

Makeover artists

Home stagers are the new fairy godmothers of the real estate industry, helping agents get fast sales with a premium

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Home stagers are coming on to the scene, sometimes taking top billing on the prime marquee of the real estate world -- the For Sale sign. Women, and it does seem to be all women, with an eye for detail and a taste for self-employment are revving up the search engines under "home staging."

Don't confuse home staging with interior decorating. Home stagers always have the buyer in mind, creating scenes using the homeowner's possessions or bringing in new props to help sell a house fast. Interior decorators, on the other hand, work with clients who will live in the house.

You may swoon over your lavender and peach pomegranate wallpaper, but Mr. and Ms. Buyer find unpatterned walls in neutral colours more pleasing to their house-hunting tummies.

"Buyers look for properties that have been staged," says Virginie Proskurniak, an accredited staging professional and vice-president of StagednSold (stagednsold.com). "It's a time thing for buyers who are busy looking at many houses.

"We want to pull the potential buyer into the room."

For the seller, the value of a staged house is tangible. According to the godmother of home staging, Barbara Schwartz, CEO and founder of StagedHomes.co, (www1.stagedhomes.com), a staged house should sell in half the time and for a 6.9-per-cent sales premium.

Home staging, an import from California, has been in Ottawa long enough that sisters, Donna Cole and Judee McCulloch of Room Remedy (www.roomremedy.ca) consider themselves to be Ottawa's pioneers in the craft, having set up a service in the 1990s. In 2003, they earned Accredited Staging Professional designations, Ms. Schwarz' own copyrighted seal of approval.

But not all home stagers opt for accreditation. Sue Jeakins has been running her business, The Lone Arranger, (lonearranger.ca) for about a year, working with real estate agents and house sellers. Ms. Jeakins has a diploma in window dressing and spent a number of years in event decorating.

"It's just me and what I can do," she says about her service, although she does rely on a number of assistants.

Most real estate agents are familiar with the services, but not all see the need to use them. Tom Hare, a sales representative with the Sutton Group, says he wouldn't knock the service, but wouldn't necessarily use it.

He assists his clients on how to best present their house for resale. "It requires common sense and a practical approach," he says, adding agents really need those skills to sell houses.

But sometimes advising a client to rearrange and even get rid of furniture and clutter can become a sore point between listing agent and house seller.

"It can be difficult," Mr. Hare admits.

That sensitive issue is partly why Jan Ayres, a sales representative with Royal LePage, offers home staging as part of her client package service.

Ms. Ayres uses Staged nSold, run by Ms. Proskurniak and Connie Nedergaard, both accredited home stagers and finds everyone benefits.

She believes homeowners will hear suggestions from a home stager more constructively and the result is "the house looks great, the seller feels good about it, and the agent and seller can likely expect a fast sale.

"I can focus on my role of supporting my clients through what can sometimes be an emotional experience," she says.

However, when she brings up the idea, clients are often wary, asking how much it will cost. When they learn it's part of the package she offers clients who sign her as their listing agent, they are more open to the idea.

Ms. Ayres uses StagednSold's "Limited Service" consisting of a two-hour consultation during which a list of suggestions are drawn up, followed by a one-hour consultation to see how much the homeowners accomplished and providing finishing touches if necessary. The fee for that service ranges from \$250 and up.

Once ready, StagednSold will certify the house, earning the right to have the designation on the For Sale sign.

Most home stagers offer different services that depend primarily on the client's time schedule and budget. Home stagers will generally take on as many jobs as they can handle for a price. Rental of furnishings and accessories from their own collections will affect the final fee.

Often, however, the owner's own furnishings, accessories, and labour can be used, reducing the costs.

Ms. McCulloch of Room Remedy says today's house sellers are much more savvy, knowing major decluttering is required. She notes storage locker providers have enjoyed a recent boom in business.

She predicts the day will come when home stagers will be as commonplace in the resale housing market as the home inspector.