One for the Money, Two for the Show!: A Manual to Prepare your Home for Selling

"You never get a second chance at a first impression." We've all heard this expression before. And now, while you are preparing your house to sell, it should not be far from your mind.

While logical factors such as price and location narrow the pool of houses a potential buyer will look at, the ultimate decision to buy a particular house is fuelled by a mixture of logic and emotion. And emotion often wins out. The same might be said for the process of selling a home. For this reason, Real Estate Agents, when they talk to you about buying real estate, will refer to your purchase as a "home." When discussing the sale of your current home, however, an agent will refer to it as the "house." This is a conscious choice. The agent knows that buying a house is often an emotional decision, while, when selling a house, emotion should be separated from the process.

Buyers are searching for a "home"—a place in which they will feel comfortable, secure, and happy, a place in which they can imagine settling down and raising their family. As a seller, your goal is to cultivate these feelings through the property you're selling. Look at your house as a marketable commodity. A buyer's emotional response is triggered early, so you want to ensure you have done everything you can to encourage a positive response to your house from the outset. Within minutes—even seconds—of pulling into your driveway, buyers have formed an impression that they will carry with them through the rest of the showing, and beyond. Keep in mind, this impression will not only influence whether or not they make an offer, but also what they consider to be the value of the property.

If you've ever visited model homes, you're familiar with effective presentation styles. Have you ever walked into one of these homes and immediately begun taking stock, planning how to get your home to look that good? Well, now is the time to take some of these steps. Of course, there are ways to achieve the same effect in your own home without incurring model home costs.

When homes create this immediate type of emotional appeal, they tend to sell quickly—and for more money. Use the following step-by-step guide to get your house into selling shape before you put the property on the market, and you'll be well on your way to a successful sale!

- **Outside the House**

Work your way from the outside in. It is essential that your home possess a certain "drive-up appeal." Remember, a potential buyer's first impression of your house is formed while s/he is still sitting in the REALTORS® car. So, first you need to view your house from this perspective. Go stand on the opposite curb and observe your property. Compare it to surrounding properties. Concentrate on the following four areas:

Landscaping:
How does your landscaping measure up compared to the rest of the neighbourhood? If you guess it would rate below-average, make a few adjustments. You might want to consider buying some bushes and planting them around the property. Do not buy trees, however—mature trees are expensive, so you will not see a return on your investment. And immature trees don't tend to significantly improve the immediate appearance of your home.

If the problem with your yard isn't a case of too little greenery, but rather too much, get out the pruning shears. The purpose of landscaping is to complement the home, not hide it. Overgrown shrubs should be sheared to a height near the bottom of the windows. Remove any ivy clinging to the side of the house. Tree limbs should be high enough that you're able to walk beneath. Trim any branches that bar the way.

Your lawn should be freshly cut and watered, and an even colour. If there are brown spots, make sure you begin to remedy this well in advance of putting the house on the market. You may want to re-sod areas, and you need to make sure these spots are given enough time to grow, so they will match the existing lawn. Also, if you decide to use fertilizer, you'll want to allow enough time for it to take effect. Rake up any leaves or grass cuttings.

Planting a few flowers is an easy way to add colour and vibrancy to your yard, enhancing the first impression of your home. Invest in a full flat of mature, colourful flowers, such as petunias or periwinkles, which last the length of the growing season. Do not buy bulbs or seeds—they won't necessarily grow enough by the time you begin showing to achieve the desired effect. If you don't have an area in which to plant flowers, consider purchasing a few flower pots for your porch and planting flowers or blooming plants.

If you have a pool, keep it sparkling and leaf-free.

House Exterior:
When you view your house from across the street, does it appear weathered or faded? If so, it's probably time to treat it to a fresh coat of paint. This is usually a sound investment; new paint can do wonders to increase a home's perceived value.

Stay away from unusual or loud colours. The new colour should fit in with surrounding houses, and complement the style and structure of your house.

Examine the roof closely. Old or leaking roofs should be replaced. If there are leaks, you'll have to disclose this detail to the home buyer anyway, and they will want it replaced. If there isn't any apparent damage, however, wait for word from the home inspector before making repairs.

The Front Door and Porch:
The front door and surrounding area should look particularly fresh and welcoming, as this will be the buyer's first up-close impression as they enter the house. If you paint nothing else, at least give the door a new coat. Replace the doorbell if it is broken and polish the door fixture until it gleams. Wash the mail box. Keep the porch swept and buy a new plush door mat. All of these little things will contribute to the overall effect of a well cared-for and welcoming home.

Ensure the lock works smoothly and the key fits properly. When a home buyer visits your house, the REALTOR® will open the front door with a key. You don't want the buyers' first experience to be of waiting on the doorstep while the REALTOR® fumbles with the lock.

- **Depersonalize.**

This should be one of your first steps when you begin preparing your house to sell. Over the years, a home inevitably becomes tattooed with the owners' lives, covered with touches that have made it that special place for you. At this point, however, you want buyers to recognize it as a property they could make into *their* unique place. When a home buyer walks into a room and sees these personalizing touches—such as photos on the walls or trophy collections—their ability to picture their own lives in this room is jarred, impairing a positive emotional response. So, your first step will be to remove all the family photos, the trophies, collectible items, and souvenirs. Pack them all together, so you'll have everything you need at your disposal when it comes time to personalize your new home. For the time being, rent a storage space and keep these items there. *Do not* simply transfer these items to another place in your house. *Do not* hoard them away in a closet, basement, attic, or garage, as the next step in

preparing your home is to minimize clutter—and these areas of your house will all be targeted.

- **Remove all clutter.**

The next step on the list is to purge your house of the excess items that have accumulated over the years. This is the hardest part for many people, as they have an emotional investment in many of these things. When you have lived in a house for several years, a build-up of personal effects occurs that is often so gradual that you don't notice the space is becoming cluttered. If you need to, bring in an objective friend to help point out areas that could stand to be cleared. Try to stand back yourself and see your house as a buyer might. Survey shelves, counter tops, drawers, closets, the basement—all places where clutter often accumulates—to determine what needs to go. Use a system to help you decide: get rid of all items, for example, you haven't used in the past five years, and pack up everything that you haven't used in the past year. Although getting rid of some things might be hard, try to do it without conscience or remorse. You'll be forced to go through this process anyway when you move, and with each box you eliminate, your storage space—and the room in general—begins to look larger. We've broken down the process into specific areas of your house to help you concentrate your efforts:

Kitchen:
The kitchen is an ideal place to begin, as it's easy to spot and eliminate the type of clutter that tends to accumulate here. Home buyers will open your drawers and cabinets as they'll want to check if there will be enough room for their own belongings. If the drawers appear cluttered and crowded, this will give them the impression there is not enough space.

- First of all, remove everything from the counters, even the toaster (the toaster can be stored in a cabinet, and brought out when needed).
- Clean out all the cabinets and drawers. Put aside all of the dishes, pots and pans that you rarely use, then box them and put them in the storage unit you have rented (again, *not* in the basement or a closet).
- If you, like many people, have a "junk drawer," clear this out.
- Get rid of the food items in the pantry that you don't use. Begin to use up existing food—let what you have on your shelves dictate your menus from now on.
- Remove all extra cleaning supplies from the shelves beneath the sink. Make sure this area is as empty as possible. You should thoroughly clean this spot as well, and check for any water stains that might indicate

leaking pipes. Buyers will look in most cabinets, and will notice any telltale signs of damage.

Closets:

- Go through all clothes and shoes. If you don't wear something anymore, get rid of it. We all have those clothes, too, that we wear only once in awhile, but can't bear to give away. Box these items and keep them in the storage unit for a few months.
- Go through all other personal items in the closet. Be ruthless. Weed out everything you don't absolutely need.
- Remove any unsightly boxes from the back of the closet. Put them in storage if need be. Get everything off the floor. Closets should look as though they have enough room to hold additional items.

Furniture:

- You may want to tour a few model homes in order to gauge the type of furniture chosen by design teams to create a spacious, yet comfortable atmosphere. Note how that furniture is arranged to cultivate a certain feeling.
- After having armed yourself with some ideas, stand back and look at each of your rooms. What will you need to remove? Remember, most homes contain too much furniture for showings. These are items that you've grown comfortable with and that have become incorporated into your everyday routine. However, each room should offer a sense of spaciousness, so some furniture will likely need to be placed in storage.

Storage Areas:

- Basements, garages, attics, and sheds: these are the "junkyard" areas of any given home. It is possible to arrange simple clutter into a certain order, but junk is sent packing to these often-hidden rooms. First, determine which of these boxes and items you actually need. Can some of it be sent to the dump once and for all?
- Hold a Garage Sale. You've heard the saying, "One person's trash is another's treasure." Let these items go to a better home.
- Transfer some items to the rental storage unit. You'll want to clear the storage areas in your house as much as possible, in order for them to appear spacious to potential home-buyers. Buyers want the reassurance that their *own* excess belongings will find places for storage in their new home.

- **Inside the House**

  Once you've cleared the house of excess items, you'll have room to work on other areas.

  Walls and Ceiling:
  Examine all the ceilings and walls for water stains or dirt. We don't often look closely at the walls that surround us, so be careful—there could be residual stains from leaks that have long been fixed, or an accumulation of dirt in an area you hadn't noticed.

  Painting the walls may be the best investment you can make when preparing your home to sell. You can do it yourself, and relatively inexpensively. Remember, the colours you choose should appeal to the widest range of buyers, not just to your own personal taste. A shade of off-white is the best bet for most rooms, as it makes the space appear larger and bright.

  Carpet and Flooring:
  Does your carpet appear old, or worn in areas? Is it an outdated colour or pattern? If the answer to either of these questions is yes, you should consider replacing it. You can find replacement carpeting that is relatively inexpensive. And always opt for neutral colours.

  Any visibly broken floor tiles should be replaced. But make sure you don't spend too much on these replacements. The goal isn't to re-vamp the entire home, but, rather, to avoid causing any negative impressions due to noticeable damage or wear around the house.

  Doors and Windows:
  Check the entire house for any cracked or chipped window panes. If they are damaged in any way, replace them. Test all windows, as well, to ensure they open and close easily. Try spraying WD40 on any with which you're having trouble. This should loosen them up.

  The same can be done with sticking or creaking doors. A shot of WD40 on the hinges should make the creak disappear. Check to make sure each door knob turns smoothly and polish it to gleaming.

  Odour Check:
  Begin by airing out the house. Chances are, you'd be the last person to notice any strange or unpleasant smell that may be immediately apparent to visitors.

If you smoke indoors, you'll want to minimize the smell before you show your home. Take your cigarettes outside for a period of time before you begin showing. Ozone sprays also help eliminate those lingering odours without leaving a masking, perfumed smell.

Be careful if you have a pet. You may have become used to the particular smell of your cat or dog. Make sure litter boxes are kept clean. Keep your dog outdoors as much as possible. You may want to intermittently sprinkle your carpets with carpet freshener as well.

Plumbing and Fixtures:
All sink fixtures should look shiny and fresh. Buy new ones if scrubbing fails to get them into shape. Replacing them can be done fairly easily and inexpensively. Check to make sure all hot and cold faucets are easy to turn and that none of the faucets leaks. If you do find a leaking faucet, change the washer. Again, this is an easy and inexpensive procedure.

Finally, check the water pressure of each faucet, and look for any stains on the porcelain of the sinks or tubs.

Once you've covered all these bases, your house will be in prime shape for its time on the market. Congratulations, you're ready to begin showing!