

Playing it smart when buyers rule

A seller's guide to marketing tactics

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Thirty- and fortysomethings looking for a larger home to accommodate a growing family face the same challenge as older folks looking to scale down to an active-adult community: Neither can make a move until they sell their current home. And that's the problem. In a buyer's market, the inventory of homes available exceeds the demand, thereby giving buyers plenty of bargaining power and the motivation to be more critical. Realtors will tell you that eventually anything sells, if the price is right. According to Shelley Corlett, a Realtor with 13 years of experience, the first step in choosing the right Realtor. "It's important to establish a relationship with someone who knows your area well. Don't be tempted to choose a Realtor offering a lower commission if it means compromising expertise," she says. "A lot happens between listing and settlement, so you need someone who will be a true and

knowledgeable advocate."

She also cautions against pricing your home according to 2007 standards, which are no longer viable. Realtors are pricing experts; let them do their job. They have all the facts, including information about comparable listings in your area. And be realistic about the condition of your home. Either address major issues or price the home accordingly. On balance, interest rates are still low and the new home you buy is also priced lower than it was two years ago.

Before you resort to reducing your selling price by thousands of dollars, first consider taking a pro-active stance with effective marketing. Time and money spent to get your home market ready will be much less than the inevitable price reduction if you do nothing. The goal is to groom the house as if it were a contestant in a beauty contest; the trick is to keep the sparkle and shine while living there. Today's real estate market is the equivalent of a competition, and the most dazzling houses are the winners.

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On the subject of accessories, she feels that less is more. Go for a few large accessories instead of a glut of minutia. Get rid of artificial flowers and bring in the bling, meaning anything that reflects light: candlesticks arranged on a mantel or dining room table in odd numbers, never even, and all silver picture frames grouped together, if you decide to keep the family photos up. "People need to perceive that someone does live in the house," says Anderson, "so a few family photos are OK. Just be consistent with frames."

Bathrooms need a minimalist treatment; no hair products on counters. Just hang some attractive new towels. In bedrooms, dress beds for success with attractive duvets or comforters and a flock of complementary pillows—no more than five. And de-clutter all nightstands: no more than three items, including the lamp.

Don't overlook your closets. "If you're a packrat, keep it neat," Anderson says. "Buyers must perceive that closets are large enough for all their clothes."

And that brings us to the problem of the over-furnished home. "Understanding that you need to

live in your house while it's on the market, it's still important to reduce the amount of furniture so rooms appear larger." Most Realtors can advise you about what should go. Listen.

Pay attention, as well, to the Realtor's suggestions regarding color. "If a room is painted a vibrant color, think of changing

three of the walls to a more neutral color," Anderson says. "As a designer, I love bold colors; but when my home went on the market, I had to repaint the walls a neutral shade." Vibrant color, wallpaper borders—even wallpaper—are distracting.

"It's not that we're telling people how to decorate," Anderson is quick to add. "It's that potential

buyers focus on the stuff in a house—especially if there's a lot of it—instead of focusing on the house."

Finally, keep a bucket of cleaning supplies handy to touch up that thorough cleaning you did before the first showing. Fingerprints and smudges are a big no-no, so whip through the house before every showing. No one said this was easy.