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## Does 'staging' a house help sell it faster?

By Riddhi Trivedi-St. Clair

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

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January 11, 2008 -- Joyce Kluge, left, and owner of Home Staging Innovation, Sue Rector, right, go over last minute details on how to arrange dinnerware in a home that is for sale in Ballwin, MO., on Jan. 11, 2008.

(Jason Fritz/P-D)

Staging is different from interior decorating, says Sue Rector, the owner of Lake Saint Louis-based Home Staging Innovations and Lenac's stager.

"Decorating is personalizing, staging is de-personalizing," Rector said. "The three main principles of staging are clean, de-clutter and (add) color."

Staging has been used in markets like Florida, California and Arizona for many years but only now is starting to pick up in the St. Louis area. The change may be linked to the region's slowing housing market, some stagers say.

In a slow market, sellers need fresh tactics and creative thinking to help set their house or condo apart from the others on the market and to help it sell, said Linda Rohlfing, owner of Sedona Interiors and Home Staging in St. Charles County.

"Marketing and advertising will attract people to your house, but staging will present it in the best possible light and help it sell," she said. "It is much better to spend a few dollars on staging than having to take price reductions."

So, does staging work?

The 17 houses Rector staged in the last year sold in an average of 39 days for more than 98 percent of the original asking price, she said.

According to the St. Louis Association of Realtors, the typical house was on the market for an average of 82 days and the sellers got an average of 96.5 percent of their asking price.

Kurt Selzle, a Realtor with Coldwell Banker Gundaker in Town and Country, agreed that staged houses attract more buyers. Fifteen to 20 of the roughly 100 houses he listed last year were professionally staged, Selzle said.

"The staged homes definitely sold faster," he said.

Lenac said that of the eight houses for sale on his street — two of them within a few doors of his condo — his was the only one that sold. He originally had listed the house for \$204,000 and sold it for \$199,000 in less than 60 days. Lenac attributes his success to using a stager. "By the time I moved in July, two of the others had removed their 'For Sale' signs, and the others were still on the market," he said.

Rector did a walk-through of Lenac's house and gave him an exhaustive list of what he needed to do in the house to prepare it for sale.

"It was like an A-to-Z list," Lenac said. "I had wanted my place to look like a model house, so that it gave people the sense of being new even though it was four years old."

Lenac said he implemented all of Rector's suggestions, and he met his goals.

Last May, Bob Lenac decided to put his two-level, 2,000-square-foot condo in O'Fallon, Mo., on the market.

With a slow housing market and eight other houses for sale on his street, Lenac doubted his house would sell quickly. When one of the Realtors he interviewed offered a home-staging consultation as part of the sales package, Lenac jumped at the chance.

Lenac had heard about staging from his ex-wife and decided it might be worth trying. Staging is the process of preparing a house to create the most appeal for prospective buyers. The concept is old. What's relatively new is that sellers are paying for staging advice, giving rise to a growing industry.

And with today's relatively weak housing market, more buyers — and Realtors — are turning to staging in an effort to speed the process.

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The key to successfully staging a house, professionals say, is to make the house look livable, but not lived in.

"People decorate for themselves, not for prospective buyers," said Caron Butler, owner of Roomartist, a staging service based in St. Charles County. "The goal of staging is to make buyers feel like they can live in that house, that it can be their home."

The prospective buyer should fall in love with the space rather than the stuff occupying it, Rector said.

If a room is too personal and prospective buyers are unable to visualize their belongings in the house, they won't buy it, said Jane Nuckolls, a partner in St. Louis-based R.E. Design.

"People design their homes based on emotion," Nuckolls said. "So they are often too close to it and cannot take an objective assessment of what needs to be done."

A stager can provide an unbiased perspective, Rector said, although sellers don't always like all the suggestions.

"One of the first projects I did was my daughter's home, and when I went in and started changing and de-cluttering, she got mad at me," Rector said. "She thought I didn't like the way she decorated."

Lenac knows the feeling. He is very proud of his family, so he was disappointed and hurt when Rector asked him to remove the photographs of his grandchildren and family from the walls. But Lenac acknowledges that the house looked a lot more salable after he implemented Rector's suggestions.

At a staging consultation — like the one Rector did for Lenac — the stager provides a list of do-it-yourself suggestions. Stagers also can come in and actually do the staging for the homeowner, said Rohlfing, of Sedona Interiors and Home Staging.

Rohlfing said when she does a staging, she visualizes how the space can best be presented and then implements a plan that can range from reorganizing furniture and adding a few accessories and splashes of color to bringing in all-new furniture from her inventory.

The price tag for staging a house can range from \$50 to \$100 for a consultation to a few thousand dollars or more if the stager brings in all-new furniture and accessories.

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