

Ready, set, sell your home



by Jennifer Garrett

Castle or cottage, bi-level or bungalow, hacienda or humble abode, a house is more than a foundation with four walls and a roof. It is a retreat, a haven, a home.

That's why selling houses is difficult, according to Mary Jane Brummer, a realtor with Stark in Madison. "Homes are emotional spots," Brummer says. "When it comes time to sell, the house becomes a product for sale. I think a lot of people have a hard time thinking of their home as a product."

Yet selling real estate boils down to a business transaction, and every seller

wants to get the best price in a reasonable amount of time. That's always possible, according to Brummer, as long as the house is priced fairly and ready to show.

Market assessments and a little objectivity can help sellers determine an ask amount, but that's the easy part according to Brummer. Whipping your house into shape takes a lot of elbow grease. "I don't think sellers realize what a job it is," she says.

As special as it is to you, your home is just a "property" to a prospective buyer, simply another MLS number in their price range. Getting people to take a closer look is the very first hurdle. "A lot of people laugh at the term 'curb

appeal,'" Brummer says, "but it's critical."

Jean Armendariz-Kerr, a realtor with First Weber in Madison, agrees. "Somebody's usually going to drive by the house first," she says, but if the exterior is in bad shape "they just keep on driving. Your house might be beautiful on the inside, but people never see it."

Brummer stresses that the key to selling any home is a good first impression on the inside and out. "It's powerful stuff, that first viewing," she says. "Once buyers see the first negative, it's hard for them to look at the positives."

The best way to accentuate the positive is to make sure the house is squeaky clean and clutter-free. Brummer says that a clean and tidy house, more than anything else, will fetch the best price in the least amount of time. Reflective surfaces like windows, appliances and light fixtures should sparkle. Walls should be freshly painted. Carpets should be shampooed.

Preparing for showings is the hardest part according to Mount Horeb's Sue McKay, who recently sold her Barneveld home. McKay says there were times when she'd proudly flaunt her freshly polished home to her realtor. Instead of being impressed, he would point out things she missed. "I would think I had all the cobwebs and he'd find one more."

Brummer and Armendariz-Kerr both recommend topping off the cleaning frenzy with a "sniff test" to clear the air. A house ready for the market will look and smell fresh, but pet odors, cigarette smoke and even some food aromas can get trapped in carpet fibers and furniture. Sellers grow used to the smells and don't even notice them.

An honest friend can tip you off to what your nose won't notice. There are

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good products available to neutralize many household odors, but Brummer warns against trying to cover them up with perfumes, sprays or potpourri. "Right away the red flag goes up and the buyer thinks the seller is trying to hide something."

Chances are, you won't be able to hide anything. Prospective buyers are unlike any guests you've ever had. They will open the refrigerator, peer into the oven, peek under the bed and survey the medicine cabinet. Nothing is off limits.

Even the skeletons in the closet should get a good once-over. Kitchen cabinets, attics and basements, too, need to be organized. "If you don't have the time or desire to do it, hire someone," says Brummer. "It's critical. Buyers will focus on the stuff rather than the space."

Molly Myers of Middleton agrees that the sellers' possessions can distract potential buyers. Myers' company In Home Designs provides interior arrangement, relocation services and real estate staging. She tells clients to remove snapshots from the fridge and family photos from the mantle. Pets, too, should be whisked to a neighbor and children to the zoo. Kitchen and bathrooms countertops should be cleared and closet contents pared down.

She calls the process "editing," and says the goal is to enable the buyers to imagine themselves happy and healthy in the home. That's why things like medicine bottles are removed from view. "They could give the impression that there is sickness in the home, even if it is just vitamins," Myers explains. "It's hugely psychological."

Myers adds that buyers simply have a hard time envisioning the potential of a home. "We all know when we are walking through houses that, yes, we can take down that dated wallpaper," she says, "but if it's going to come down, the seller might as well do it."

It's true, most buyers aren't crazy about red shag carpeting or avocado green appliances, but having an older or well-worn house doesn't mean your home won't sell. All it means, according to Brummer and Armendariz-Kerr, is that the price should reflect the need for remodeling.

In fact, Brummer discourages sellers

from investing a lot in updating. A coat of good quality paint on cabinets can really freshen up a kitchen without much expense. Worn carpeting can be removed to reveal hard wood floors. Buyers know that they might have to forgive differing taste.

They are, however, much less likely to overlook disrepair. Armendariz-Kerr recommends fixing leaks or cracks before selling, but acknowledges that structural problems won't always stand in the way of a sale. "Price can be very forgiving," she says, "but if you want to maximize the amount you get for your house, you want it to appear that you've cared for your house."

If you've cared for your house, Myers says, it will show. But if you'd like a special touch to set your home apart, Myers recommends cheery flowers for the kitchen or a lingering aroma of freshly baked apple pie. She says the little flourishes help buyers feel welcome and comfortable, but warns they won't make up for major shortcomings. "If things are shoddily done, that's going to be discovered. You can't pull the wool over peo-

ple's eyes."

Nor should you need to. "If you're house is ready to go and priced right, it should sell within the first three weeks no problem," says Brummer. "There are a lot of buyers out there."

Jennifer Garrett is a Madison-based freelance writer.



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