

Getting homes dressed to sell

Stagers help put best face on slow-moving houses

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DeDe Weinberg, sales manager for Golf Ridge Villa Homes, inspects the living room of a home after it was staged. Stagers are helping sell houses in the subdivision.

Nicole and Darius Joshi of Northville Township wanted their home to sell fast, but they were busy working and raising three children. So they turned to a home stager, who rearranged furniture and added flowers and rugs to make their home more appealing to prospective buyers.

Within weeks their home sold.

The couple is part of a growing group of sellers turning to home stagers to combat a sluggish real estate market. Professional stagers curb clutter, rearrange furniture and perform minor makeovers aimed at boosting sales prices and shaving the time it takes to sell properties.

"With the economy and the market the way it is and with so many more houses than there are buyers, (staging) gave it that extra punch," said Nicole Joshi. "If we hadn't staged it, the house would have been sitting on the market longer."

Staging is more commonplace on the West Coast, but membership is growing this year in a local group of certified staging professionals. About a quarter of homes nationwide were sold last year after being staged by a professional -- up from 10 percent five years ago, according to the International Association of Home Staging Professionals.

The trend toward staging has been fueled, in part, by the proliferation of home improvement television shows and the challenge facing sellers seeking to distinguish their houses in a crowded market.

Stagers are stitching together a mini-economy, fueled by furniture rental companies, Realtors, builders, brokers and homeowners, said Gary Reggish, a broker with Remerica United Realty of Novi and president-elect of the Western Wayne Oakland County Association of Realtors.

The average charge for a consultation is \$100 to \$300, which pays for a stager to take photos of rooms and compile a report that lists suggested improvements. Costs rise -- \$5,000 and up for staging multiple rooms and renting furniture for a couple of months -- depending on the number of projects undertaken.

"You have about three to five seconds to grab them, and it's critical because buyers right now don't want to do a lot of (home improvement) work because they don't have to," said Deborah Chene, owner of Staging Impressions in Farmington Hills.

Homes staged before being listed sold for almost 6 percent more than homes that were listed, staged and then sold, according to a study by stagedhomes.com.

But not everyone sees staging as the savior of the real estate sales market. Home staging, even when combined with low mortgage rates, is not enough to tilt the balance of power to sellers, considering the number of available homes, one Realtor said.

"I would say the buyer is still very much in the driver's seat right now," said Realtor Patrick Carolan of Coldwell Banker Schweitzer in Troy, who has hired stagers for several years.

Several stagers have noticed a growing willingness among sellers to spend money preparing their home for a sale. The investment, which can range from \$86 to paint a room to more than \$1,000 to rent and stage furniture -- is minuscule compared to the potential drop in a home's asking price after lingering unsold on the market, stagers say.

"You can't afford not to invest. If you don't, your house is going to sit on the market," Chene said.

It takes an average of 124 days to sell a house in Metro Detroit -- 16 days longer than last year, according to Realcomp of Farmington Hills, a multiple listing service.

Nicole Joshi hired Chene a few months ago. The occupational therapist and her husband, Darius, a physician, reached a settlement agreement in early April -- a rare quick sale that Nicole Joshi attributed to a competitively priced home and Chene's work.

Builders have been hiring stagers for years, but more individual homeowners have been hiring them in the past six to 12 months, Reggish said. "Everybody knew about staging, but didn't necessarily utilize it," he said.

Builder Tony Scappaticci started using stagers about a year ago. Recently, Chene and Carolyn Stieger, president of the Great Lakes chapter of the International Association of Home Staging Professionals, arranged furniture and added accessories to emphasize the interior space of one of Scappaticci's empty new houses in Golf Ridge Villa Homes in Livonia.

The builder is spending \$5,000 to stage three homes in the community -- a move he hopes generates sales within two months.

"The potential return is worth the investment," he said.

In a better housing market, sellers could list their homes with unpainted rooms or dingy carpet. No more, Reggish said.

"With more competition, you have one chance to make a first impression," he said.

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