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Monday, January 19, 2009

Setting the stage

Home sellers pay experts to polish their presentation

WALLETS AND POCKETBOOKS

By Donna Boynton TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF

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Jean Couture and her brother were trying to sell their father's eight-room, 2,200-square-foot home in Stow, but after three months on the market, the house drew no offers, despite its location in a well-established neighborhood.

"We hit the market just at the wrong time," said Ms. Couture, who listed the home in June. "The spring rush was done, and the market had just started to tumble in on us."

The siblings knew something was needed to set the home apart, and they called Domenica Tatasciore of Holden.

Ms. Tatasciore, owner of Successful Home Staging, assessed the home and rented furniture to demonstrate how the space could best be used, and within a week of returning the home to the market, Ms. Couture had an offer.

"It was like night and day with how the house looked. You could really see how to use the space," said Ms. Couture of Westminster. "She really made it come together, and we had attracted the type of buyers we hoped to attract."

Home staging aims to showcase a home's biggest selling point — its space — with two main themes at its core: neutrality and simplicity. Home staging began on the West Coast 30 years ago and spread east; it is used by homeowners and Realtors alike to help sell homes faster in a stalled market. Its popularity has been driven by home improvement television networks such as HGTV.

Home stagers charge hourly or flat rates, based on types of services.

Ms Tatasciore, for example, lists her pricing for home staging — consultation and work — at \$400 and \$500, depending on house size.

"You have to show every available space to its potential," said Lisa

If you are a seller, you have to have the best-looking house in the best condition in the best price range to even qualify. ”

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Ryan of Northboro, owner of The Simplified Home. "Space equals equity."

Home staging helps potential buyers visualize how space can best be used, by arranging minimal furniture and décor around a focal point. Home staging is not to be confused with interior decorating; rather, home staging is about redesigning a home to highlight how space flows from room to room.

"Simplicity is elegance. That really is the cornerstone," said Ms. Tatasciore. "You want to show off as much square footage as possible and the architectural features. You want to show the internal flow and circulation. ... You want just enough furniture to pull off a room."

Karen Crossman has had her Boxboro condominium on the market for eight months, but is hoping that some fresh paint, rearranged furniture and removal of some personal effects might be enough to attract a buyer.

Ms. Crossman enlisted the help of Elizabeth Flanagan of Leominster, owner of Home Stage Impressions.

Ms. Flanagan inventoried Ms. Crossman's home, making suggestions such as painting the walls a neutral color and decluttering, all in an effort to appeal to as many buyers as possible when the Crossmans put the "For Sale" sign up again in March.

"Our chances are better," said Ms. Crossman. "I didn't realize how much we had to remove to make it a blank canvas for the buyer."

"Not everyone can see potential, so we have to have the potential shown for them," said Ms. Flanagan. "Your two main objectives are to get your home off the market and get the most money possible. For people hoping to get the asking price, home staging is invaluable."

"I urge sellers that before they take a price reduction that they think about doing something like this," Ms. Flanagan said. "The average reduction is between 5 and 10 percent, and on the average home that could mean between \$15,000 and \$30,000. The return on this investment is well worth it."

Home stagers and Realtors both say staged homes sell faster and for more money than those not staged.

Realtor Lyn Gorka of First Choice ReMax in Marlboro has worked with Ms. Ryan on several properties in the past year. Ms. Gorka said using a home staging service gives her a competitive edge, which she said is necessary to be successful in today's real estate market.

Through Ms. Gorka, Ms. Ryan staged a home on Huntington Avenue in Marlboro that had been on the market for several months with little success.

"The minute it was staged, it sold," said Ms. Gorka.

With five years of experience as a home stager, Ms. Tatasciore said staged homes usually receive an offer within a week or two after they are staged, but cautioned, "Home staging has to go hand in hand with pricing. Even if a home is staged, if it's not priced right, it won't go anywhere."



Domenica Tatasciore, owner of Successful Home Staging in Holden, offers an example of a "before staging" living room, with busy wallpaper and furniture pushed into corners and along walls.

(Photo courtesy of Domenica Tatasciore)

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In the "after staging" photo, the room is painted a neutral color and just a few pieces of furniture are grouped around a focal point.

(Photo courtesy of Domenica Tatasciore)

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Ms. Tatasciore added that buyers often know within 30 seconds if they are interested in a home, which is why the first impression — whether it be outside the home or at the entryway — is vital to selling a home, and why she focuses on curb-to-closet service.

The decline in the real estate market has been a boon to the home staging industry. Ms. Tatasciore said her business in 2008 tripled from 2007, and Ms. Flanagan had four business inquiries in the first week in January.

“This is not a fad,” said Ms. Flanagan. “It is more important because of the market. Because of the HGTV shows, people expect homes to look like that.”

Home stagers say that in this real estate market, buyers are looking for a home that requires as little work as possible before moving in.

“If you are a buyer, you want a house that is ready to go,” said Ms. Ryan. “If you are a seller, you have to have the best-looking house in the best condition in the best price range to even qualify.”

Home stagers aim to reuse the existing furnishings and décor, or will rent furniture for vacant homes. When stagers evaluate a home, they do not judge a homeowner’s decorating skills, but make suggestions on how to best showcase the property.

“When you are selling a house, you cannot keep the house the way you live to sell it,” said Ms. Ryan. “A home is a piece of property, and you need to sell it. You need to pull yourself out of the equation and treat it as an object, not as a personal belonging.”

“A home is where you need to be. A house is a building; it is an object,” Ms. Ryan said. “You put your heart and soul into a house, decorating and personalizing, and somehow the decision is made to move, and you need to realize this is a business transaction.”

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