



Secrets of the home show

*You spent years making your home
yours, but now it's time to sell.
It may be heartbreaking, but it's
best to gut it of all personal items*

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If you are about to sell your house in today's cooling market, you might want to look at "staging," a method of preparing your home for sale to make the best impression on potential purchasers.

It not only can sell your home, but also can help you get you up to 20% more for your property.

So you won't mind that it involves cleaning and decluttering and tidying and organizing — whew, I'm exhausted already. But that elbow grease can potentially translate into thousands of dollars.

"Staging is done strictly to sell the house," says Kelly Ralph, of Creative Touch Interiors. An accredited staging professional, Ms. Ralph tells me staging is important "because the way you sell your house and the way you live in it are two separate things."

"And unlike decorating," she adds, "staging costs a fraction of the price. You're not spending hours with the client picking out fabrics, you're really just redesigning."

Christine Rae, Canada's regional director for stagedhomes.com, and owner of decoratingsolutions.ca, puts it this way: "Decorating is personalizing a home, usually you have a budget to work with, and you add things to the home. Staging is just the opposite — you're taking things away, depersonalizing, so a buyer can see the space. It's about selling the space, not decorating it."

Staging a 2,400-square-foot home would take, on average, five hours, and at a rate of about \$75 an hour, would cost the homeowner some \$375. "A bargain," Ms. Ralph insists.

If extra furniture is needed, Ms. Ralph goes to Executive Furniture Rentals in Toronto at an extra cost to the homeowner.

Mark Miller, president of Executive, tells me "we're often called upon to furnish empty houses because empty houses do not sell." But he cautions, "when you go into a gorgeous designer home, you must remember that the furniture doesn't come with it."

Mr. Miller himself learned that the hard way. "I bought a house once that was beautifully furnished. I didn't consider that the furniture didn't come with it," he admits. "I spent years trying to recreate the look, and couldn't do it

without the expense of a designer and expensive furniture."

Mr. Miller says his company rents "realistic furniture, the kind that most people use in their own home."

Says Executive's stager, Heather Clouston: "We're here to give a perspective of space and a warm welcome, so a purchaser will think, 'I'd like to live here.'"

She adds, "Staging makes it easier for the buyer to picture himself living in the home."

But what exactly does a stager do?

"Tackles the three deadly sins of sellers," Ms. Ralph tells me. These are:

Too many personal items In my case, it's too many pictures displayed on my desk.

"It's more important for the purchaser to look at your beautiful corners, mouldings, plantation shutters and wood floors," Ms. Ralph says.

I point out that one of the pictures displayed is of me and Bill Clinton.

If you're selling, Ms. Ralph tells me, Bubba will have to go — not to mention my photos of Mom, Dad, my kids, Boots the cat, etc., etc. You get the picture.

"To live in a house is one thing, to sell it is another," Ms. Ralph says. "Remember, you're trying to sell the house. You're not trying to sell yourself."

All books and magazines also have to go. "Empty your bookshelves," she advises. "I was in a listed house on the weekend that had a *Playboy* magazine in the bathroom." A definite no-no.

And Ms. Ralph warns that potential purchasers always look in the medicine cabinet. "Do you really think people want to see what kind of tampons you use?"

Religious items should also be put away.

"One house had religious music go off periodically," Ms. Ralph says. Hired to stage the house, she gently told the owners to stop the music. "They weren't insulted," she insists, "and their house sold quickly."

Another vendor had a son who was a priest. "There were crosses all over the place, and holy water. Enough to frighten most purchasers," Ms. Ralph says with a laugh.

Clutter "Most clutter can be packed away," Ms. Ralph says. "Don't showcase your beautiful collection of china dolls."

All clothes must be put away. "And neatly," Ms. Ralph says, "because people will check the closets."

If there isn't enough room in the drawers and cupboards, the answer is to

store it all short-term, Ms. Ralph says.

(All Canadian Self Storage is an example of a local provider, they will come to your home and take your boxes away. "Whatever you do, don't leave the boxes lying around. Homes with too much stuff don't sell," Ms. Ralph says.)

In the kitchen, make sure your dishes are done. "You wouldn't believe how many people don't do this," Ms. Ralph tells me. "The idea is for the purchasers to see that there is room for them to move in."

Cleanliness "Cleanliness sells," Ms. Ralph says. "If you can smell it, you can't sell it. Get rid of the dog, cat, bird, whatever, and all signs of it, for resale. If you're having an open house, take the animal with you, and get rid of the litter box." According to Ms. Ralph, nobody wants to move into a house where an animal lived, even if they're animal lovers themselves.

"And if you're a smoker, get rid of the smell," she says. "And don't forget the evidence. Ashtrays — get rid of them."

Cooking odours are another faux pas.

"I recommend the carpet be cleaned," Ms. Ralph says. "That will help get rid of cooking odours. In some cases, I've recommended that the owners watch what they're cooking for a while, and stay away from foods with lingering odours."

She also suggests confining your workspace to one area and making the beds.

"And don't forget curb appeal," Ms. Ralph says. "The first impression is vital. If they don't like it outside, you won't get them inside."

"But why would I need a stager, when I can do it myself," I ask.

"Because as a stager, I have no emotional attachment to your home," Ms. Ralph says, "so I'm able to see it from the purchaser's perspective."

"People think when you're staging, you're pulling the wool over their eyes. But that's not so. A staged home is a clean home that looks great and is screaming, 'I'm ready for you to move in.'"

Adds Ms. Rae: "Staging has other benefits as well. Sellers often say how cathartic it is for them. By staging and removing things, they make the emotional cut that they can't do when they're living in the home."

"Often the owner comes home after the staging and says, 'This is not my home anymore.' They are now ready to sell. It can help them get a good start to move on."

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