

Stagers work magic at selling time

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Canwest News Service

Like many in this fragile housing market, Barb and Luc Bouchard crossed their fingers and hoped for the best when a For Sale sign was hammered into their lawn.

They didn't have to worry.

Their eight-year-old home was listed on April 5, and within days they were sifting through multiple offers. On April 14 it sold for \$305,250 -- \$350 more than the asking price.

The Bouchards give plenty of credit for the quick and lucrative sale to home staging, the process of prepping a house inside and out to appeal to the largest possible audience and for the highest possible price.

Interior designers and decorators do much the same thing in new communities, gussying up model homes with helpings of granite in the kitchen, bright colours in a child's bedroom or buttery soft leather couches in the family room.

The leather and paint colours are designed to appeal to buyer's senses, helping them visualize living in the house. Often a builder seals a deal because of its model homes.

Many of the same techniques are used when selling a home in an existing neighbourhood. In most cases, staging involves hiring a professional to make a house look bigger, brighter, cleaner and warmer.

"Professional stagers are highly skilled artists," says the website About.com. "They can take a blank canvas and paint a sensuous portrait without ever lifting a paintbrush. Stagers possess the skills of a top-level designer and they create dramatic scenery that appeals to all five senses."

"Did staging sell our house? We'll never know, but it really helped it sell faster," says Bouchard. "There were several



CREDIT: Bruno Schlumberger, Canwest News Service

Before: The first to go in the living room were the giant cage and dog beds.



CREDIT: Bruno Schlumberger, Canwest News Service

After: To help sell their Kanata home quickly, Luc and Barbra Bouchard had to erase all traces of their Bernese mountain dogs, Mojo and Mina.

others for sale in the neighbourhood and not too many sold signs. We thought it would take a few weeks to sell and we never thought we would get more than we asked."

Staging has grown by leaps and bounds over the past five years. Some real estate agents say up to 90 per cent of their listings are staged, though market-wide, a more accurate figure is probably about 25 per cent, says Geoff McGowan, the broker with ReMax Affiliates Realty who listed the Bouchards' property.

McGowan and other agents say staging is rapidly becoming an essential step in the sales process, much like home inspections, which once were a rarity and now a norm.

"Does every house need staging? Maybe not. But could every house benefit? Absolutely," says McGowan, who feels the improvements not only helped the Bouchards sell quickly, but also enabled them to boost their asking price by \$10,000.

Royal LePage Performance Realty agent Lyse Freeborn uses stagers in half of her listings, often when dealing with clients who don't see the need for cleanup and improvements before their home hits the market. In her experience, staging has helped sellers reap up to five per cent more than anticipated for their homes.

"The first 15 seconds is the moment of a showing that gives a potential buyer the gut feeling that he or she is in the right house," says Freeborn. "A stager can help make that happen by getting rid of things and making certain additions."

Staging wasn't the only reason her home sold in a jiffy, but it helped, says Bouchard.

With advice from professional home stager Connie Nedergaard, founder of Ottawa-based Stage N Sold Properties Inc., and McGowan and by using some of their own ideas, the couple overcame two significant roadblocks they thought would scare off buyers - the home's unfriendly layout and their large Bernese mountain dogs, Mina and Mojo.

To boost the family appeal, a second-floor home office was returned to its bedroom status by borrowing a bed. Then, the basement, which was used as a woodworking shop, was converted back to a recreation room that would accommodate children and family social events. The conversion involved painting and drywalling, ceiling repairs and the purchase of a new carpet.

Knowing that pets alienate some buyers, the Bouchards erased all traces of their dogs. Hardwood floors, scratched by the dogs, were refinished and at every showing the canines and all pet-related paraphernalia, including bones, toys and bowls, was removed. "It was a no-brainer," says Bouchard. "Our fear was that anyone who was not a fan of dogs would feel dogs can be hard on a house. We did not want buyers making a pre-judgment."

Another key adjustment was to replace a computer table in the kitchen with a table and four chairs, giving the home a second eating area.

"It was an eat-in kitchen, but it was not set up that way," says Bouchard. "The change made the

kitchen more useful."

The stager also made a raft of suggestions in her report, from decluttering to a thorough house cleaning, removing all family photographs to adding strategically placed blankets, pillows, a duvet, coffee-table books and vases.

The only exterior work was some serious window washing and staining the backyard deck.

"Where staging really helped was in ensuring we set the place up to look like a family home. If people looking for a home had kids, ours was not set up to appeal," says Bouchard, who along with her husband, did most of the work.

Not everyone sees the value in home staging, says Nedergaard, including some who don't squirm when their homes receive lowball offers and take months to sell.

"The way homeowners live in their homes and the way their homes should look when they sell are two different things," says Nedergaard. "People who have lived in a home for 30 years don't see the flaws. We are in the business of uncovering those flaws.

"Staging is about eliminating excuses for people to not buy a home, and making that home move-in ready."

The biggest turn-ons when staging are uncovering or refinishing hardwood floors, replacing worn carpets, repainting, installing new light fixtures, brightening rooms with natural light or high wattage bulbs and softening the look of rooms with something as simple as a vase of flowers or a blanket thrown over the back of a chair.

Turnoffs include cooking and animal odours, messy or dirty living spaces, lack of lighting and fireplace mantels cluttered with knick-knacks and closets and garages stuffed with boxes and clothing.

"The best market is the first 10 days. If your home doesn't look good, it will quickly be forgotten, so it is important that it shine and be at its best when it goes on the market," says Nedergaard, noting that most agents who use her services sell their listings in 14 days or less and within 98 per cent of the asking price.

Her packages range in price from a \$300 limited service plan which includes two visits from a stager and a written report containing a fistful of recommendations that are the homeowner's responsibility to complete, to a \$1,200 to \$1,800 package, which includes full staging, decorating and accessorizing by her staging team, followed by de-staging and the pickup and delivery of any rental furniture and accessories. The fee also includes the cost of renting furniture and other items. Seventy-five per cent of her clients use the limited service plan.

The Bouchards opted for the limited service plan, which was paid for by their real estate agent, a fairly common practice for homes priced at \$300,000 or more.

The recommended improvements set them back about \$2,500, although some would have been made even if they had not decided to sell the home.

"When the staging was all done . . . we stood back and said, 'This place looks great, we would buy it,' " says Bouchard.

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Sidebars

By the numbers

79 per cent of sellers will spend up to \$5,000 to get their house ready for sale

64 per cent of buyers will pay more for a house that is move-in ready

72 per cent of aspects create a first impression that are within seller's control

52 per cent of buyers say the kitchen had the biggest impact on their decision

41 per cent of men place a premium on updated decor

30 per cent of women place a premium on updated decor

Buyers' top three features: freshly painted walls, organized storage space, up-to-date flooring

Seductive selling powers;

Interior designer borrows theatrical tips to get the best house price

Susan Victoria Phillips intimately understands the problems of selling a house for the best price.

The Kanata, Ont. interior designer and home staging consultant has figured out what it takes to make a home stand out from the competition after moving 19 times in England and Canada.

Now the owner of Spotlight on Decor (spotlightondecor.com) has put her expertise into a new book, *The Seductive Power of Home Staging: A Seven-Step System for a Fast and Profitable Sale*.

It's the first home staging book designed for realtors, but it's also useful for homeowners. The 136-page softcover takes the reader from room to room using a methodical approach to overcome roadblocks that can hinder the sale of a home.

Unlike most home stagers, Phillips is also a set designer at Kanata's Ron Maslin Theatre, borrowing dramatic tips to capture attention.

"Choosing the design and decor for a theatrical play or decorating a client's home, or preparing a home for resale follows similar principles," she says.

"Reading a script and learning how the characters interact is much the same as learning how my clients use their space, the mood they wish to convey."

Among the highlights is her seven-step system to make a home irresistible, including identifying red flags or poor maintenance; removing distracting clutter; taking advantage of focal points; selecting appealing colours; using light to highlight areas; optimal use of space and generating fluid traffic movement; and using accessories for finishing touches.

In another chapter, Making it Work, Phillips takes the reader on a walk, using before and after photographs for each step.

The Seductive Power of Home Staging also points out three buying habits sellers should know, when to decorate an empty house and her top 10 improvements for under \$100.

The Seductive Power of Home Staging (Dog Ear Publishing, \$24.95) is available at Amazon.com, various bookstores or directly from the publisher at www.seductivepowerofhomestaging.com

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