **Make sure the ceiling is in good repair.**

Chapter 16

Office Affair: Stage 'Em Something to Talk About

In This Chapter

- ▶ Evaluating the office space
 - ▶ Zeroing in on the function of the room
 - ▶ Staging the home office
 - ▶ Prepping the office with a DIY checklist
-

These days you're bound to encounter buyers who telecommute — or plan to in the future — and that means a home office is becoming an important part of the home-buying decision.

If the office space in your home means a decades-old metal desk nestled between the hot water tank and a basement wall or if it's a crowded catchall for the excess stuff that doesn't fit in the rest of the house, then it's time to reevaluate the space so buyers can imagine themselves being productive, happy workers. This chapter walks you through the steps you take to bring your office up to selling standards.

If you work from home and need to continue working from your home office during the home-selling process, this chapter provides you with some staging strategies to make this set-up work while you're selling your property.

Sizing Up the Space

Home offices weren't even on the radar screen just a few years ago; today, home-based businesses are on the rise, and many buyers are looking for a room they can turn into a home office.



When setting up a home office in your house, you want buyers to imagine themselves working in a bright, organized, and efficient space.

If your home office is a work space where you pay bills, do some online shopping, and help the kids with their homework, getting away during showings isn't too traumatic. If you have a home-based business where your clients come and go from the premises, it may be more difficult to work around house showings on a moment's notice.

Evaluate whether your house has enough space for a home office. If it has fewer than four bedrooms, don't let your home office take over one of them. You attract more buyers when you advertise a four-bedroom house. Try to relocate the office to another part of the house, such as a den — or utilize the desk space in the kitchen that may already exist.



A home office on the first floor is a great selling point but an extra responsibility. When the office is on the first floor, the office's first impression on buyers is all the more important. If they don't make it upstairs because of what they see in your office, you may lose a perfect buyer because of unconquerable clutter or another turn-off. Keep the office clean, neat, and organized. Buyers won't see a messy room as conducive to conducting productive business.



One of the trends for 2008 and beyond is having two computer work stations. Locate one computer in the home office and another in a bonus room or kitchen desk area.

Restoring the Function

Take a look at what else you have going on in the office. Are kid's toys scattered around? Are out-of-season clothes or extra table linens hanging in the closet? Do you have a collection on display? Are your craft or sewing projects and supplies in the room? Is this space also used for your home gym? If so, pack away anything that isn't considered part of a typical office and restore the room to its home-office function.



Sellers often ask us whether a TV is okay in a home office when the house is on the market. Bottom line: Everyone wants a cozy home office. If the TV is unobtrusive, it's fine.

Staging nightmare: The home office in Figure 16-1 was the first thing buyers saw when they walked into the house. The office was used not only for running a business but as a dumping place for the family's extra stuff.

Staging solution: Packing away items that didn't belong in the room and making the space practical, efficient, and organized presents the room as much better maintained. (See Figure 16-2.)

Figure 16-1: Before, the message to buyers is that the room isn't well cared for and holds too much work for them.



Graduating CSP Class

Figure 16-2: Staged, the room's function is restored and the office looks efficient, inviting, and spacious.



Graduating CSP Class

Building a Workable Work Space

An office cries out for certain pieces: a desk and computer space, of course, and someplace to keep files, good lighting, and — if you have space — a credenza or bookcase. You want the office space to say “productive organization” to the buyer, which means your first step is clearing the clutter. Get rid of as much paper as you can while maintaining a viable, productive place to work. Box all the older files, and clean out desk drawers and file cabinets. After everything is neat and clean, just use the files you need, and then file them away at the end of the day and before showings.



An office needs good lighting, so check that your overhead lighting is as clean and bright as possible, and add a desk lamp or two so your task lighting is adequate for your work space. Be sure that you are using the highest wattage light bulbs that are specified for each light fixture and lamp.

Staging nightmare: The Certified Staging Professionals class had a challenge with the room in Figure 16-3. The house had been on the market for several weeks and buyers commented they were confused about the purpose of the space: Is it a home office or a workout space? The placement of the bookshelf right at the entry made entering awkward. Buyers didn’t walk into the space — they peeked into it and then moved on.

Staging solution: When staging your property, you need to show buyers how to use the space so they can imagine themselves using it the same way. You also want to make them feel they can walk into the space without feeling like they are intruding into the seller’s life. Moving the bookcase, adding a comfy chair and a desk, and removing the exercise ball return the room to its function. (See Figure 16-4.)

Just like you do in the other spaces in the house, pack away as many personal photographs as possible. Jan did a consult recently where the sellers had a home office just off the front entrance of the house. The homeowners have three children and six grandchildren — all of whom were represented in photos and artwork in the office. We suggested that they pack away everything but the photo of the extended family on one of the bookshelves. That way Grandpa could look at all the kids and grandkids in one picture and easily pop the photo into a drawer before showings.

Wipe off and clean the computer cords with a damp rag and put away any cords you aren’t using. When the cords look neat and orderly, the message the buyer sees is that the space is neat and orderly, too.

Cords also play a part in where you put your desk. If they fall to the back of the desk so that buyers see them as soon as they enter the room, then move the desk so it faces a wall and hides the cords.

Figure 16-3:
Before, the room sends a mixed message: Is it for workouts or work?



Graduating CSP Class

Figure 16-4:
Staged, this space is ready for business.



Graduating CSP Class

Some people who work at home share an office and have two workstations. Unless you have plenty of space to accommodate both desks, consider moving one elsewhere. Keep the best-looking desk, set up the second workspace somewhere else in the house, and then maintain the home office as an efficient space for one.



Bringing another chair or two and a small side table into the home office suggests that the space is a good one for having a meeting with a client or an afternoon chat with a child when he gets home from school. It also says there's enough room in the office for someone else.

Paring down equipment and furniture

Like many rooms, the home office tends to have too much furniture. Take a look around and ask yourself whether you need everything that's there all the time.



Anyone who does any amount of work at home needs office supplies and a place to put them. If you're setting up shop in an extra bedroom, then stage the office supply closet so it's half full. The message in the room is that it offers plenty of organized storage space. If you're tight on space for your office supplies, you could have a small storage container on wheels that you tuck into the closet during showings and then wheel out when you need it.

The fax machine has taken a back seat to e-mail, so while your house is on the market, store away your fax machine in the office supply closet. Move your printer onto a smaller piece of furniture to make your office look more spacious.

If you have a bookcase in the office, showcase it so that it's only half full of books. Then add a small plant or colorful accessory to soften the bookcase and send a subliminal message to the buyer that this is a pleasant place to work.

Everyone needs filing space, but chances are you don't need all the files you currently have in the office. If you can, relocate a larger filing cabinet to an unobtrusive place in the basement, or consider storing it off-site but in a place that allows you to have access when you need it. Removing large pieces of furniture makes the office look bigger and more efficient.

Considering privacy issues

Message boards and calendars are common accessories in home offices. Because you don't know who's touring your house, clear off the message board or calendar of family schedules, children's names — anything you don't want a stranger to notice. Then, neatly tack up what you do need.



With all the business people conduct online today, many home offices have passwords and user ID numbers posted around the computer for easy access. When your house is on the market, don't compromise your computer privacy! Find a secure place to keep this information.

Remember to turn off your computer screen before showings or open houses. Your best bet is to shut down the computer completely before each showing.

Maintaining your work space while your house is on the market

If your business is busy and buyers touring your house would be an interruption, consider relocating your business to a rental space until your new place is available, or — if you've already purchased a home — moving the office earlier than the rest of your household.

If these suggestions don't work for you, your agent will work with you to be considerate of your business hours when she schedules showings. If that's the only alternative, be prepared to be busy — keeping everything tidy and out of the way. Before showings or open houses, put everything on your desk into a deep basket file or a briefcase and store it in the trunk of your car.

Bringing Finishing Touches to the Home Office

When it comes time to stage, you want your home office to be neutral; we recommend using the same colors that you use throughout the rest of the house for continuity. You can impact the room with color by using books, art, and a few desk items.

Here are some guidelines for bringing life to your home office:

- ✓ Add plants. As professional stagers, one of the things we deal with all the time is how to disguise power cords. Plants are an easy way to do this, and they bring the room to life. A fern in a basket can be fanned out enough to cover a space about 30 inches wide, and it doesn't cost much. You might also add a small plant to a bookcase or credenza.
- ✓ Hang carefully chosen art. Add color to the office with larger pieces of art, staying away from sex, liquor, or political themes.

Remember that both men and women have home offices, so yours should be gender neutral. Travel photos are great for a home office, especially if you continue the theme with a globe or atlas.

- ✔ Hide your trade periodicals in attractive magazine boxes and place them neatly in the bookcase.
- ✔ Store office odds and ends in matching storage baskets and place the baskets neatly in the bookcase or storage space in the home office.
- ✔ Use books as props. Put one on the desk and several in the bookcase to showcase the office. Remove book jackets from hardcover books to reveal more color. Titles usually are printed in metallic ink, which gives the bookshelf a look of quality. Remember to use discretion when selecting book titles to showcase.

Depersonalizing the office space is important, but if you have diplomas or award plaques that are important to running and functioning of your day-to-day operations, you do need to keep them in your office. Display only the important documents, nicely framed and hung on a side wall, and then pack away the rest. Leaving up diplomas and awards only encourages people to look into your life instead of considering the space, so don't leave these items on display unless you need to.

Spiffing Up an Office with a DIY Checklist

Just like every other room in the house, you want the home office to be clean, neat, and clutter free. Here's a do-it-yourself checklist to help you get started.

- ✔ **Clean the floors.** If the carpet is soiled from your chair running over it or has a traffic pattern where clients enter and leave the room, then have the carpet professionally cleaned. If it's worn, replace it.
- ✔ **Clean and freshen up the woodwork, baseboards, and trim molding around the doorways.** These areas must be sparkling clean or freshly painted.
- ✔ **Clean or replace switch plates and outlet covers.** If they're decorative, replace them with new, plain covers in either white or cream.
- ✔ **Wash the windows so they're sparkling clean.**
- ✔ **Repair windows that don't work smoothly.**
- ✔ **Oil door hinges if they squeak.**

- ✔ **Paint walls if they aren't neutral and on-trend.**
- ✔ **Repair any cracks in the ceiling.**
- ✔ **Clean or consider replacing light fixtures.** Lighting is important in a home office, so make sure the overhead lighting works and that the fixture is on-trend and clean. Put in the strongest light bulbs the fixture can handle, and have a desk light that provides good task lighting.
- ✔ **Toss out any window treatments that aren't on-trend and wash those that are.** Privacy from your neighbors usually isn't an issue in a home office, so if you're tempted to replace the dated curtains in your home office, don't — leaving them off lets more light in the room.

Chapter 17

Behind Closed Doors: Staging Closets and Other Hidden Places

In This Chapter

- ▶ Taking action to improve every closet
 - ▶ Running through special considerations for any closet type
 - ▶ Checking off laundry lists for laundry rooms
 - ▶ Taking care of basement business
 - ▶ Bringing the garage up to speed
-

The closer buyers are to making an offer, the closer they look at your property. This means that no door, drawer, or closet is sacred and that you need to be prepared for the buyer to look at *everything*. When the doors and drawers start opening, the potential buyer is in the confirming mode — they’ve formed a positive or negative impression about your property and are confirming their decision to make an offer or not by looking for clues that they’re right. When they find a mess, they believe you may be hiding something.

In this chapter, we show you how to go beyond just tidying up closets or containing the mess in the garage and to show these often-forgotten spaces to their best advantage.

One of the top-three selling features buyers are looking for in a new house is adequate storage space, which means that your closets are extremely important. Buyers expect to see guest bedroom closets almost empty with a few nice hangers like a closet in a hotel suite. They want the master bedroom closet to look like a well-organized clothing store, with all the clothes hanging the same direction and all like clothing hanging together.



Take the extra time to organize every closet and consider making a small investment in adding closet organizers to each closet — icing on the cake that might just sell your house.

Running Down Things to Do in Every Closet

Because both of us have recently sold or are in the process of selling our homes, we can tell you how freeing it is to clean out and organize the closets. We love the way this feels so much that we vow never to let the closets go back to their old, messy selves ever again!

Here's our checklist for reaching closet nirvana. After you follow these steps, you get to enjoy the fruits of your labor every time you open your closet door:

- ✓ **De-clutter.** Remove everything in the closet and sort it into three piles: keep, toss, or donate. (Read more about de-cluttering in Chapter 7.) From the “keep” pile, store anything that you don’t need on a daily basis. When you’re down to the “keep” pile, neatly put the in-season clothes, accessories, toys, or sporting equipment back into the closet and pack and store the rest — but not in the closet!
- ✓ **Free up the floors.** Store everything from closet floors so the floors are free from clutter. If you need to use shoe racks, be sure they’re neatly arranged and the shoes don’t give off a sweaty smell. Storing shoes in baskets is better.
- ✓ **Bring the closet space back to its original purpose.** If you have a guest room closet where you’ve been storing sports gear or arts-and-crafts supplies, pack everything away and return the closet to its function.
- ✓ **Replace any missing shelves, hanging bars, hooks, and so on.** Maybe you stopped noticing the missing second shelf in the closet years ago, but buyers *will* notice. They’re trying to figure out whether their stuff will fit, and broken or missing bits draw their attention to work instead of to imagining their belongings sitting organized in the closet.
- ✓ **Paint.** Many older homes show their age when you open closet doors. Closets often were missed when the rest of the room was renovated. You see outdated wallpaper or telling color choices that say *old*. Remember that you’re competing with newer homes. A little paint can keep your property in the running.
- ✓ **Organize.** Store the items you use daily in a straight and organized manner. Think of how a retail store would set up its space. (They’re in the selling business, after all.) In this case, you’re selling space, so rather than just putting everything back willy-nilly, store smaller items such as gloves, hats, scarves, excess mail and paperwork, sporting equipment, and cooking items in storage containers or baskets within the closet.

Defining Closet Upgrade Options

Throughout the chapter we talk about upgrading options for your closets to create more organized space. The following list contains descriptions of different types of storage and suggestions for using them:

✔ **Storage containers:** Storage containers are a wonderful storage solution that show buyers the possibilities of the closet space, and you can take them with you when you move. Buy clear containers in a variety of sizes so you can easily see what's inside without unstacking the containers or pulling off the lids. After you sell your house, just pack the containers into the moving truck.

✔ **Shoe racks:** We realize that shoe racks are ideal for master bedroom closets while you're living in the house, but you're better off removing them for staging rather than overloading your closet. Store the shoes you need in clear shoe boxes instead of using a shoe rack.

Don't leave all your shoes on display, and remember that nothing is more off-putting to an interested buyer than odor, especially in enclosed closet areas. Overcoming the impression of a smelly closet is extremely difficult, so why risk it? Pack away as many out-of-season shoes as you can and take them to the storage unit, and then leave out a few pairs to show the function and spaciousness of the closet.

✔ **Wire or wicker baskets:** Baskets are great for organizing your closets and handling the clutter under both kitchen and bathroom counters, but remember to use those that come with a labeling system. This way, not only can you find the things that you need, but you give even the most disorganized buyer the chance to imagine living in an organized house. Showing the possibilities helps sell the dream.

Use wide, short wicker baskets with lids and cotton liners for storing your dirty laundry. During showing periods, these baskets are a definite improvement to the open-top plastic laundry baskets. They look like storage baskets but serve a function to help keep the room open-house ready.

✔ **Wire shelving:** Wire shelving is a perfect solution for odd-sized closets because it's adaptable to fit any space, and you can adjust the same shelving later to fit the closets in your new home.

✔ **Closet lights:** Battery-operated lights are fantastic for closets that don't have enough light shining in from the room or within the closet itself. They're very inexpensive and tend to make a smaller closet look larger and more inviting. Look for them at dollar stores.

Finding the Function and Setting the Stage in Closets of Every Kind

Each different kind of closet takes a unique staging direction. The following sections run down ideas for getting every closet in your house into showing shape.

Handling the hall closet

The hall closet is probably the first one buyers poke their heads into, so you need to make sure what they see looks neat and spacious.

Function: Store outdoor clothing, boots, shoes, and other daily-use outdoor items.

Upgrade options: Add shoe racks, coat hooks, and clear storage organization bins (for hats, gloves, umbrellas, and so on).

Showcasing tips: Remove all off-season clothing. Sort the remaining items by colors and length. If you have items that aren't normally stored in a hall closet, such as a vacuum cleaner or sports equipment, find another place to put them. These things take up a lot of room, making the closet seem crowded and too small for the buyer.

In an entryway hall closet, put your coats on wooden hangers and be sure to leave a little bit of space between the clothes to say “there’s plenty of room in here.”

Perking up the kitchen pantry

The goal with your kitchen pantry is demonstrating organization and letting buyers see that the pantry has plenty of room.

Function: Store seasonal bulk and canned food, cereal, and cooking supplies.

Upgrade options: Maximize space on the storage shelves by adding a lazy susan, in-cupboard shelving, canisters, and food-grade buckets. Remember to pick up and store everything off the floor.

Showcasing tips: Sorting the canned goods by size makes them easier to stack. All food labels should face out, making them easier to read. We know that this may not reflect how you live, but buyers are buying the dream that if they live in this house, they can have the organized cupboard.

Figure 17-1 shows you a well-staged pantry.



Figure 17-1:
A staged
pantry says
“I need a
life like
this!”

Christine Rae

Enhancing linen closets

Envision your local department store’s linen department. All the towels are in one spot, the sheets and pillowcases in another. Work toward that same feel in your linen closet so buyers can’t wait to move in.

Function: To store household linens, including, extra blankets, sheets, pillowcases, towels, tablecloths, and so on.

Upgrade options: A key and inexpensive upgrade to a linen closet is to replace any old shelving and add or remove shelves to maximize the space. Make it look new with a fresh coat of paint. Then add wicker baskets for small items, bringing an organized feeling to the space.

Showcasing tips: The goal of showcasing a linen closet is not to leave it completely empty but to show that the space is large enough to store the family’s household linens. Use the following tips to up the organization factor:

- ✔ Consider storing difficult-to-fold fitted sheets, the matching flat sheet, and one pillow case inside the other matching pillowcase. You can store uncoordinated sheets in a pillow case, as well. When stacked on the shelf, these pillowcase packets make for neat linen storage.

- ✓ Sort big, bulky blankets by size and color. Then vacuum pack them in clear, space-saver bags. Show buyers how three to four bulky blankets are easily stacked and stored in the spacious linen closet.
- ✓ If you have mismatched linen, pack it away. You want to use only white and cream-colored linens on the beds and store extras in the linen closet. Getting rid of mismatched linen makes the space look larger and more aesthetically pleasing.

Making the most of the master bedroom closet

Most master bedroom closets we see are too small for all the stuff sellers need to hang up and store.

Function: Store personal clothing and accessories.

Upgrade options: Cater to the needs of a husband and wife in this room. Organize and store ties, purses, shoes, jewelry, and so on. Include drawers for small items, shoe racks, and double hanging racks for maximized space. Closet lights create a feeling of luxury. Use battery-operated lighting under each shelf where there isn't a light fixture.

Showcasing tips: Sort all clothing by sex (his and hers), and then by type (pants, tops, skirts), color, and size (long sleeve, short sleeve, and sleeveless). Keeping short items together provides room for an extra level of hanging bars. Use baskets and clear bins to store smaller items such as shoes, scarves, handbags, and totes on the top shelves. Pack off-season clothing and store it off site if possible.



Pay attention to odor in this area. A concentration of shoes sometimes makes for a “sniffy” closet. Old perfume or body odor also lingers in a closet for a while. Make sure you refresh the clothes by cleaning or use an air purifying machine in the closet.

Figure 17-2 shows you a crowded and jumbled master bedroom closet, and in Figure 17-3, you see a sorted and staged closet.

Conquering children's closets

Have you noticed how toys seem to multiply the older the child gets? Here are some ideas for keeping the toys and games manageable when your house is on the market and after the move.

Function: Neatly store clothing, children's books, and toys.

Figure 17-2:
Before, the master closet looks small and like you couldn't find anything if your life depended on it.



Graduating CSP Class

Figure 17-3:
Staged, the master bedroom closet looks neat, spacious, and organized.



Graduating CSP Class

Upgrade options: Use stackable shelves and drawers for a child's room. Lower, easy-to-reach bars and shelves are a nice touch for the rooms of kids 4 years old and younger. While you're waiting to move, stackable shelves and drawers are nice for keeping toys and belongings safely hidden, but attractively arranged. You can even use portable, stackable shelves and take them with you.

Showcasing tips: Don't have too many toys or books stored in children's closets. You don't want to discourage buyers who don't have children and may be planning to turn the room into a guest room.

Preparing the guest room closet

More than any other closet in the house, the guest closet should have ample empty space.

Function: Store guest clothing, extra blankets, and suitcases.

Upgrade options: Add a shoe rack, drawers, and hanging bar. To avoid too many things hanging in the guest closet, adding a hook on the back of the bedroom door for a plush robe or towels is a nice touch that doesn't cost much.

Showcasing tips: If you're showcasing the room as a guest bedroom, think "bed and breakfast" and the extra touches you enjoy as a guest. In the closet, leave plenty of room for the guests to unpack and stay awhile. Include wood or padded hangers.

Getting to work on the office closet

Buyers look for organized storage. A neat and organized closet sends the subtle message that a lot of good work is accomplished in this space.

Function: Store office supplies, file cabinets, and other office-related items.

Upgrade options: Add large, sturdy shelves (paper is heavy) and clear bins for computer and camera equipment. Use smaller, stackable drawers and shelves for smaller office supplies such as staples, paper clips, tape, and so on.

Showcasing tips: Arrange the closet so all labels face out — just as you'd see on the shelves at office-supply stores. Make the closet generic, removing anything that indicates what type of business you're in. You want the buyer to be able to see her own business office supplies in that closet space.

Staging storage closets

What to do with all those holiday decorations, seasonal items, and sports gear? Here are some great ideas to sell the extra storage space available in your house.

Function: Store miscellaneous items, luggage, holiday decorations, seasonal items, sports gear — anything that you don't use very often.

Upgrade options: Add large sturdy shelves, plastic storage bins, hooks, and maybe even a box with a lock on it to hide personal items during your selling process.

Showcasing tips: You may be tempted to pack the items that you don't need every day in a storage closet. Don't! Remember when you stage a storage closet that space sells. Keep this closet almost completely empty. It's a good place for the vacuum and any necessary large items that you can't live without before moving, like your ironing board, shop vac, or leaf blower.

Organizing the Laundry Room

Today's buyers want cheery, spacious, convenient, and well-organized laundry rooms. Today's trends have moved laundry rooms out of the basement and into the main areas of the house — an overdue change given that the laundry room is one of the most highly trafficked rooms in the home.



If you're selling a laundry room located in the basement, remember that you're competing with main-floor laundry rooms in newer homes. More shelving, more storage, and more space may get you a passing mark in the buyers' evaluation of your property.

Staging the laundry room can be tricky — you want to show that the laundry room is large and functional enough to do those eight to ten loads of laundry a week, but you don't want the buyer to see the room in action. Here are some ideas that help your laundry room pass inspection with even the pickiest buyer:

- ✓ Clean everything! Machine lids, floors, walls, and baseboards.
- ✓ Remove lint and dust from on, over, and behind the dryer.
- ✓ Remove all items from the countertops.
- ✓ Store detergent and laundry supplies out of sight.
- ✓ Put away excess hangers; they can make a laundry room look messy.
- ✓ Be sure the room is well lit.

- ✔ Be aware of unpleasant odors and use a fresh air machine (see Chapter 24) if needed.
- ✔ Remove trash cans.
- ✔ Hide away dirty laundry in the machine or in a laundry basket with a lid.



If you need to have your laundry powder out and available for use, store it in a large, clear jar with a lid. These jars are available through your local hardware store and send a message that the space is clean, safe, and hygienic.

Countertops, shelving, built-in ironing boards, and new appliances double the space in a laundry area or room. If the room is large, create another lifestyle element by adding a reading chair, rug, and a lamp. This way, buyers envision themselves sitting down for a moment and reading a magazine while waiting for the spin cycle to finish.

Staging nightmare: Figure 17-4 shows a typical unfinished basement laundry area, one where most buyers wouldn't enjoy doing the family laundry. The Certified Staging Professionals 2007 graduating class in Niagara had a challenge on their hands with this assignment. A work assignment in class means students don't have access to any outside accessories and have no budget to work with, and so they have to stretch themselves to think "how can I solve this problem?"

Staging solution: Adding tidy storage goes a long way to make the laundry room look more organized and feel more pleasant. (See Figure 17-5.) Plants bring a little life into the space.

Bringing Basements up to Selling Speed

Don't overlook the basement as space to sell! Most buyers say they look for a finished basement. If your home includes one, check out Chapter 12 to find out more about staging living spaces, in addition to running through the basement-staging advice here.



If your property has a finished basement, be sure to create functions for each room. Stage them as if they were on the main floors of the house.

If your property doesn't have a finished basement, you're not necessarily out of the running, but you do need to put some time and effort into getting your basement into its best shape. Here's a checklist to help you ready your basement for sale:

- ✔ Fix cement cracks in the floors, walls, and ceiling. Find helpful how-to information at your home improvement store but remember that larger cracks may be foundation related and need a professional opinion and repair.

Figure 17-4: Before, this space is difficult to sell as a pleasant place to do laundry when it's in the unfinished basement area.



Graduating CSP Class

Figure 17-5: Staged, the laundry area is better organized and more welcoming.



Graduating CSP Class

- ✓ Pay special attention to the floors: Sweep, mop, and consider painting the floor if it's in good condition and isn't covered with carpet or other flooring. Any paint or hardware store can help you select appropriate paint for this purpose. Mid to light gray is a good color choice for the floor.
- ✓ Check that all doors swing freely and without noise. If the hinges are dirty and rusted, spray them with WD-40, and then wipe off the runoff; if they squeak apply a thin coat of light machine oil. Either product is available at your local hardware store.
- ✓ Repair any obstructed drains.
- ✓ Clean basement windows; remove any curtains to let in plenty of natural light.
- ✓ Consider using daylight bulbs to bring natural-feeling light into the space.
- ✓ Remove spider webs and dust from baseboards and beams.
- ✓ Really clean and disinfect any areas that may hold mold or dampness. Put in a fresh air machine (see Chapter 24) or dehumidifier to prevent buildup of dampness.
- ✓ Remove all garbage.
- ✓ Keep all walls free of obstruction for inspection purposes.
- ✓ Organize the basement; if you use it for storage, condense the piles into one section.



Every space is a selling space so avoid using the basement to store all the stuff you've already packed. We heartily encourage you to secure off-site storage for your extra items to maximize the space in your house.

Staging nightmare: The unfinished basement in Figure 17-6 contains just about every toy known to man laying in wait. It looks like the invasion of the Lilliputians. Many people underestimate the power of a tidy space. Even when the space is unfinished, our advice is to show its function. Most houses without finished basements sell for less than those with finished basements, so making an effort down here is crucial if you are to create a connection with the buyer.

Staging solution: The stagers advised owners to organize, pack, and store to create a functional space that includes a place for “big people.” (See Figure 17-7.) Repositioning the couch helps buyers envision family time in the basement room, as well.



Figure 17-6:
Before, the
basement
before looks
untidy and
unkempt.

Graduating CSP Class



Figure 17-7:
Staged,
everything
is tidy and
buyers can
see the
room's
function.

Graduating CSP Class

Getting the Garage in Order

Brace yourself: The garage is for parking your cars not storing your junk. Buyers are looking for a garage that's organized, spacious, and clean, so you need to completely clean and clear out your garage so there's room for cars. Keep only those items you use daily; use bins and storage containers, and try to keep the floor clear.

Do the tasks in the following checklist to make sure your garage is a selling point instead of a turnoff to buyers:

- ✓ Sweep and hose down the floors.
- ✓ Hose off inside and outside of garage doors.
- ✓ Thoroughly clean the garbage cans inside and out.
- ✓ Clean windows until they sparkle.
- ✓ Organize items on shelves.
- ✓ Remove and store anything you would not normally see in a garage. You don't want the garage to look like a catch-all, but rather a pleasant and functional space.
- ✓ Hang bikes from the ceiling or walls with appropriate hangers.
- ✓ If you do have a workshop or workbench area, keep it neat and tidy. Organized space in a garage is a big selling feature.
- ✓ Pack and store extra tools off-site.
- ✓ Dispose of paint cans and chemical substances.
- ✓ Be sure you don't store deterrents (pesticides, rodent products, and so on) in the garage. If buyers see these products on your property, they think your house is infested and move on to their next choice.
- ✓ Fix the cracks in the concrete floor. You may want to have a professional take a closer look because if the cracks aren't fixed properly, the sealant can expand and push out the sides of crack.
- ✓ Check that all garage doors are in good condition, well maintained, and open freely without noise.
- ✓ Remove spider webs and dust from ceilings and garage door machinery.



For a great first impression, keep your garage door down at all times. Even if your garage is the picture of organization, your house looks tidier when the garage door is down.



If you look in any hardware catalog you see garage organization systems that have drawers, racks, cabinets, and bins. These ads usually show you how the systems turn your garage into a workshop or a kids' sports center. Consider your target market and check with your agent to find out whether this upgrade is worth the investment.

Part IV

Addressing Special Staging Considerations

The 5th Wave

By Rich Tennant



"I just don't get it. The Robinsons next door sold their house in 5 days and it was the exact same model 3-room ranch house that I have."

In this part . . .

Here we tell you about some particular challenges that you might run into as you stage your own house or a client's. We tackle the toughest realities and most creative aspects of staging, starting with unpleasant odors and personal attachments. We give you suggestions for staging rehabbed properties and show you how to use Feng Shui techniques to your staging advantage. Finally, we introduce you to an important concept in marketing for the rapidly growing contingent of eco-conscious buyers.

Chapter 18

Dealing with Sensitive Issues

In This Chapter

- ▶ Taking pets out of the staging equation
 - ▶ Handling ashes with care — and caution
 - ▶ Letting go (temporarily) of collections
 - ▶ Selling your house during the holidays
 - ▶ Taking the work out of wallpaper
-

When you're selling your house, all of your pimples and warts show; the blemishes in the way that you live are exposed to potential buyers, home inspectors, and real estate professionals. Some of these not-so-desirable features are okay, but others can break a sale. So take off your blinders, toughen up your skin, and get ready to deal with those sensitive issues in your lifestyle that you may not even be aware of.

Eradicating Scent of Wet Dog, Eau de Cat, and Other Signs of Pets

Pet pampering is a growing trend in North America. Increasing disposable income and empty nesters are fueling this growth. (Jan hates to admit this but when her son went off to college this year, her husband bought their West Highland Terrier a Halloween costume!)

But 74 million dogs are owned by only 40 percent of the population. That means that 60 percent of the population aren't dog owners. The 60 percent majority aren't all dog-haters or even dog-dislikers. They may be afraid of dogs or have an allergy of some kind. So even though you adore your little Fido and he never makes a mess or barks, he needs to scam when buyers view your house.



When you're selling your house, you cater to the majority, and most people don't have dogs.

As much as sellers don't like to hear it, our number one recommendation for pet owners is to arrange for all pets to live somewhere else during the time the house is on the market. Seem a little harsh? Remember that this short-term pain helps you realize a long-term gain. Finding a temporary home for your pets helps you

- ✓ Secure the most equity possible
- ✓ Speed the sale
- ✓ Facilitate easy access to the property during the sales process

These days, you find a variety of places where your pet can be safe, well-cared-for, and even pampered. Options include kennels, groomers, pet hotels, doggy day cares, and pet camps. When Christine was selling her house recently, she took her dog to a local doggy day care center. It was inexpensive, and her dog looked forward to going — so much so that she now takes him on a regular basis. It helps the dog socialize and tires him out because he runs and plays all day. So on those long staging or training days when her dog would be at home alone; he's well cared for and loved.



Dogs and cats are common, but when we advise getting pets out of the house, we mean *all* pets. That includes birds, cats, snakes, spiders, guinea pigs, mice, reptiles, and so on — anything that creeps, crawls, makes a noise, smells, or would strike terror in the heart of a buyer. The exception to the pet rule is a fish tank, but only if it's well-maintained and the fish aren't ugly predators. Remember that buyers take only three to six minutes to look at a house and any seconds wasted looking at your fish tank are minutes they're not looking at your house.

A real estate agent recently told us about a property that she was listing. It was a family home in which the owners rented out a basement apartment. The tenant had lived there for five years and wasn't too happy with the impending move and didn't want to provide access to his apartment. He finally did let the agent and homeowner into the apartment where they discovered that the tenant had installed two large, open shelving units — one on each side of the room. One side housed about 40 tarantula spiders, the other housed snakes! Both the agent and homeowner couldn't wait to get out of there, so imagine how a potential buyer would feel. Even though these creatures were in protected glass cases, after the move, potential buyers couldn't help wondering whether one had gotten away.

The tarantula-and-snake example is extreme, but don't forget that one buyer's cat is another buyer's tarantula. Your best bet is not to risk annoying or scaring potential buyers.

If you can't swallow the idea of moving your pets out of the house while it's on the market, then you *do* need to work at eradicating any and all signs of pet from your house. This means the obvious like removing pet waste from

yards and the kitty litter from wherever you keep it; it also means paying attention to the following telltale signs of pet:

✔ **Odor:** Urine and spray from an un-neutered cat leaves a particularly offensive odor. Many pet centers have a variety of cleaners and a special light so you can detect areas the cat has sprayed. Go to www.vetmeddirect.com for enzyme-oriented cleaners, which cost about \$4.99. We recommend enzyme-based cleaners because they're environmentally friendly, are safe for pets and children, and release no harsh chemicals into the air.

After you treat the problem areas, recruit a friend or neighbor to do the sniff test. Your nose is desensitized to everyday living smells, so you need an honest outsider to detect odors in your house.

✔ **Food:** Buyers are looking at all the space in your house, including cupboards, drawers, and closets. A place often forgotten by sellers is the food cupboard or pantry. As we tell you in Chapter 17, pantries and cupboards should be clean, neat, and tidy but should *not* include the pet food or pet supplies, which are a dead giveaway that you have a pet in residence.

Buy a fancy canister or container to store a small supply of the dry pet food, and then keep the rest of the food in the bag in the trunk of the car.

✔ **Animal-centered art:** As a pet-lover you may not notice that much of your art includes animals as subjects — particularly those that look like your pet. The art that's right for staging doesn't include pets — no kitty on the window or dogs by the lake and no ceramic puppies on the sofa table. Replace this art with neutral pictures and accessories.

✔ **Pet hair:** General cleaning helps get rid of pet hair, but you do need to double-check some tell-tale places. Take a close look at the areas along the bottom of a sofa or pet's favorite chair and check for additional hair that may be clinging on the side of the chair or sofa cushions. Make sure no pet-hair dust bunnies are hanging out in the corners of the rooms. You know your pets, so check that all their favorites snoozing places are hair-free.

Protecting Precious Goods (Or, "Grandma's in That Jar!")

In the past few decades, cremation has been gaining in popularity, and many families choose to take their loved one's remains home, which poses a challenge for the professional stager who must tell the home seller that Grandma does not need to be on display during the open house!

Many urns today are attractive and may not be recognized as urns at all. Even so, you never know who's coming into your house and you don't want

to risk something terrible happening. A few children rough-housing or an accidental knock on a table may send the contents tumbling.

Another concern is that people get spooked when you talk about the dead; any suggestions of a dead loved one may upset potential buyers and push them away.



An urn and its contents are priceless possessions, so pack and store them to keep them free from harm while your house is on the market.

Staging nightmare: A client that we dealt with had only recently lost her husband; she had placed an urn containing his remains on a favorite table in a hallway at the bottom of the stairs. Keeping the urn in this visible location helped her get in touch emotionally with her loved one, brought comfort, and helped with the shock of her husband's sudden passing. She was adamant that the ashes stay on the special table in the hallway.

Staging solution: Sometime the best resolution is compromise. We relocated the urn and the table to a nonessential room with less traffic so there was less opportunity for the urn to be knocked over — far from ideal but the best we could do. The urn in question looked like an Asian-inspired art piece, which helped make this compromise acceptable.



If you insist on having your loved one's remains in the house, tuck them into a closet high on a shelf where they aren't likely to be seen or knocked over. Tape the lid closed for extra security.

Quashing Collection Fever: Show Buyers Your House, Not Your Beanie Babies

Would you rather have potential buyers look at your collection of tea cups or your house?

Collections of any kind are a distraction and need to be packed away. Because buyers spend so little time in your house when they're looking for a new home, packing away your collections gives them one less distraction and better enables them to focus on your house, not on your collections.

Even one piece of art can be a distraction. We remember a house where the owner had a fabulous oil painting of her three boys in hockey gear posing in their own back yard on an ice rink Dad had made. They then had the oil painting signed by a famous hockey player. We asked the agent if many people stopped to ask him questions about the painting during the open house. Answer? Every guy talked for about 20 minutes about it! When we asked the agent whether he thought that was a good or bad thing, he ventured that it was

good. When we continued to discuss staging, he realized that during the time he was talking sports with the guys, he wasn't able to talk about the house or to other potential buyers. You don't want buyers missing your crown molding because they're fixated on a painting that's going to move along with you.

One very sweet elderly client we remember talked about how special all her collections were to her. We reminded her that children would make a beeline for most of them and told her we were afraid they would get broken. We recommended that she pack everything away. "But how will people know I have them if they can't see them?" she asked? That's the point! We don't want buyers to see the collections; we want them to see the house.

After much discussion we realized these collections represented her life's work. They reflected her interests, her travels, the love of her family who had purchased things as gifts, and her own self worth. She explained her first husband many, many years ago had left her with three children and nothing else. After she remarried she was in a position to buy things for the house — she wanted to have "things" that were hers.



You stage a house to get the most money from the sale of the property. Sometimes that means packing away some of the things that make your house your home and even make you you.

In the case of the lady with the zillion collections, our recommendation stood even after she explained the significance of all that stuff. She packed everything away and secured more equity in her house.

Selling Your House During the Holidays

If you're going to be having showings during any holiday season, keep decorations to a minimum. The holiday season is a more hectic and stressful time to sell, but an effectively staged property has a distinct advantage over its competition — the house is showcased at its best, with just a little added sparkle.



Keep decorations simple and nondenominational. Use the universal magic and appealing simplicity of fresh greenery — pine and cedar boughs, white lights with a *few* tasteful and carefully chosen decorations.

If your house is on the market during the holidays, remember the following:

- ✓ Keep walkways, porches, and driveways clear of snow, ice, leaves, and salt; be sure the entryway is safe, clean, and bright. Remember to de-ice, sweep away the excess salt, and keep the shovel hidden.
- ✓ Hang a seasonal wreath. Fresh greens emit a pleasant fragrance as people enter the property.

- ✔ Exterior lights look great at night but a white cord dangling from the eaves is unsightly during the day. Instead, use white mini-lights that have green wires in trees and bushes. Avoid hanging lights from the roof; position floodlights to showcase features of the outside, like the front door, white birch trees (positioning the light so it shines up into a tree), the house numbers, and the For Sale sign.
- ✔ Safely tuck away all extension cords to avoid tripping hazards.
- ✔ If you have a long expanse of deck or patio, set a lifestyle scene. Place a bird feeder near the front porch, shine a white light on a tree, place a wreath on an Adirondack chair, or set a snowman in the yard. These elements draw the eye to the property.
- ✔ Provide a basket or absorbent mat for buyer's outer shoes and boots.
- ✔ Keep the temperature at a comfortable 68 degrees F (22 degrees C), even when you aren't there. You don't want buyers' first impression to be *brrrrrrr*.
- ✔ You want your house to appeal to the broadest audience, so keep religious icons to a minimum, and tuck them away during showings. Use a smaller tree or discreet décor in small amounts throughout the house to add sparkle and festive joy without being denominational. Remove excess furniture to make a room with a tree feel more spacious.
- ✔ Decorate the inside tree with white lights and use only one color on the tree. You don't want the focus of the showing to be on the tree and décor because it won't be there when the buyers move in.
- ✔ Be sensible about security. We recommend either a few wrapped empty boxes under the tree or just a tree skirt.
- ✔ 'Tis the season for hospitality so do leave a plate of cookies or holiday nibbles (but no nuts because some folks are allergic to them).
- ✔ Winter tempts sellers to highlight the fireplace. You can use the gas, electric, or woodburning fires if you have a screen to prevent little fingers from being burned and you've checked with the agent about liability. We have learned many agents will accept this gladly and others won't, so do check for your own protection. If you're a stager yourself, check your own liability insurance policy on this one. The same goes for candles: Don't light candles for showings because even the most protected hurricane lamp can be subject to an accident.



We love flameless candles. They're available in many sizes and shapes sizes and work with a battery. These candles look very real but don't present a fire hazard. Find them at www.stagingmall.com.

You See Beautiful Wallpaper, Buyers See Work

We're sure the wallpaper was a wonderful addition when you installed it, and that it looked fabulous all the time you lived in this house. But leaving wallpaper in any room may mean work to a buyer. We recommend you either remove it or paint it.

Underneath it all, most folks have the same feeling when it comes to work: They already have too much to do and they don't have time to do more. Wallpaper is such a personal choice and can become dated really quickly. By leaving it on your walls you're opening yourself to having a buyer chip away at your equity.



Are you reluctant to remove wallpaper because of the work? So is the buyer. Leaving it as is will cost you equity.

Removing wallpaper

You can always hire a professional wallpaper stripper to get rid of dated patterns on your walls, but removing wallpaper may be easier than you think. Talk with someone at a rental store about how to use a stripper if you're interested in removing the wallpaper yourself. No matter who does the work, getting rid of wallpaper is a smart move that will bring you equity.

Staging nightmare: The master bedroom in Figure 18-1 was beautiful in its day but tough to sell because it looked dated and tired. The furniture placement blocked the natural focal point and access to the other side of the bed.

Staging solution: Stager Nairn Friemann of Ingenuity & Pizzazz removed the wallpaper, painted the walls, and took up the carpet to expose incredible hardwood floors that updated the room. New bedding and art completed this executive retreat (see Figure 18-2) and helped bring about an immediate sale.

Staging nightmare: The hallway wall in the 50-year-old house shown in Figure 18-3 was very dated and unappealing.

Staging solution: Removing the wallpaper, painting the walls, and installing new baseboards and moldings transformed the hallway into an inviting and updated space (see Figure 18-4).



Figure 18-1:
Before, the
master
bedroom is
dated and
tired.

Nairn Friemann, Ingenuity & Pizzazz



Figure 18-2:
Staged, the
room is an
incredible
retreat.

Nairn Friemann, Ingenuity & Pizzazz



Figure 18-3:
Before, wallpaper makes this entryway look dated.

Christine Rae, Certified Staging Professionals



Figure 18-4:
Staged, the hallway looks current and appealing.

Christine Rae, Certified Staging Professionals

Painting over wallpaper (Really!)

Removing wallpaper can be next to impossible, especially if many layers have been applied one over the other or if the original wallpaper was applied directly onto the wall without sizing it first. Under these circumstances, trying to remove the wallpaper damages the underlying plaster or drywall. If this is the case or if you're under a time crunch, consider painting over the wallpaper. You can paint over almost any surface today as long as you prep it well and use the right paint and primer.

Follow these steps to paint over wallpaper:

- 1. Check that all the seams in the wall paper are pressed down and smooth.**

If the paper is lifting, glue it down with wallpaper seam glue, and then let it dry.

- 2. Using a wide drywall knife, apply a smooth layer of drywall mud over all the seams and flaws.**

Let the mud dry.

- 3. Using fine-grit sandpaper, sand the mud seams and other repairs smooth.**

- 4. With a wet cloth, wipe off excess dust from the walls so the primer and paint will stick.**

- 5. Prime over the clean walls using alcohol-based primer.**

Water-based primers loosen the wallpaper — what a mess!

- 6. Caulk along the ceiling, trim, and baseboards to get a nice, cut-in line when you paint.**

- 7. Using a washable flat or eggshell wall paint (Chapter 4 tells you how to choose a color), paint two coats over the wallpaper.**

Don't buy cheap or gloss paint because either will show all the imperfections on the wall.



Chapter 19

Staging When You're Building, Rehabbing, or Flipping

In This Part

- ▶ Finding out what stagers do for investors
 - ▶ Using color to save money and make the sale
 - ▶ Looking into the improvements that count
 - ▶ Keeping buyers in mind as you build or rehab
-

If you're building a house for resale or you've purchased a property with the intent to rehab or *flip* it — fix it up and resell it for a profit — we strongly recommend you consider starting the work by consulting a staging professional. Working with a professional saves you time, money, and headaches, and a stager helps you develop a plan of action so you get the best return on your investment.

Traditionally the Parade of Homes (select decorated houses a builder has for sale) introduces builders to the public and showcases their new developments and construction projects. Builders often hire a professional interior designer to furnish the property that's on display, making the event not only a great avenue for the builder to show off his work but for the public to see what's new in design and décor.

Many people who attend the parade aren't going to buy a new home; they're looking to remodel their current homes and want to see what's new in appliances, countertops, flooring, and fixtures. They're also looking for the new trends in decorating — what colors are being used and which fabrics, textures, and accessories are hot.

Decorators and interior designers showcase their talents at events like these so homeowners will hire them. But interior designers, interior decorators, and professional stagers have different skill sets. (We explain these differences in Chapter 1.)

Today's builders are beginning to realize that their model homes need to be staged instead of decorated in order to emotionally connect with potential buyers. Builders discovered long ago that houses need furniture for people to connect with them. Many people visit model homes that have been decorated to gather ideas for how to decorate their own homes — not to buy the house.

Stagers focus on positioning furniture, artwork, and accessories to direct buyers to the focal point in the room and other desirable features of the house so they want to *buy* it, not just emulate it.

Unlike interior designers or decorators, stagers don't work to make you fall in love with flooring or furniture. We want you to fall in love with the whole house! Each room needs to say, "Ah, this feels good," rather than, "Wow, look at that sofa!"



Whether the house is new construction, a property that has been fixed up to be flipped, or an unoccupied home, you are better off staging a vacant property because

- ✓ Staging helps buyers build an emotional connection to the property.
- ✓ Vacant houses that have been staged sell 78 percent faster than those that are empty.
- ✓ Without furnishings in the house, buyers have no frame of reference regarding how their furnishings will fit.

Different animals: Investors and homeowners

The staging process is the same whether you're flipping a house or selling your own house, but the mindset is different, and so are the timing and budgets.

Home sellers usually have less time than investors to get their property ready for sale. Maybe they *have* to sell because they're being transferred or maybe they thought their property was more ready than it really was and have to make up for lost staging time before they list it.

Home sellers also tend to overlook the budget part of the staging equation. Chances are a homeowner didn't buy the house with reselling

it in mind but as a place to live. Typically, these sellers aren't aware of how much work they need to do and how large an investment they might need to make to get the most return from the sale of the house.

Investors buy a property with the idea of selling it to make a profit; therefore they look at it with much different eyes. They have a better idea of what needs to be done to it and how long it will take to ready the house before they put it on the market. When an investor purchases a house, she does it with the intent of selling right away, she's conscious of how much work and money she'll need to ready it for sale.

Climbing the Three Steps of Staging

Staging for a rehab or to flip a property is a three-step process, but it's more in depth than staging an occupied property. The following sections provide an overview of the process.

Step one: The consultation

As we show you in Chapter 6, a complete staging consultation is a comprehensive written inspection of the house and the property. It produces the mother of all “honey do” lists.



For an occupied or vacant property, we recommend that the consultation take place before the owner lists the house for sale so he has enough time to get all the work done. For a house that will be rehabbed or flipped, we recommend having the consultation before the investor purchases the property. An objective set of eyes compiling a detailed list of recommendations for change gives the investor food for thought important for the buying decision.

A professional home staging consultation helps the rehabber or flipper determine the condition of the property and which fixes and upgrades it needs for the investor to get the best return on his investment. This consultation can also help an investor plan the work — connecting the investor with qualified tradespeople, choosing colors and fixtures, and so on.

With the assistance of a professional property staging consultation, the investor is in a better position to evaluate whether the property is worth the investment. After an investor decides a property has good potential for investment, the consultation helps ascertain value and establish the improvements needed. The investor then decides whether those improvements are within the projected budget and on track for the expected return on investment.

Before buying an investment property, consider the points in the following sections.

Minor repairs mean a major decision

When evaluating a property to renovate or flip, take a closer look at the list of minor repairs. Minor repairs are the smallest, easiest, and least expensive to check off the home staging list, but if there are a lot of them, you may want to pass on the purchase; these repairs — things like repairing cracks in the wall or a dripping tap — are those that your buyer expects to be done instead of renovations you can highlight on a sales flyer.

Take a close look at what kind of work needs to be done. Ask yourself whether completing these minor repairs adds value to the property. If so, then they're probably worth doing. And if these repairs are the only things wrong with the house and it's a good price, you're probably wise to buy it. You can find out much more about decision-making for flipping in *House Flipping For Dummies* by Ralph R. Roberts with Joe Kraynak (Wiley).



Buyers naturally expect minor repairs to be completed on a property for sale. If you decide not to take care of them, they can be used as a bargaining chip by the buyer, earning you a lower selling price for the property.

Elbow grease eases your budget

How clean the property is has a big impact on the sale price for the investor. When you're investing in a property to rehab or flip, you can chip away at the sales price if a property is less than spotless. The cleaning part of the staging budget is determined by who will do the work — you or a service. If you're willing to do the work, you also see the savings.

Considering major remodeling?

Typically stagers don't include major remodeling in their home staging consultations, but if an investor is flipping a property, the investor needs to look at all angles that will give the buyer what she wants. Regularly recommended small remodeling projects — changing flooring, upgrading light fixtures, replacing the kitchen and bathroom sinks and faucets — make a huge impact on the return on investment. When an investor makes these simple improvements, they can advertise that the property has new upgrades, which increases the value of the house.

Appealing to your target buyer

If a property feels cold and uninviting, a rehabber or flipper can choose colors, light fixtures, and other elements that create a warm and inviting feeling.



The feeling in the house needs to appeal to the buyer. Determine who the buyer is before selecting the interior color, light fixtures, and hard surfaces so that you're sure to find elements that are attractive to the buyer. You'll choose differently if you're appealing to empty nesters than first-time home buyers, for example. Chapter 2 tells you more about figuring out who your buyer is.

Putting your plan in writing

After the staging consultation, complete the chart in Figure 19-1 for the elements you need in each room. Include the problem, the solution, and how much you estimate the task will cost. Be sure to research each category and then add 10 percent to the total estimate as a safety net to cover any hidden costs or delays that you may not have thought of.

Figure 19-1:

Use a chart like this one for each room in the house to determine your budget for rehabbing the property.

Staging Budget and Checklist Chart				
Address: 54 Oakwood Dr.				
Room Function: Master Bedroom				
Element	Problem	Solution	Estimated Cost	Actual Cost
Floors	carpet old and outdated	replace with new carpet	\$1,500	\$1,435
Walls & Trim	need cracks fixed, outdated color, trim needs replacing	fix cracks and repaint replace with 4 inch molding & baseboards	\$250	\$225

Step two: Getting the work done

After you have established your list of work to be done, determine who is going to do the work, and then contract out the work as needed. If you need help, contact a professional stager for a comprehensive list of reliable vendors.

Chapter 7 provides details about finding and hiring contractors.

Step three: Showcasing

Showcasing is the final step in preparing the property for the buyer's first impression and an essential step when selling the room. (Chapter 8 gives you the details about this important step.) For a vacant property the stager assesses the property, takes room measurements, and then prepares a proposal for renting furniture, accessories, and art.

The real estate market has slowed in many areas of the country. Numerous new-construction homes sit empty while they wait for a buyer. Even more folks are buying property and renovating it for a profit. The professional rehabber or flipper is really proud of taking a tired house and making it into a wonderful home. Those who work in urban areas take great pride in being part of bringing back a neighborhood and community. But the bottom line is that a vacant home doesn't show well or as quickly as one that's showcased with on-trend furniture and accessories.

When a house is empty, buyers have nothing to look at but walls, windows, outlets, and the flaws. There's nothing for buyers to connect to. Time and time again we hear buyers say of a vacant property, "It was nice, but. . . ." Their voices trail off because they really can't remember anything special about it.



When you're showcasing a property, don't skimp on the finer details such as linens, towels, bedding, throws, lamps, and artwork. These elements ensure that the property looks lived-in. Complete the chart in Figure 19-1 to include the accessories you need to make the room complete.

Even if you haven't worked with a professional home stager during the first two steps of the staging process, enlisting their expertise before showcasing will still save you money and time. A professional stager has built relationships with suppliers and, in many cases, will pass her discounts on to you when you hire her to showcase the house. Using furniture and accessories that are the correct size, scale, and style are fundamental decisions to set the buying mood.

Many investors are really proud of their results; they're proud of how they brought back the hardwood, how they saved the built-ins, and how they're revitalizing a neighborhood or part of the community. To them the house looks great empty because every time they walk into a room they remember what it looked like and how far it has come. But buyers have no such connection. Buyers see only what is right in front of them.

In Figures 19-2 and 19-3, you see what remodeling and showcasing do to sell a space. The investor took CSP Joanne O'Donnell's advice and added French doors. Then the room was showcased to sell the outside and inside living space. A mirror across from the bed reflects the light and view from the French doors, creating another window in the room.



Figure 19-2:
Before, even with the new windows the room feels dark and uninviting.



Figure 19-3:
Staged,
buyers' eyes
are drawn
to the
window.

Joanne O'Donnell, *Chic Home Interiors*

Colors Speak Even When They Don't Say a Word

You can sometimes tell the age of a house just by the colors of the décor or fixtures. Avocado green screams sixties; grey and mauve have eighties written all over them. When listing a home you need to appeal to the widest audience of buyers; doing so is fairly easy because all buyers — regardless of age — typically respond well to color that feels fresh and current. We tell you about using color and about its psychological impact in Chapter 4.



Vacant space is an exception to many staging rules, and sometimes we use strong color to add warmth to a space and create the *wow* in empty rooms. Deciding how to use color is best left to a professional because there are so many issues to consider, especially when you're working with an empty house. If you're working alone, your best bet is to stay as neutral as possible and use color in accessories and art.

Staging nightmare: Stagers know that color makes a big impact. Lynelle Hartman of LH2 Staging was invited by an investor to help choose finishes and colors for a condo conversion in an old building in a changing neighborhood. The building didn't stand out because it was the same color as the building next door. (See Figure 19-4.) From the street both buildings looked worn, dreary, dated, and old.

Staging solution: The investor was happy to paint the exterior because it made the property stand apart from its twin next door. With a new color, windows, front door, and iron railings out front, the curb appeal (see Figure 19-5) said "very modern and hip" to potential buyers. The updated sage green with white trim welcomed buyers to the front door with a look more fresh, appealing, and sophisticated than the building next door.

Builders like to use personalityless builder's white (which has a grey undertone) on the walls and ceilings with the idea that buyers will later paint with colors they like. This may have worked in the past, but it doesn't work today. Buyers want a house to be move-in ready, and although white looks fresh and clean, it can feel cold if you use the wrong shade. Worse yet, if you have white woodwork, the architectural features just blend in with the all white walls.

Preparing a bid on a vacant property, Lynelle Hartman of LH2 Staging was in the house a half hour before she realized the living room had wonderful vaulted, soaring ceilings. It was a firsthand experience of the way buyers look at the space — scanning the room at eye level, not looking up or down just all around. This looking-straight-ahead phenomenon happens even more when there's no color to contrast with and highlight the features of the house. Staging ensures that buyers' eyes are drawn to a house's features.

Color sells

We know the right choice of color sells; here's an example to show what we mean: Working with a developer, LH2 Staging chose colors for and staged a model home in an urban neighborhood that was being reinvented. Sales hadn't been brisk, so the developer wanted to kick it up a notch.

The developer had chosen an on-trend color palate for the main living area, kitchen, and living room, but the bedrooms and baths were "Builder's White." The main space felt warm and inviting, but as soon as you walked into the other areas the emotional temperature went cold.

LH2 suggested a coordinating paint color for the other rooms, and then brought in furniture and accessories to showcase the formerly empty model. It sold immediately. Consequently, LH2 stagers were asked to repeat the success in a second unit. It was painted, showcased, and sold. After the third unit sold, the developer said, "We need to have you choose colors and stage all the units!"

This example shows that buyers need completed spaces to really fall in love with a house. They need something other than white walls in vacant places to grab their attention and connect them emotionally to the space.



Figure 19-4:
Before, the building looks dreary.

Lynelle Hartman, LH2 Staging



Figure 19-5:
Staged, the building looks modern and hip.

Lynelle Hartman, LH2 Staging

Color is the least expensive way to change the feeling of a space, and adding color with paint, furniture, and accessories, moves buyers' eyes not only around the room, but down to the great hardwood flooring, and then up to the vaulted ceiling. Color accessories can even draw the eye into the next room. Color, when used well, is what makes a house feel like home.



Sometimes contractors think that ripping out a fixture is easier than dealing with refurbishing it. The practiced eye of a staging professional can help decide whether a built-in bookcase, buffet, or other feature can be saved. A coat of paint can work wonders and save interesting, useful fixtures.

Finding Eye-Opening (And Sale-Making) Improvements

The lemons a vacant or investment property gives you are often quite different from those that an occupied property presents. (You don't have to talk an investor into storing his extensive and prominently displayed gun collection, for example.) In this section, we show you how professional stagers have counseled their clients and turned lemons into lemonade.

Choosing a furniture-rental company

If you choose not to enlist a professional stager to help you showcase your property, find the following information before setting up a furniture rental agreement on your own:

- ✓ **Terms:** Some furniture rental companies require a minimum three-month rental, even if your property sells in the first month.
- ✓ **Delivery:** Be sure the quote includes delivery and administration fees. Look for a guaranteed delivery time and know how much notice you need to give the company for furniture pick-up when the property sells. Will their people unwrap and assemble the beds, lamps, and other furniture, or does that service cost extra?
- ✓ **Insurance:** Find out what kind of insurance coverage the company has. If theft or fire damage isn't covered by the furniture company, be sure your own business insurance covers your vacant property. Many times insurance providers won't cover homes that are unoccupied unless you have specifically asked for it.
- ✓ **Availability and quality of furniture:** Look closely at the available furniture. What type of furniture does the company rent? Is the furniture on-trend? What shape is it in? Do they have plenty of stock? How much notice do they need to get the pieces you require?

Make sure you inspect any furniture you rent before accepting delivery. Look for dings and dents when the furniture arrives. If you're responsible for damages, then make sure you aren't being charged for the previous renters' damage.

Peeling away paneling problems

Flippers often rip out paneling, not knowing that stagers can help them save hundreds of dollars on new drywall, time, and labor.

Staging nightmare: The property in Figure 19-6 had the common dark-paneled-wall challenge and was showing its age and neglect.

Staging solution: Paint holds amazing power. Not only did painting the paneling change the feeling of the space; by lightening and brightening the room, it visually increased the square footage, too.

Lynelle Hartman from LH2 Staging refinished the flooring and added new light fixtures. The heating pipes were left exposed for interest but painted the same color as the walls to blend them out. The heating vent should have been painted, but the painter disagreed. (It eventually was painted before the first showing. You might want to let any painter you work with know that they don't get a vote so you don't end up in the same situation.) The room now reflected buyers' excitement about their potential new home. Figures 19-7 and 19-8 show you how the room progressed.



Figure 19-6:
Before, the
room looks
dark and
neglected.



Figure 19-7:
Midway through the renovation and waiting for furniture.

Lynelle Hartman, LH2 Staging



Figure 19-8:
Staged, stunning, and move-in ready.

Lynelle Hartman, LH2 Staging

The contractor received several offers for this condo on open house day. Everyone wanted to buy this particular unit, even though there were several units finished and vacant in the building. This was the only one staged for sale and ready for living.

Staging nightmare: With orange carpet and old wooden paneling, the room in Figure 19-9 looks very dated — and ready for a price reduction. Not only was the room being underutilized, it was very depressing and really became a discussion point for viewers, who wondered how long the current homeowner had lived in the house.

Staging solution: Joanne O'Donnell of Chic Home Interiors advised that the clients paint the paneling and update the flooring. She then strategically placed the furniture to change the focus and feel of the room.



Figure 19-9:
Before, the
room is
dated and
depressing.

Joanne O'Donnell, Chic Home Interiors

Figure 19-10: Staged, the paint and flooring upgrades changed the focus from how the owner lived to how the buyer will enjoy the fireplace and views.



Joanne O'Donnell, Chic Home Interiors

Patching predicaments

Even if you've updated the kitchen appliances, changed the light fixtures, repainted, and replaced just about everything you can, your property still may turn off a buyer if you missed even a crack.

Patching and repairing any place inside or out is crucial when you rehab or flip a house. If you think it's too much work, so will the buyers. Don't let them see cracks in the ceiling or pitiful patios.

Popcorn: Great for movies, bad for ceilings

One of the worst inventions of the past century had to be popcorn ceilings. Do you know anyone who likes them? Unfortunately, there are a lot of popcorn ceilings out there, and we have to deal with them. You have two choices: remove the popcorn or paint over it.

We'd love to tell you to remove the popcorn, but it's a very messy job. You have to spray small sections at a time with water and scrape — laborious work, and the clean up is as bad, so proceed at your own risk. If you're inclined to remove it, are a contractor who can assign a crew to it, and mess doesn't faze you, then our advice is to remove the popcorn ceiling. Removing the popcorn alone will help you sell the house. Even though we aren't psychic, we're pretty sure this is one trend that won't return.

If you don't want to go to the extreme of removing the popcorn, you at least need to paint the ceiling. Most owners paint their walls and ignore the ceilings. Aside from the aesthetic qualities, a painted ceiling adds impact to a room. Any paint store can sell you ceiling paint and a paint roller perfect for painting over popcorn ceilings.



Newer ceiling paints are tinted pink or blue when you put them on and then fade to white when the paint dries. This feature makes it easy to see where you've already painted — a great help if you're a novice painter or have poor lighting.

Plaster ceilings

Most ceilings are made of plaster; if they're old, they're prone to cracks and need repairing. They may also bear yellowing or *tea stains* that indicate water damage. (Investigate any signs of water damage; you might find a nightmare in the attic.)



Look closely for the telltale signs of ceiling damage and repair them immediately. Otherwise, as the damage gets worse, you may have a ceiling fall in prior to showing. So pay it now or pay more later and take care of the problem before it takes care of you!

Hanging curtains does not a house sale make

What are you selling — the house or the window treatments? Obviously you're selling the house, so keep this in mind when you consider window treatments. When a vacant house is on the market and all buyers see in a room are dated window treatments, they make an assumption that the house is dated and will start noticing any dings in the wall, scratches in the floor, and the dirt in the carpet because that's all they have to focus on.

Showcasing vacant properties with on-trend furniture, art, and accessories helps properties to sell faster, because buyers see the positive features of the house.

Staging nightmare: The home in Figure 19-11 had been on the market for six months with no offers in sight. The property owner tried to improve the look of the rooms by hanging up curtains. Certified Staging Profession Louise Short of A First Impression had a terrible time convincing the seller that showcasing a vacant home with furniture really would make a difference.

Staging solution: Removing the drapes and adding furniture enhanced the space, improved the traffic flow, and showed off the windows as a focal point of the room. (See Figure 19-12.) Three days after Louise staged the house (and right after the open house), the seller had her first offer.



Figure 19-11:
Before, the
drapes
distract the
buyer from
looking at
the room.

Louise Short, A First Impression



Figure 19-12:
Staged, the
windows
get the
attention
they
deserve.

Louise Short, A First Impression

Building and Staging with the Buyer in Mind

Staging a new house requires targeting and tailoring furniture, art, lighting, and accessory choices directly to the potential buyer.

Knowing what the buyer wants is the key; those wants change according to whether you're dealing with a first-time homeowner, a buyer considering a vacation property, or an empty nester. When you know what the targeted buyer wants, you can build a house that maximizes the connection the buyer makes with the property.



Research buyer demographics (buyers' ages, number and ages of children, combined average annual income, and so on) before building, remodeling, flipping, or staging your property. The following features are those most-sought by the “average” buyer. If your house has most of these features, you're way ahead of your competition:

- ✓ **Energy efficiency:** As the green movement continues, buyers are looking for high-efficiency appliances, products, and features when buying a home.
- ✓ **Main-floor laundry:** Buyers are looking for accessible laundry rooms that are larger and more functional to ease the chore of doing laundry.
- ✓ **Large kitchens:** More and more, the kitchen is the hub of the house. Features like oversized kitchen islands and concealed pantries are highly valued and on-trend.
- ✓ **Easy-to-maintain, fabulous-looking landscape:** Buyers want low-maintenance artificial ponds or waterfalls and year-round visual interest.
- ✓ **Luxurious bathrooms:** Buyers want the highest-quality bathroom their price range permits. Separate tub and multiple shower heads, pedestal sinks, large mirrors, spa-like feeling, and attached dressing rooms with a place to sit are all features to consider when building to sell.
- ✓ **Specialty rooms:** Bedrooms on the main floor for aging parents, snoring rooms, media rooms, playrooms for kids, and exercise rooms are specialty rooms that buyers like.
- ✓ **Storage and space:** Buyers are looking for storage space in every room. They want built-in closet organizers and opt for homes with larger garages for housing toys and tools for their expensive hobbies.
- ✓ **Tech-readiness:** Satellite and cable TV, satellite radio, high-speed Internet, multiple conveniently located phone jacks, and central air, are features that buyers want to plug in to. With buyers' lifestyles relying so heavily on technology, even a day or two without high-speed Internet or a phone hookup can be a major inconvenience.
- ✓ **Outdoor living spaces:** Patios, decks, exterior lights, fenced yards, fire pits, and so on extend the usable living space in homes.
- ✓ **High-quality everything:** In buyers' eyes, luxury has become standard. So when rehabbing, flipping, or building, check out the standard of luxury in your area and give buyers what they want.

Chapter 20

Staging Your House the Feng Shui Way

In This Chapter

- ▶ Glimpsing Feng Shui's principles
 - ▶ Delving into clutter's effects
 - ▶ Running down the five natural elements
 - ▶ Putting Feng Shui to work to sell your house
-

F*eng Shui*, an ancient Chinese art and observance of positive and negative energy flow and the effect it has on life, and staging have a lot in common. Whether or not you believe in the tenets of Feng Shui, every positive thing you can do to help you sell your house makes a difference.

In this chapter, we run down the basics of Feng Shui. If you want to find out more, read David Daniel Kennedy's book, *Feng Shui For Dummies* (Wiley, 2000).

Introducing Feng Shui

Feng Shui is all about energy — the flow of energy and how it enhances or detracts from your life. In essence, our lives are a reflection of our personal and work spaces. For example, a water fountain or feature outside your front door should flow toward the house — not away from it; flowing away opens you to the draining away of your finances.

Becoming a trained, certified Feng Shui practitioner takes many years of study and practice in the field. We don't mean for this chapter to replace a skilled Feng Shui consultation or be interpreted as training; however, we do want to make you aware of the basics of Feng Shui and how it might affect the sale of your property.

Early Feng Shui practitioners made their initial observations from watching the cycles of nature and the changes of the seasons. Then observations about the sun's directions and eventually the cycles in nature were explained as the cycle of the five elements — fire, wood, earth, water, and metal. Each element interacts with the others and affects them negatively or positively. We tell you more about the five elements and how to use them in the upcoming section, “Making the Most of the Five Natural Elements.”

Practitioners of Feng Shui believe that everything in the universe is energy (or *chi* — pronounced *chee*) and that chi is expressed in and as the five elements. The goal of Feng Shui is to keep chi moving from room to room in a house, bringing positive energy to all of them.

What does this have to do with selling your house? Chi flows through entrances to the house, primarily through the front door. When the chi in the house is moving and flowing (like wind), it brings new and sufficient energy to provide beneficial life circumstances (like a buyer). But if the chi is blocked in any way — with clutter, for example — the energy flow is disrupted and parts of the house can be energy depleted. The depleted energy affects the people who live there because it encourages disharmony and life problems, and it makes the house more difficult to sell. Staging is about the feeling a staging professional creates in a house, which is why many of the consultants are looking for as many disciplines to harmonize a house as possible.

Overcoming Clutter's Harmful Effects



Energy doesn't circulate well in an overcrowded living space. Almost everyone has some clutter somewhere in their house, and some have more than others; when you're selling a property, anything that can be interpreted as clutter has to go! Where you see treasures a buyer might see clutter, and clutter chips away at your equity.

Believe it or not, clutter is related to the instincts of self protection and insecurity. The person who likes clutter around him needs nurturing and support. Practitioners of Feng Shui interpret clutter near and around doorways as an indicator that you:

- ✓ Avoid going outside
- ✓ Struggle to achieve your goals
- ✓ Build barricades (like piles on a desk) around yourself
- ✓ Fear letting go

When professional stagers prepare a house, they often find the process of organizing and putting away unnecessary things usually has an amazing positive and uplifting effect on the homeowner.



Practitioners of Feng Shui believe that clutter throughout the house holds back (and slows down) the sale of your property — so get out of your own way and start packing! De-cluttering the house puts every area of your life into balance. A cluttered area in or outside the house blocks the flow of positive energy and stagnates your life. It may also prevent someone from coming in and offering money, so get packing, clear the pathways of your house, make yourself feel good, and allow good things to come to you.

Making the Most of the Five Natural Elements

The goal in staging your house the Feng Shui way is to balance the five elements in and on the property. These elements affect everything in your living and work environments. Ancient Chinese practitioners related each element to a specific color for ease of interpretation and use. Because of its relation to light frequencies, color vibrates at a high level that lifts the energy in a house. In the following sections, we give you a closer look at the five elements and how the energy of each affects the sale of your house.

The elements (fire, wood, earth, water, and metal) interact with each other in good and bad ways that practitioners call *productive* and *destructive* cycles. These cycles describe the way that the natural forces of the universe work together to help or hinder your life. Too much of an element in your house or in an area of your house and the house and your life may feel less balanced and peaceful. Balancing the elements improves the balance of your life. The proper placement of the elements helps allows chi to flow through the house and create a good feeling — and increase buyer activity.

The theory goes that changing the energy of the property works like a magnet to attract buyers. Even if parts of the Feng Shui philosophy sound strange to you, we recommend giving some of the practices within it a try. What do you have to lose?

Placing the five elements

A productive or positive cycle in Feng Shui is when each element interacts with another in a positive way. For example, fire creates earth when a forest fire burns trees and creates ash that filters into the ground and stimulates growth. You emulate this interplay of elements in your house to create harmony. Paying attention to the correct placement of the elements around the property and the house increases the feeling of good energy and subsequently increases buyer activity.



When you place the five elements around your house, you don't have to use the actual elements to get the effect you want. Pieces that represent the element in shape or color will work.

You place these elements according to the segments of the *bagua* — the Feng Shui map. (See Figure 20-1.) The *bagua* places aspects of your life in relation to the layout of your house or property. The areas of life are:

- ✓ Career
- ✓ Children and creativity
- ✓ Fame
- ✓ Family and friends
- ✓ Health
- ✓ Knowledge
- ✓ Marriage and relationships
- ✓ Helpful people
- ✓ Wealth

Place the map over the layout of the house to uncover any areas in which energy needs to be enhanced or rectified. For example, if your kitchen, bathroom, or laundry room is in the wealth area of a house, practitioners believe that any wealth coming into the house would quickly disappear down the drain. You can stanch the flow of wealth away from your house by keeping toilet lids down and by closing any doors to rooms where water might drain away.

Here's a rundown of the five elements, what they mean, and how to place them according to the principles of Feng Shui:

- ✓ **Wood** is associated with spring, new life, new growth, creativity, and development. It's represented by the colors brown and green and the shape of a vertical rectangle or column. Wood can be strong and pliant and helps you feel energetic and motivated. Live trees oxygenate and clean the air as well as help keep the air and energy moving throughout the house.

A good placement for a wood accessory is in the family and friends area (center left on the *bagua*) when you want new growth in your life.

- ✓ **Fire** is hot and bright; the fire element energizes the chi in its path. Fire is represented by the color red and by triangles. People paint their front doors red for good luck, but you can also use red accessories or candles for an uplifting effect of this energizing element.

Place the fire element in the fame area (center back of the *bagua*) to help increase good fortune.

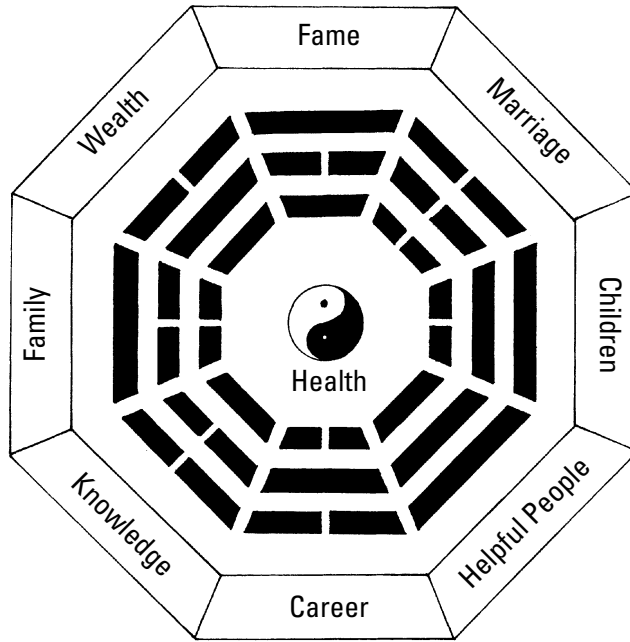


Figure 20-1:
The Feng Shui bagua is a reference for applying the principles of the practice.

- ✓ **Earth** represents stability and grounding. Correcting the chi in this area helps balance and stabilize you, your life, and your environment. In times of change or unrest the, earth elements help center you. Earth is represented by yellow, the square, the cube, and the horizontal rectangle, earth's natural location in the house is in the health section (center of the bagua). A ceramic bowl is a good earth accessory in a room.
- ✓ **Metal** is associated with communication and with business or financial success. It's represented by the colors white and gold and by circles, spheres, and domes. When you want to improve communication in business, locate metal — metal wind chimes, for example, or an accessory made of or the color of metal — in the helpful people area (front right on the bagua).
- ✓ **Water** represents the energy of travel, concentration, and stillness that are related to things moving as in a water fountain, and then coming to rest. The colors black and dark blue represent water elements. Shapes that flow in undulating forms such as waves and flowing draperies should be placed in the career area (center front on the bagua). Place water cures such as a fountain or picture with water or even a blue vase when you want more peace and clarity of mind or want to increase the flow of people and cash into your life.

Using water to sell your house

You definitely want to increase the number of people who tour your house, so if you use no other element, make sure you use water to help sell your house.

Simply place a representation of the water element in the southeast area of your house or lot. To add the water element to your house, you can opt to use the color black or dark blue. These are good colors for your front door if it's located in the center front of the house.



You might want to add a mini fountain by the entry to address the Feng Shui notion that moving water is a must for enabling money to flow to you. If moving water is out of the question, use a picture with a water scene or black objects that represent movement to this area — just be sure the water is flowing to you, not away from you.

You can go overboard with water, so be selective and study the best placement. Don't place a water feature in the master bedroom, for example, because it is thought to bring worry and financial loss as well as to weaken the love relationship.

Staging to Feng Shui the Sale

The following are some gold nuggets of Feng Shui wisdom that will help you sell your house:

- ✓ **Add light:** Light is energy in its most obvious form. Any dark areas in the house benefit from additional lamps. Soft light is best, and the bulb shouldn't be visible. Mirrors reflect and intensify light, but be careful with the placement — you don't want mirrors to reflect unappealing spots of your house. (Remember also that mirrors represent the water element.) Both staging and Feng Shui encourage you to bring light into the equation.
- ✓ **Banish clutter:** Cleaning and de-cluttering increase the opportunity for money to flow to you. Chi likes spring clean and freshness. (And so do buyers.)
- ✓ **Use plants:** Live plants or a good representation of live plants signify life. They help oxygenate the house, bring in positive energy, and represent money enrichment.

A not-so-obvious placement and location for plants is on the toilet tank. This counters the centrifugal "draining" of finances. Staging and Feng Shui both recommend that you keep toilet lids down.



✔ **Wisely draw color into your decorating scheme:** To avoid stress and irritability (not good for a sale), use neutral colors around your house. To lift the chi, add flashes of color in the art or accessories.

✔ **Maximize movement:** Stagnant chi needs to be enlivened. Open the windows and let in fresh air to stir it up.

The chi coming into the house brings with it the chi it crosses. So if you're located near a cemetery, for example, or even electric pylons, you need to entertain some Feng Shui cures to prevent the negative energy from coming into your house. An indoor fountain is one thing that helps.

✔ **Set the tone:** Playing gentle, melodious music during an open house and showings is a good idea because it engages one of the five senses and helps relax and motivate the buyer by creating good feelings.

✔ **Welcome guests:** The front door is the mouth of the house, so put some thought into how you're presenting it. Keep it free of clutter and debris. Paint it and light it well at night. Add red plants and a black mat to encourage good chi and money.

✔ **“Do” the windows:** Keep windows clean and clear because dirty windows obstruct the view and close off light. Draperies should be easy to draw back to allow as much natural light as possible.

✔ **Tend the lawn:** Landscaping must be well-maintained and ideally has curving, gracious lines, and all plantings should be in proportion to the things around them. Shoot for including a representation of the five elements in the yard. For example, a pond for water, a sundial or statue for metal, trees and shrubs for wood, red flowers for fire, and yellow flowers for earth.

✔ **Clear a path:** Keeping your pathways clean and unblocked allows the wealth to flow into your front door. Make sure you trim any bushes or shrubs that overhang pathways.

✔ **Plant a tree:** Put a new tree in your wealth section (refer to Figure 20-1). Money really will grow on trees.

✔ **Seal up money leaks:** Repair anything that's broken.

✔ **Hang a gentle wind chime:** A wind chime activates the sound energy, greets visitors, and draws chi to your house.

✔ **Activate the helpful people area:** When you're facing your lot, it's the area in the front right and a good place to locate the For Sale sign.

✔ **Get packing:** Packing to move sends a positive intention: You expect to move, you expect to get a sale — and you will.

Chapter 21

It's Not Easy Being Green: EcoStaging

In This Part

- ▶ Finding cash from federal sources
 - ▶ Discovering effective eco-friendly products
 - ▶ Walking the walk with eco-friendly flooring
 - ▶ Marketing conservation-minded changes
-

Energy conservation and green living have been around for awhile. With the movie *An Inconvenient Truth*, Al Gore raised the consciousness of the general population about the delicate balance in the world as a result of our poor stewardship of environment and resources. More and more people (buyers included) are waking up to the practices and philosophies that go along with green living.

The *greening* of North America refers to the growing popularity of conserving energy, reducing greenhouse gases, and preserving our natural resources. *Green products* to support the environmental interest have to meet governmental standards to be deemed ecologically friendly. You can now readily find green products for cleaning, and more builders are using green construction practices in both new home and commercial construction.

New construction is going green by incorporating innovative building materials made from renewable or recycled materials and by utilizing products and energy efficiencies that ensure *environmental sustainability* — the balance of meeting human need while protecting natural resources. Environmental sustainability is an aspect of everything from glass cleaner to larger building projects and urban communities that include energy efficiencies from indoor air quality to green rooftops and rainwater reservoirs.

What does all this have to do with getting your house sold? Late in 2007, HGTV's editorial team pulled together ten things that were high on buyers' priority lists. Number one? Energy efficiency. Buyers want homes that save them money. An Oraclepoll Research study showed that buyers ranked energy efficiency third on their lists, right behind price and location.

In September of 2007, the Certified Staging Professionals organization announced an initiative called EcoStaging (www.ecostaging.com) to help raise awareness of the importance of energy saving and conservation — it's good for the environment, good for your equity, good for the buyer, and good for marketing.

CSP Room Ready Handbook is the tool Certified Professional Stagers use for consultations, and it now includes a new section that allows consultants to assess a house for energy savings and resource conservation features. With the installation of simple things like low-flow toilets, aerators for taps and Energy Star-rated furnaces, appliances, and windows, this eco-awareness gives you a head start on improving the marketability of your house and an informed heads-up when making your next property purchase decision.

In this chapter, we discuss the trends of living green and how the philosophy directly impacts the sale of your house.

We introduce you to

- ✓ Eco-friendly products you can use in the cleaning and preparation of your house
- ✓ Earth-friendly staging practices
- ✓ The competitive edge you get from innovative EcoStaging processes

Looking Into Rebate and Eco-Grant Programs

Governments around the world are finally waking up enough to help in the quest to save the planet. Many have initiated information programs, grants, and awards to encourage development and early adoption of such programs.

In Canada

The EcoENERGY Retrofit program provides grants of up to \$5,000 for Canadian homeowners who retrofit energy-saving features into their houses.

The grant benefits the seller and the buyer by identifying the energy leaks in the house and provides the seller and homebuyer a window of time (18 months) to retrofit the house to qualify for reimbursement. You need to have an energy-efficiency inspection before selling to access the grants. Doing so helps you decide which improvements and upgrades to complete before marketing your house and provides an information portfolio for you to leave with the buyer in the event you elect not to do everything prior to sale.

After you complete whatever items you want to do, the inspector comes back to verify efficiencies and then applies for the grants. It takes about 60 days to receive the money.



Across North America, communities know they have to do something to help save the planet; maybe your community has similar initiatives. For example, an Ontario grant matches money available from the federal government, therefore giving home sellers and buyers access to as much as \$10,000. Find details at www.nrcan-rncan.gc.ca/com or from your local Certified Staging Professional.

In the United States

In the United States, consult www.energystar.gov, a program of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the U.S. Department of Energy that's helping everyone save money and protecting the environment through energy-efficient products and practices.

Homeowners can take advantage of a variety of retrofit and rebate programs when they improve almost any area of their homes. The rebates range from 10 percent to 30 percent of the purchase price depending on the upgrade and

EcoStaging and Habitat for Humanity

When clients ready their houses for sale we often hear comments like

- ✓ "I had no idea we had so much stuff."
- ✓ "I can't believe how great the house looks with less stuff in it."
- ✓ "Now we want to live like this all the time; less is definitely more."

You can achieve the same minimalist bliss in your own life, but after you do, you need to find a place for all of your extra stuff. Do we have an idea for you!

Certified Staging Professionals are involved in a special project called The Pay-it-Forward Initiative with Habitat for Humanity (www.habitat.org). Here's how it works: When we

help sellers prepare their homes, they often replace outdated light fixtures and old sinks and faucets, or they have extra or leftover tile, vinyl flooring or carpeting. Rather than adding these things to the landfill, we recommend they get the tax advantage by donating these items to the Habitat for Humanity's ReStore.

Habitat ReStores all over the United States and Canada accept donations for everything from light fixtures to major appliances. Neighbors of Jan's even donated roof trusses they didn't need! Looking for almost-new appliances or other building materials? Shop the Habitat Restore. Doing so is another small step toward reducing waste in the landfill sites.

products you use. With the help of Energy Star, Americans saved enough energy in 2006 to avoid greenhouse gas emissions equivalent to those from 25 million cars and saved \$14 billion on utility bills!

Using Earth-Friendly Products for Cleaning and Painting

As another small step toward a cleaner planet, we and our fellow CSPs recommend using eco-friendly products. The following sections detail some of our favorites.

Greening while cleaning

Synthetic cleaners pollute our air and harm the earth as well as our internal organs. Because these chemicals work invisibly, the side effects are easy to ignore, but the green movement is raising our consciousness to the health dangers around us and to the damage these products are causing to the world we live in.



Many environmentally friendly products are available now and more are being introduced to the marketplace every year. But after researching several sources, we found amazing, environmentally safe products that we love and use every day produced by The Soap Factory (www.thesoapfactory.com). These biodegradable cleaning products are free from harmful pollutants such as phosphates, nitrates, and enzymes, and they don't use artificial dyes or fragrances.

Painting conscientiously

Conventional house paint is made from chemicals that are continuously released into the air after you use them. Peeling and chipping paint wasn't an issue fifty years ago because paint was made from linseed oil, which has no chemical emissions. Linseed paint is long-lasting, doesn't have any additives, preservatives, or petroleum products, and is mildew-free.

Production of linseed products had all but disappeared until increased interest in finding natural painting solutions led to new linseed crops. The paint is again being manufactured for eco-friendly homes, and it lasts 50 years! The paint comes in a semi-gloss exterior and interior finish; because it doesn't evaporate from the can, it covers twice as much as regular paint. Keep that in mind when you look at the cost, which, yes, is steeper than the cost of conventional paint.



Legislation throughout North America has been drafted to eliminate petroleum-based oil paint and to ban solvents in paint. Check out www.solventfreepaint.com to learn all about solvent- and petroleum-free products.

If your inclination or budget doesn't run to organic paint solutions, try using low- to no-VOC paint. What are VOCs? Remember when you were a kid and everyone had to leave the house when it was being painted? That's because of the high levels of *volatile organic compounds* or VOCs found in most conventional paint. These gasses harm the air quality, resulting in symptoms like headaches, dizziness, respiratory problems, and even memory loss.



To find low- or no-VOC paint, visit www.icipaints.com and www.sherwinwilliams.com. A CSP staging consultant can provide you with special preferred pricing for these products. Also check out www.bioshieldpaint.com for natural, water-based paint and other pure products.

Low-VOC latex paint uses water as a carrier, and an added solvent makes the paint cleanup easier and is less hazardous to the environment. Today manufacturers have learned ways to reduce or eliminate VOCs from their paint production and make paint to meet consumer demand and keep it price-competitive.



Remember that not every latex-based paint is low- or no-VOC paint, so read the label to get paint that has benefits for all potential buyers, even those with allergies.

Finding Flooring That Goes the Eco-Distance

Homeowners now have a lot of options for environmentally safe flooring. Depending on your budget, where you plan to put the flooring, and the style of your house, you might be interested in one of the following:

✓ **Marmoleum** is made with natural ingredients and without harmful VOCs and other toxic chemicals. It can be *click installed* (something like using a tongue and groove installation without the glue) or installed with solvent-free adhesives.

Marmoleum also has no harmful eco-effects during production, use, or disposal. It's warm to walk on, has antibacterial properties that prevent micro-organisms like Salmonella from multiplying, and is a real bonus for allergy sufferers. Marmoleum looks like linoleum but is more durable. It's reasonably priced, comes in 150 colors, is easy to clean, doesn't stain, and needs only simple dusting and damp mopping.

Lighting for efficiency and brightness

The curly bulbs you see at the hardware store are called *full-spectrum daylight bulbs* and are the best option for lighting when you've made your commitment to the planet. They use about 75 percent less energy than incandescent bulbs and last for seven years. All that means they're more expensive to buy than regular incandescent light bulbs.

When replacing regular bulbs with full-spectrum daylight bulbs, start in the darkest areas of the house to bring in the most light. The next place to replace the light bulbs is in the living room — it's the primary room in the house, it looks better with daylight lighting, and you'll get better pictures for your sales flyers and Internet marketing.

Chapter 4 gives you the full scoop on lighting.



- ✓ **Bamboo** isn't just for the tropics anymore. It's one of the most widely used plants on earth shows up in furniture, paneling, cabinets, countertops, and flooring. It's quiet, elegant, and environmentally sustainable: Bamboo is a grass with a short growth cycle, meaning that it grows back quickly. It also comes in a variety of beautiful colors and is hardwearing and sustainable.

Not all bamboo is eco-friendly. So do be sure you ask questions before buying bamboo. Some products are made in countries that do not have a commitment to the environment, and the products are made with harmful glues or are transported by polluting methods. Do your research well before making your choices and remember: You almost always get what you pay for.

- ✓ **Cork** costs about the same as hardwood; it's also durable and an excellent thermal and sound insulator. Cork is warm to the touch, insect resistant, fire retardant, and hypoallergenic, and cork is a renewable resource.

Finding Practical Ways to Conserve Water

You can make an incredible difference in your water and energy consumption by making the following changes in your house and then marketing the improvements you've made to potential buyers:

- ✓ Install a faucet aerator to reduce the flow of water by 25 to 50 percent.
- ✓ Upgrade your appliances to "Energy Star" quality and save electricity, water, and money.

- ✔ Repair your water faucets throughout the house. A leaky faucet can waste more than 7 gallons (25 liters) a day — 2,555 gallons (9,125 liters) a year.
- ✔ Toilets are the biggest water-wasters in the house. Fix any toilet that is constantly running or replace toilets with a low-flow models that use less water per flush but still maintain the force. Look for one that uses 2 gallons (6 liters) or less.
- ✔ Plant native grasses and drought-resistant plants to reduce the need for extra landscape watering.

Part V

The Part of Tens

The 5th Wave

By Rich Tennant



"I like the marble vanity and the wall sconces, but I think the Eurostyle features on the whirlpool take away some of its simple country charm."

In this part . . .

This part of the book is shorter than the others, but it's long on useful information. These chapters include information our clients, agent friends, and colleagues have found most helpful when deciding to stage a property. We steer you away from common mistakes and toward products that can make your staging life easier. We tell you about important ways to get your house (and your head) ready for the sale and run down some of the reasons staging helps sellers get the most money fastest when they put their properties on the market.

Chapter 22

(Almost) Ten Mistakes Sellers Often Make

In This Chapter

- ▶ Avoiding the pitfalls that keep your house from selling
 - ▶ Taking the right steps before your house goes on the market
 - ▶ Making sure your path to the sale is clear
-

The goal of listing your house for sale is to sell it, still many sellers step on their own toes, inhibit the sale of their houses by making mistakes that push buyers away. Throughout this book, we show you ways to make your house as attractive as possible to buyers, and in this short chapter, we run down ten (okay, nine) common errors we wish would go away forever.

Overpricing the Property

Agents the world over tell us that overpricing a property is the single most frequent mistake sellers make.



When pricing your house for sale don't fall into the trap of thinking, "the house down the street sold for \$X last year. Mine is the same house, plus we added a pool, and a gazebo, so ours should be worth even more."

Market conditions change from year to year — often from month to month. So as tough as it may be, you need to understand and acknowledge that your house is worth only as much as a buyer is willing to pay for it. An agent friend of ours says it best when she tells her clients, "Your house needs to be the shiniest apple in the barrel and at the best price."

Pricing a property too high starts a downward spiral. Too high a listing price results in fewer showings. Fewer showings equal no offers. No offers results in drastic price reductions. Price reductions send the message to agents and buyers that something must be wrong with the property. So save yourself time, money, and frustration by pricing your house right in the first place.

Choosing the Wrong Professional

Selecting the right someone to represent you is crucial to getting your house sold. Whether you're choosing a staging professional, real estate agent, or home inspector, you want someone who's credible and who you like, a professional who understands you, the property, the market, and the potential buyer for the property.

Do your homework before you hire anyone. Interview several candidates, ask for testimonials, and ask to see proof of their success. Make a decision partly with your head, and then listen to your gut. If there's any doubt that the person is right for the job, move on.

Going It Alone: For Sale by Owner

We know what you're thinking: "If we sell the house ourselves, we can save the 6 percent commission." Although "For Sale by Owner" may be a growing trend, it's one likely to do more harm than good for the seller's interests.

Studies show that sellers who work without a real estate agent accept 15.4 percent less than they would have if they had worked with a reputable agent. More worrisome, much of the general public is more reluctant to approach a FSBO because they don't perceive the seller as credible.

Credible agents are worth their weight in gold. They can save you from costly errors and are motivated more than anyone to sell your house faster and for more money. They don't get paid until the house sells, after all. Selling the house yourself involves much more than just putting a sign on the lawn. Good agents understand the market better than you do. They have access to marketing trends and — most importantly — have the tools and resources to generate interest in seeing your property. They know all the legal pitfalls because their job is to protect you.

We know an experienced real estate agent who shows her sellers a list of almost 160 tasks that a good agent completes when they sell a house. Do you want to add another 160 tasks to your "to do" list? If not, then consider hiring a real estate professional.

A good agent will:

- ✓ Hold your hand throughout the selling process
- ✓ Provide advice to help you make decisions and avoid costly mistakes
- ✓ Determine fair market value for your property

- ✓ Advertise to make sure the most qualified, interested people see your property
- ✓ Negotiate the best sale price as an advocate for you
- ✓ Provide a network of trusted professionals to help bring your house to the market at optimum condition

Listing Your House Before You Stage It

Listing the house before staging is like driving a car without putting gas in the tank.

In a rush to market the house, sellers miss their biggest selling opportunity: The first five to ten days a house is on the market are the period during which the most people — buyers, agents, and brokers — will tour the property. Ever. Why not show the property at its very best?

But don't take our word for it. Gary Keller, owner and founder of the fastest-growing real estate company in North America and author of *The Millionaire Real Estate Agent* (McGraw Hill, 2004), named the first step in the “Basic Fourteen-Step Marketing Plan for Listings” as *staging and pricing strategies*.

If you wait 30 days, 60 days, 90 days, or more, staging will help market the house (and we're happy to help), but the house is no longer a fresh listing. A house for sale draws most of its potential buyers during the first ten days it's on the market. Why would you gamble with your results by not making a great first impression?

Not Doing Your Homework

Sellers are always *thrilled* when we tell them they need to work to get their houses sold — as thrilled as middle school students are to hear their parents push them to do their homework.

We get paid to be the bad guy. We're okay with it, especially because we do it for good reason.

So why do we recommend you do your homework before you list your house? Because it works. Any repair left undone tells the buyer “you have work to do here.” The psychological effect of that message goes a long way toward preventing a sale. As a buyer tours a property (usually in less than six minutes), his mind racks up each little thing left incomplete or that's less than desirable — unfinished repairs, anything dirty, outdated flooring and light fixtures, smelly corners, and so on. If the property interests the buyer, expect a lower offer.

Dated light fixtures, faucets, and door knobs also tell buyers that the house holds work, making them notice its age and wonder about the wiring and plumbing and other big issues. Add replacing these items to your homework list.

When sellers balk at their homework and the money we ask them to spend, we try to frame the situation for them: “If we paid you \$50,000, would you spend \$300 and a few days to do your homework?” The work you do before you list your house pays off in the selling price you get. So get busy.

Failing to Target the Right Buyer

Did you know that the average home seller is 57 years old and the average buyer is 32? We are definitely talking about two different generations here. So besides pricing your property right, the condition of the house and the decorating style might make a difference in how quickly the house sells.



Targeting the right buyer is essential for selling any property, so you want to be sure your house appeals to the buyer who is most likely to make an offer. Know who is looking at houses like yours:

- ✓ First-time home buyers look for things to feel brand new and special, and so you will want to be sure you upgrade any areas or items which may detract from that feeling.
- ✓ Couples with young children look for a house in a cul-de-sac, a large back yard, and bedrooms for each child. Maximize interior space and highlight family gathering places.
- ✓ Empty nesters look for a great place to entertain and usually steer clear of any house that needs work. Be sure that everything is well-maintained inside and out; you want your property to look as if the yard and house take care of themselves.



Check out the competition. Find out what nearby houses in the same price range offer as well as which amenities are featured in new houses in your area. Doing so helps you understand the sought-after selling features and where to invest your money when readying the property for sale.

Undervaluing the Power of Curb Appeal

If your home’s exterior and your lawn don’t invite buyers inside, no amount of interior staging is going to sell your house. Even granite countertops and spa updates in the bathroom won’t weave any magic if you can’t get buyers inside to see them.



Buyers love a well-maintained yard, sure, but the flip side of that coin is more daunting: Buyers simply won't look past a weedy yard with overgrown trees that hide half the house. And because so many buyers drive by a house to determine whether making an appointment to see the inside is worth their time, you're turning away potential sales when you neglect to light your house, paint the peeling trim, or fix the front stairs. The first impression is a lasting one; make sure it's positive.

Chapter 10 gives you the details about maximizing your house's curb appeal.

Neglecting the Floors

What would you rather do — spend \$2,000 to have new carpet installed or give a \$5,000 (or more) carpet allowance? Only a foolish person would pick the latter, and research drives home the point: A recent Maritz Research survey of homebuyers showed that 33 percent of buyers cite new flooring as crucial in their buying decision.

Today's buyer wants a move-in ready property. Buyers don't have the inclination or cash flow to fix things after the move-in date. So the more move-in ready you make the house, the closer you are to selling it. If you figure that you're going to pay for new flooring anyway — either up front before putting the house on the market or by giving a flooring allowance (which cuts into your equity) — isn't it better for you, not the buyer, to be in control of the budget?

Not Washing the Windows

One of the reasons to stage your property is to lighten and brighten the house. You can outfit your light fixtures and lamps with the highest-wattage light bulbs recommended by the manufacturers. You can remove heavy window treatments to let in more light. But a critical and often overlooked task is making sure that all the windows are sparkling clean. Clean windows not only let in more light, they let buyers know that the house has been well cared for.

You can clean the windows yourself, but a professional window washer usually is worth the investment. A professional knows how to get the job done well without making a mess or harming your home or the things in it. Our window washer even cleans and lubricates the window tracks, checks for window repairs you may not know about, and removes and washes the screens.

Chapter 23

Ten Reasons to Hire a Staging Professional

In This Chapter

- ▶ Running down the special skills of staging professionals
 - ▶ Looking into the benefits of working with a stager
 - ▶ Getting more money and saving time
-

Many people have the talent to help you get your property ready for sale. And many of these people haven't completed any training at all. Some have migrated from the decorating industry, and others have read books or have taken training from a distance educator; some have natural talent.

Any one of these people might be well-skilled, but when you're hiring a staging professional to ready your most valuable asset — your home — we say, "Let the buyer beware."

Utilizing the Skills of a Certified Staging Professional

Home staging is a relatively new industry and isn't regulated; very few places truly teach the staging-specific décor skills and the crucial real estate communication component. As is the case with any growing and developing industry, a time will come when the buying public demands certification credentials.

Having worked in the industry for the past seven years and having the privilege to work with people from all across North America, Christine is proud to say the Certified Staging Professional program is ever evolving and ever new; the information changes as the economy changes and as the industry becomes more sophisticated.

Rigorous training and testing

As we tell you elsewhere in this book, staging is not just moving the furniture around. A Certified Staging Professional (CSP) understands the nuances of real estate and how those nuances affect the buyer. This crucial knowledge helps you target the buyer who is most likely to make an offer on your property. CSPs learn about the pertinent staging décor skills and study vital real estate industry-specific data to help sell your property.

To become a Certified Staging Professional, students complete 30 intensive hours of rigorous instruction, and pass two exams on which they must score a minimum of 75 percent or higher in order to attain their first certification. (It's not uncommon for students to take the test a couple of times before passing it for their certification.) CSPs sign and promise to uphold a strict code of conduct, and they have the option to continue to build on their skills, knowledge, and ability by earning continuing education credits once they enter the field work.

Training is provided in a number of locations across North America every month. To find out more visit www.stagingtraining.com.

Continuous training about market conditions

CSPs are taught and then encouraged to maintain current trend information about the condition of the market, new construction, and any age-related trends that affect the targeted buyers' expectations. Knowing these things is one thing, but transferring that knowledge to reflect the needs of the buyer of your house is another.

Finally, all graduates of the CSP program can return to class as many times as they want or need (at no additional charge) and have access to a 24-hour online resource center where they can find out about new products and information.

Important connections

When you're selling a property, a staging professional can introduce you to real estate agents who include staging in their marketing plans. CSPs also have access to a plethora of preferred pricing partnerships that help reduce your costs for products and services necessary to the move — lighting, paint, carpet, junk removal, moving services, mortgages, and so on. Graduates know how to connect locally to a variety of vendors who can do everything from simple cleaning and repairs to new carpet installation. An apprenticeship program is available to new CSP graduates, who also have access to work teams to respond quickly to your staging needs.

Seeing What the Buyer Sees

Staging professionals have the skills, knowledge, and experience to know what the buyer needs to see when viewing your property. Buying decisions are made in a blink of an eye, so sellers need to address all aspects of the buyer's experience using eyes that have been trained not only to see the obvious but to anticipate unseen forces. Staging professionals are well aware of the subliminal effects of a fresh-smelling house, on-trend flooring, the effects of natural and artificial lighting, and so on.

A staging professional treats each property as an individual project. The professional stager works with the seller's existing decorating choices and furnishings and is trained to work with what the seller owns to make sure the property resonates with potential buyers. Stagers accomplish this mission by:

- ✓ Maximizing space
- ✓ Showcasing the architectural features of the house
- ✓ Minimizing attention on less-desirable factors
- ✓ Selecting accessories for each room that capture the buyer's interest

Selling the Property to All Five Senses

Staging professionals understand how to connect the buyer to the seller's property and engage the senses using special selling techniques. When a professional stages a house, he prepares it to appeal to all five of the buyers' senses by

- ✓ Clearing away clutter and positioning the furnishings and artwork to draw the buyer toward a view or a focal point in the room
- ✓ Opening the windows and letting in fresh air
- ✓ Making sure the banister is clean and smooth
- ✓ Playing pleasant music in the background during showings or an open house
- ✓ Having tasty treats available for buyers to munch on while they tour your house

Saving You and Your Agent Time and Money

Too many people think of staging as a process that costs money. Consider the money you spend to ready a property for sale a necessary investment.

Hiring a staging professional saves you money by

- ✓ Connecting you to services at preferred pricing
- ✓ Maximizing the return on your investment by ensuring that your house is ready to appeal to buyers
- ✓ Minimizing the time your house spends on the market by showcasing the house to appeal to the broadest range of buyers
- ✓ Making decisions quickly and knowing where to source what you need to sell a space, a view, a focal point, and so on

Because a professional stager keeps you on track doing your homework, your agent can spend more time finding buyers for your house.

Stagers Play the Bad Guy So Agents Don't Have To

Because we work with real estate professionals, we know how tough it is to tell a seller that his house smells like wet dog. Worse yet, agents risk losing the listing when they share this news.

Enter professional stagers. We're trained to communicate with the seller to explain the *why* behind what we're doing so they won't be offended. The work we do is sometime hampered by less-than-willing home sellers who just can't see the value in the staging process until they experience it. But after a stager takes a room from ho-hum to wow, sellers see their belongings showcased in a new light and understand the value of working with a professional.

Highlighting Your House with Great Photographs

Properties are sold on the Internet: Most buyers search for properties online before making the effort to check out a house in person, so showing your house to its best advantage through photos is essential. Staging professionals are taught how important really great photographs are to securing a sale and how to take them. They provide photos to the agent or seller so a great first impression can be made on the Internet, sales flyers, and feature sheets.

Selling Your Property Faster

The talents of a professional amplify the features and benefits of the property so it sells faster and for more money than it would if it weren't staged. Many individual staging professionals can provide you with statistics of their own work, and those statistics speak well of the benefits of staging. For example, California broker Joy Valentine evaluated 2,776 properties and found that those that had been staged sold in less than 13.8 days; unstaged properties averaged 30.9 days. The most eye-popping result: Staged houses netted on average 6.4 percent over list price.

Relying on the Stager's Toolkit

Staging professionals bring an arsenal of tools, products (see Chapter 24), and services you and your agent can use to expose the property to more interested buyers. These unique marketing tools are designed to complement and support the agent's marketing plan for the property and include

- ✓ Specialized music to use at open houses and during showings.
- ✓ Sign riders (specially made signs that sit on top of or hang below the For Sale sign) that let buyers know the property has been staged.

Staging encourages agents to bring more buyers to your property because they know it will show well. The sign rider also brings you curious buyers who might have passed by it otherwise.

- ✓ Web site prominence where staged listings are cross-linked with agent and broker sites.
- ✓ DVDs that help sellers and agents to better understand the market, and a host of other tools.

Chapter 24

Ten Tricks of the Trade That Help You Sell Your House

In This Chapter

- ▶ Creating ambiance and fresh air
 - ▶ Moving furniture effortlessly
 - ▶ Repairing nail holes in one step
 - ▶ Using the right tools for picture-hanging
-

Staging is a hands-on profession. We just love rolling our fully-equipped tool boxes to a job, knowing that we have everything we need to help us work efficiently and without hurting ourselves or the house. In this chapter, we tell you about our favorite tools and techniques so that prepping a house for sale is as pleasant as possible.

Bringing Fresh Air In

The best scent in a house is clean, fresh air, so opening windows whenever and wherever possible is very important for creating a pleasant ambiance in the house.

Letting fresh air in is especially important in winter when we tend to keep windows closed because of the cold. Opening windows, even a little at the front and back of the house so air can travel through the rooms to replenish any stale air, helps most houses feel fresh and clean.

Running a Fresh Air Machine

Clean, fresh air gets complicated during the allergy season and even more so when you throw into the equation allergies to dust, mold, pet dander, and mildew. Potpourri, chemical plug-ins, or spray fragrances not only exacerbate

the allergy problem but send a subliminal message to buyers that you're trying to cover up something more objectionable, like cat urine or mildew.

You can rent or buy a Fresh Air machine that completely changes the air in a house in 24 hours. The EcoQuest Fresh Air Machine is the best machine we've found. It cleans and sanitizes the air, removing dust, mold, pollens, and allergens. It eliminates odors caused by smoke, food, or just plain living, and it's safe and effective enough to run while sellers are home or away.

Choosing Eco-Friendly Cleaning Products

Across borders and even households, you find various interpretations of what clean means. When you're selling a house clean *always* means spotless, sparkling, and meticulous in every detail — cleaner than the house has ever been. But you don't want the house to smell like pine cleaner. What to do? Go green.

Going green (using environmentally safe products) not only saves you money, it keeps you healthier and helps save the planet, too. Incorporate green cleaning products into your house preparation. For products that work for everyone in the family including pets, look at the myriad suppliers in your local grocery store, health food store, or check out www.shoppureessentials.com, www.pureessentials.ca, www.simplegreen.com, or www.soapfactory.com.

Hanging Art with Heavy Duty Wall Hangers

Heavy duty wall hangers are clever hooks (they look like big fishing hooks) for hanging art and mirrors. They make a very small hole in the drywall, and the best part is that they hold up to 150 pounds. They're quick to install, easy to use, incredibly strong, and reusable. You don't need tools to use them; just push the heavy-gauge wire through the drywall until all you see is the hook end, and then hang your picture — no need for molly bolts or wall anchors.

You can find them at www.stagingmall.com or your local home improvement center.

Professional Art Hanging with a Level and Hanging Tool

We hang a lot of picture groupings both vertically and horizontally. Getting everything to be level is tricky and time-consuming when you're hanging a group of pictures. Things got a lot easier when we discovered Hang and Level. This brilliant tool marks exactly where the nail or hook goes, making it quick and easy to hang any picture or group of pictures. You can find them in your local home improvement center or hardware store for around \$25.

Saving Your Walls with Wall Respecters

The Wall Respector is a reusable picture or décor hanger designed to be used on drywall surfaces and guaranteed to support up to 20 pounds. It consists of a plastic gadget that looks like a coat hook and is held onto the wall with straight pins. Wall Respecters are perfect for freshly painted walls or new construction because they leave only a pinhole.

Adding a Citrus Scent

The most natural way to enhance clean air is to use fresh lemons, limes, or oranges in a bowl. They add color and naturally emit a fresh clean fragrance — to a kitchen and dining room.

Don't get too crazy with the fruit, though. It's not a good idea in your bathroom, for example, and just one bowl per kitchen or dining room is plenty.

Saving Your Back with Furniture Sliders

Every time we put these babies under a piece of heavy furniture and move it effortlessly we thank the inventor of these products. If you need help moving heavy furniture, furniture sliders are your solution. Just put one slider under each table or sofa leg and push. These clever movers make moving even the heaviest furniture easy. (One exception is moving a piano; leave that to the piano-moving pros.) The hard sliders work great on carpet and tile flooring. The felt sliders work great on hard-surface flooring. Look for EZ Moves or Move-Alls at your local home improvement store.

Filling Cracks and Holes Easily

Have you noticed when you take down a picture that there may be other holes behind it — even bigger and uglier holes? Then you trudge down to the garage and get the plastic can of spackle and open it just to find it's hardened into a rock? Here's a great solution to this problem and we carry it in the top of the tool box. Erase-A-Hole (www.erase-a-hole.com) looks like a stick of deodorant and is a breeze to use. You don't need a spackling knife; the clever dispenser helps you fill the hole and level the spackle on the wall at the same time. It works to fill cracks and holes on drywall, wood, or stucco, and as soon as it's dry you're ready to paint. Erase-A-Hole won't shrink, is non-toxic, and cleans up with water.

Misting Naturalaire Home Cleansing Spray

We know human nature sometimes overrides common-sense practical advice; Christine found that even though she recommended to sellers that they not put synthetic air fresheners into the house, many people just couldn't stop themselves.

Fortunately, certain essential oils (oil extracted from plants and herbs) stimulate personal well-being with their pleasant scents. Christine worked with an expert to create a unique blend suitable for use when selling a house. CSP Natural Aire is not an odor eliminator; it just has a clean, fresh scent. The fragrance is not heavy, and it disperses in the air using a very fine hand-pump mister. Blended with distilled water, the essential oils create a fragrance that refreshes any room with a special blend of bergamot, lemongrass, sage, and sweet orange. You can find them at www.stagingmall.com.

Chapter 25

Ten Ways to Prepare Your House (And Yourself) for the Sale

In This Chapter

- ▶ Getting ready to let go
 - ▶ Finding and fixing trouble spots
 - ▶ Adding polish — literally and figuratively
-

Into every move some inconvenience inevitably falls. Who are we kidding? *Inconvenience?* Moving turns your life upside down. We hear from almost every home seller during the staging process that getting a house into sale-ready shape is a lot of work. After that work is done, we hear sellers say, “This doesn’t seem like my house any more,” and “Now that everything’s done, are we allowed to take showers?”

Moving is inconvenient, and the sooner you recognize this and get busy readying your home for sale, the sooner you can move on to your new life in your new home. This chapter shows you how to do just that.

Emotionally Disconnect from the House

If you want to sell your house we suggest you emotionally disconnect from it. This is the first and most important task to put on your “to do” list.



You may have put loving care into every inch of your house, but potential buyers just don’t care. You want buyers to make an emotional connection to the house, to envision their own furniture in place, so they can start creating their own memories in the space.

To start disconnecting from the house, take out those items that make your house a home. To do this, we often recommend color changes to your rooms or storing the Beanie Babies and Grandma’s heirloom tea cup collection. When these things are out of sight, you give buyers a chance to make the all-important

emotional connection to your house. It's not that we don't like those things; it's that we want potential buyers to focus on the house, the bones, the architecture, the beautiful flooring or the updated kitchen — not your stuff. As difficult as it may be, depersonalizing and emotionally disconnecting gets your house sold faster and for more money.

Make Room for the Buyer's Vision

Start by removing personal photos, posters, or artwork. Pack away religious pictures, artifacts, dishes, and statues.



When in doubt, take it out. If, for example, you have a nude painting or sculpture in the master bath — even one that's tasteful — take it down so you don't risk alienating potential buyers who find it objectionable.

Pack Up and Store Half of Your Stuff

Equity gets eaten up daily by piles of clutter. Our recommendation? Pack, store, sell, or donate anything smaller than your fist. You're going to have to weed out your stuff before you move anyway, so why not start on this task as soon as you decide you're going to list the house? Doing so enables you to spread out the packing so it's not so overwhelming right before the move.

Hang onto the stuff you're going to want in your next house by renting a storage unit or portable pod. You can have a clean, dry, portable container delivered right to your driveway. These containers are available in several sizes, and some of them even have skylights so you can see well during the daytime when you're packing. After the pod is full, you just call and have it picked up. The container people store it safe and sound and then deliver it to your new home when you're ready to move in.



Pack and safely store any gun or knife collections, including your kitchen knives. You never know who may attend an open house or will want to see a property. Removing these items is a must for keeping yourself and real estate professionals safe.

Organize Closets, Cupboards, and Drawers

The closer a buyer gets to making an offer, the closer they look at the house — and that means that your closets, drawers, and cupboards are open for

inspection. Because adequate storage is tops on the list of what buyers look for in a new home, your closets need to look organized and things need to be off the floor. (Find more closet staging know-how in Chapter 17.)

Refresh the Exterior

You want the house to look as fresh and new as possible so buyers are motivated to see what's inside. Either power wash or paint the exterior. Chapter 10 tells you more about maximizing curb appeal.

Inspect Your House Before the Buyer Does

Most houses go through a rigorous home inspection before the sale closing, so be proactive: Have your house inspected before you list it. Sure, the buyer will want to have his own inspection, but that doesn't preclude you from getting one. You're better off addressing the things the inspector uncovers and recommends before you negotiate with a buyer. Waiting for the buyer's inspection gives the buyer an opening for reducing his offer or making the offer conditional upon your making his inspector's changes.

One more thing: The halo effect happens in home inspections, too. When your home inspection starts out strong, the inspector gets a subliminal message that the rest of the house has been maintained, as well.

Invite the Buyer In

Has anyone said they'll "leave the front porch light on for you"? Doesn't it make you feel invited in, welcome, and cared about? Buyers want to feel the same way.

Do whatever you can to make sure your front door sends a welcoming message. Chapter 10 tells you how to make your entrance and exterior look inviting.

Buy New House Numbers

You're inviting trouble if your house number isn't clear and easy to see. Imagine buyers who see the house on the Internet and are excited enough for

a drive-by viewing but then can't see your house numbers. They may drive right on to the next house on their list.

If the house numbers are faded or outdated, buy and install new ones so buyers can see them from the curb, and be sure the porch light illuminates them well. Get in your car and drive by your house at night to make sure your house numbers are easy to see.

Make Every Surface Shine

Buyers want to close the sale on Friday, move and unpack on Saturday, meet the neighbors on Sunday, and then go to work and get the kids off to school on Monday. The more move-in ready you make the house, the faster and easier it will be to sell. Kitchens must sparkle, and bathrooms must look like they've never been used. Scrub every inch of the house from ceiling fans to baseboards, and don't forget mirrors and floors. Take a broom, mop, dust rag, or scrub brush to every last surface.



Buy some new, never-used thick towels to display only for open houses and showings. When you move, take them with you to use in your new home.

Seek Professional Showcasing Help

In this book, we share our professional advice on how to get more equity out of your house when you're ready to sell it, telling you about hundreds of techniques and products that will help get your house sold faster and preserve your well-earned equity.

Showcasing the house — the part of staging that you see on TV where professional stagers relocate furniture, hang art, and adjust lighting — is both a science and an art. Professional stagers are sensitive to the seller's budget and have become very resourceful in getting the selling message across to the buyers creatively. What we hear from sellers and agents alike after showcasing a house is, "I never would have thought of that."

Showcasing is a very important component in prepping the house for sale and also the most physically exhausting. It can take two people with excellent skills up to two hours to showcase one room; multiply that by the number of rooms you have and the workload selling your house brings. Sellers in many cases become too overwhelmed to complete the process. Showcasing is crucial to selling success, so if you doubt your abilities, lose interest, or just don't have the time, hire someone to help you.

Chapter 26

Ten Reasons Sellers Don't Stage Their Properties (But Should)

In This Chapter

- ▶ Fighting misguided notions about home staging
 - ▶ Bringing in the biggest bucks when selling your house
 - ▶ Cutting down on the time between listing and sale
-

A business owner and very good friend of Jan's lives by the "Five P Principle" — "Prior planning prevents poor performance." Never is the principle more apt than when you're selling a property, so we came up with our own version — "Prior planning prevents property price reduction."

In this chapter, we shine light on the most common objections home sellers give for not staging their properties. If any of these thoughts have come to your mind, we hope you remember our five P's (and, technically, one *R*).

We Don't Have Time for Home Staging

If you have time to sell your house, you have time to stage it for sale.

Don't undervalue the staging process unless you are prepared to accept less than your property is worth. Statistics show unstaged properties usually realize a lower return on investment than properties that have had a big dose of TLC before they made it onto market. A ton of statistics support this claim, and so do real estate agents, who point out that homeowners who stage are more likely to get back the money that they put into staging their house — and more.

No one can guarantee your result, but we can tell you this with complete confidence: Fail to stage your home, and you're less likely to get the price you're asking, and your house might end up staying on the market longer than you want. Better not to gamble with your equity.

Location and Price Will Do the Work

Why settle for less than you expect? Even if you have a great location and a good price, a house that's in lousy condition might languish on the market, convincing you to give up and sell for much less than your asking price.



Improve the condition of the house before you list it, and you can greatly impact the selling price. Take the time to invest in your equity and realize the highest return by staging the property before it hits the market.

I Get Compliments on My Home All the Time, So I Don't Need to Stage It

You're not selling to your friends and family. Staging a home for living and staging property for sale are two entirely different situations.

When you put your property on the market, you have to appeal to a wide audience in order to capture the interest of the one buyer who wants your house. Doing so involves totally unemotional, objective scrutiny. When we stage a property for selling, family photos, heirlooms, and personal belongings are the first things we pack up. Then we style the house to seduce the buyer.



Like it or not, selling your house isn't about you, your taste, or your decorating style. It's about what the buyer wants.

My Neighbor's House Sold Without Staging

Good for your neighbors! What you don't know is whether they made as much money on it as they could have. Why gamble with the equity in your house? You know the staging process is proven, and the results speak for themselves. A property that has been properly staged leaves a lasting impression and stimulates multiple offers.

My Agent Said I Don't Need to Stage My House to Sell It

We could say you don't need an agent to sell your property, either, but we won't; we do believe real estate professionals provide valuable guidance and help you avoid pitfalls in the house-selling process. We also believe an agent benefits you by hitting the widest audience in an effort to secure the one person who will love your property the way you do.

If you hear comments like this from your agent, know that they generally come from a lack of education about staging and from a lack of understanding about how staging impacts or fits into the real estate process. In our opinion, any agent or broker who gives this advice is not honoring his or her fiduciary responsibility to you, the seller. Staging will help secure more equity, so insist on the staging process before your agent starts marketing your house.

The key to understanding where the staging process fits is recognizing that staging is not about smoke and mirrors. It's about selling the features and benefits of living in the house.

Why should someone buy your property over another? Property staging has breached the last bastion of real estate marketing. It's one of the last industries to stop expecting top dollar from a product sold "as is." Marketing a property in its best light is now recognized as crucial to securing the most equity in the shortest amount of time.

Will your house sell without staging? Maybe. Will it sell at the price you want? Not as likely. Think about first impressions: a blind date, a job interview, a test-drive of a car. Each situation requires spit and polish. Staging helps you put your best foot forward. So unless you want to sell your property "as is," staging is now a vital part of the selling process.

If It's Good Enough for Me, It's Good Enough for Anyone

A statement like this is just an excuse, and it's convincing only if you really don't care how much money you make — or don't make — on the sale of your property.



While you were living comfortably in your home over the past few years, the way real estate gets sold has changed. The housing market is flooded with both new and existing houses, and so people have more choices. Buyers are more educated about what's acceptable and have busier lives than they have ever had before. Buyers are making a short list of houses to see from what they find on the Internet. Staging before marketing helps get your house on that short list. Buying a house that needs money poured into it is alluring to a buyer if the price is low. In short: If you can't be bothered to fix or change things, neither can the buyer.

Staging Is Just De-Cluttering and Cleaning, and I've Done That

Most certainly staging involves de-cluttering and cleaning — and this kind of straightforward sale preparation makes a huge difference but isn't the whole picture.

Your house is competing with others that have been fully staged, and in order to make a sale at a price you're happy with, you need to make sure your house looks the same as or better than its competition.

Full staging includes cleaning, repairing, reducing and refreshing, correct application of color, professionally placed furnishings, lighting, props, and art — all focused and targeted to the buyer most likely to purchase the property. It's just like the dress rehearsal for the biggest Hollywood production you can think of, only in this case you get to take home the box office receipts.

Homes Have Been Selling for Years Without Staging. Why Now?

You're so right. Houses sold without title insurance and home inspections, too, but times have changed. Interest rates have been low, and savvy consumers are watching decorating and real estate TV shows; these things are making the home-selling process more competitive, hence the emergence of and need for staging.

Today's buyers don't want to inherit your "honey do" list; they want to move in on Saturday and be happy living in the house by Sunday.

I Can't Afford It

Can you really afford not to? Hanging on to the money you'd spend to stage is a shortsighted savings. You most certainly want to get all that you can with the sale of your property and can't afford to leave money sitting on the closing table.

Before you say no to staging, consider whether you can afford to pay additional mortgage payments, property taxes, and household expenses while your house sits waiting for a buyer who can see past your life. You want to secure the most money on the sale of your home and to sell it in the shortest amount of time.

The longer a house sits on the market, the lower its sale price goes, according to numbers compiled by the National Association of Realtors. You have many options for securing the money you need to get the house ready to go on the market. Borrow the money from a friend, neighbor, or relative. Secure a home equity loan, use a credit card, have a garage sale, sell something on eBay. The world is full of money; you just have to find some. Where there's a will, there's a way.

It's a Hot Market — The House Will Sell Without Staging

Depending on where you live, you may not have heard this one in a while, but one thing we know is that what went down will come up. In case the market has turned around by the time you're reading this, we share what we know about a hot market.

A common cry from agents and brokers during a hot market is, "we don't have enough houses to sell, and the house will sell regardless of condition." It *will* sell but at what price? If you don't mind gambling with your equity, then go ahead and sell without staging. However, if you're a savvy investor and want to realize the most equity from the sale of the property, then stage it before it hits the market.

Staged properties bring exceptional return on investment. When the market is slower or softer, properties need staging even more to generate interested buyers. Staging your property gives a competitive edge regardless of market condition. Your property stands out from the crowd of properties that aren't staged. You might not be staging your property, but someone else who's competing for the same buyer is.

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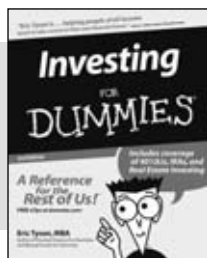
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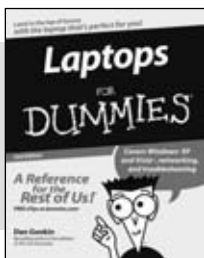
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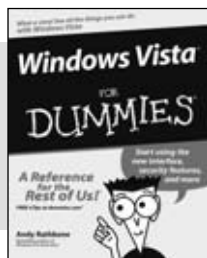
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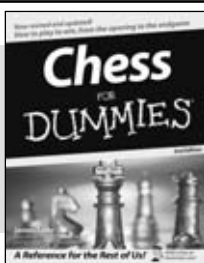
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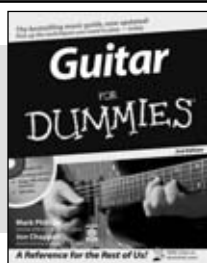
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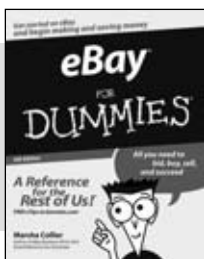
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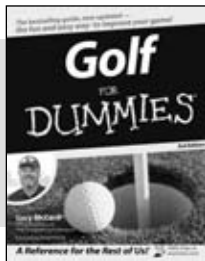
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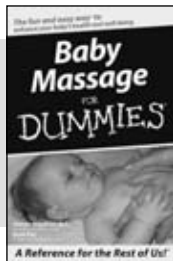
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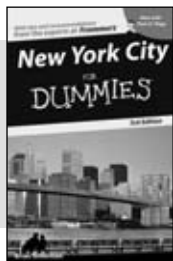
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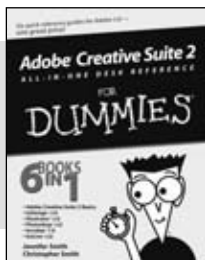
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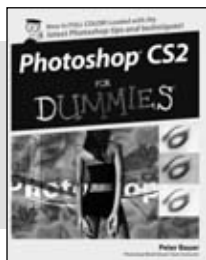
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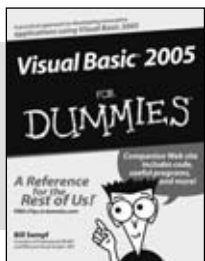
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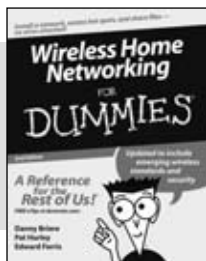
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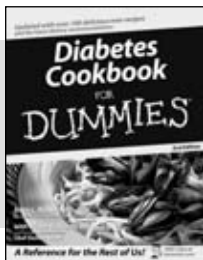
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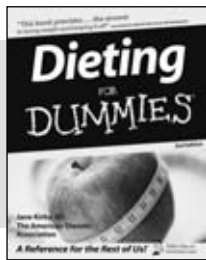
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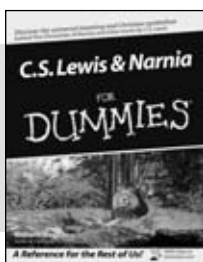
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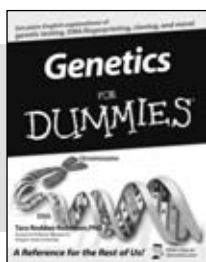
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