

'Primping' a home pays off

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It may not feel like spring is anywhere in sight in most regions of Canada. But for Rien Sharma and Michael McNamara of Vancouver, there are signs even more certain than the first tender crocus shoots, that a change of seasons is in the air.

The two men are partners in Revamp Homestaging, a Vancouver company that specializes in helping homeowners "primp," "fluff," "style," "prop" or "stage" their houses for re-sale.

So what's the rationale for spending on a property just before selling it? Sale prices that usually soar beyond list, often by as much as five per cent.

A new RBC survey indicates three in 10 Canadians (29 per cent) plan to buy a home in the next two years and 10 per cent of them plan to act in the next six months. At a time when more of these aspiring purchasers preview homes online long before they sally forth with a realtor, the appearance of a home and highlighting it's best features, is imperative.

"Spring is always our busiest season because that's when the real-estate market kicks into an even higher gear," explains Sharma. "Even in a hot market, realtors and vendors are so much more experienced. They want to trigger bidding wars, to get the absolute top price."

Attaining that goal, however, frequently requires a professional outside eye. The No. 1 sin of most vendors, according to home stagers, is clutter.

"You have to think strategically. We walk into a house and identify its strongest, most marketable features, then figure out how to play them up, how to draw attention to the positives," explains Amie Walton of X-stream Staging in Halifax. "You have to remove the hurdles to broad appeal, eliminate the visual distractions."

As part of that "editing" process, stagers work to remove much of an owner's personal imprint on a house.

"There's a psychological process by which you remove the personal so that potential buyers can project their lives into the space," says Connie Williamson of Serenity Redesign in Edmonton. "You don't want people to feel that it's someone else's home, you want them to just see it as an attractive space they could have."

In addition to removing personal items such as family photographs, fridge magnets and religious icons, stagers also tend to level with homeowners about the small things they've probably stopped noticing.

"Someone who lives in a house is never really aware of their own smell and the smell of their pets," observes Sharma. "They also stop noticing dripping taps and burned-out light bulbs -- which are the first things an outsider will notice and question." □ □

He adds it's impossible to underscore how critical a positive emotional reaction is when selling a house.

"Even before they walk through the house, check out the closet space, inspect the wiring, they have an immediate visceral reaction," Sharma says. "In the absence of other information, senses like sight, smell and sound take over. That's what determines if they shut down or have the interest to move to the next, more practical stages of a transaction."

The consensus among home stagers is vacant properties, whether new or old, are the toughest to sell. That's why companies such as Revamp maintain massive warehouses filled with furniture and accessories.

"A property has to convey warmth and love -- it can't have any feeling of abandonment," explains Walton.

"The other key point is that empty spaces seem smaller. It's an issue of perspective because there's no context for the eye, no sense of relative proportion." Notes Sharma, whose company has six vacant, staged properties on its roster, "Few people are able to imagine the size of a queen-size bed in a room -- you have to show them." Furthermore, he says, it's important to establish the feel of a certain lifestyle in a home that's being marketed.

"When people are moving from a rental to a first home or they're moving up to a larger place, they need the illusion of bigger and better," he says. "You have to strike that note -- the smell of fresh-ground coffee, fresh flowers -- those small touches of luxury."

Evoking that sense is particularly important in the highest end of the real-estate market. Bob Rennie of Rennie Marketing Systems, who specializes in selling the most luxurious condominium developments in Canada, even takes pieces from his own contemporary art collection to enhance the appearance of model suites.

"You have to offer memory points, design points, decor that resonates with people, that exudes an aspirational lifestyle," he says.

That includes extreme attention to bathrooms and kitchens, as well as the use of modern Italian furnishings.

The budget for these displays runs from \$40,000 for a single studio to \$120,000 for just one luxury model suite.

While few have that sort of marketing budget at hand, Sharma insists that for \$200 to \$4,000 homeowners can enhance their property's value.

And that's even more heartwarming than any of the other first signs of spring.

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