

Decorating to sell

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When Martin MacLachlan was preparing to sell his West End condo last November, his real-estate agent suggested that with a fresh coat of paint, his two-bedroom, one-bathroom, 950-square-foot home could possibly earn him \$350,000-but that he could probably get even more if he had his condo professionally staged. After mulling over his options, which included ideas from Michael McNamara and Rien Sharma, owners of Vancouver-based Revamp Home Staging, Martin decided to invest \$15,000 in a complete makeover.

Three weeks later, Revamp had repainted the entire condo (including the kitchen and bathroom cabinets), recarpeted the master bedroom, retiled the kitchen and bathroom, changed nearly all of the light fixtures, and replaced three quarters of his furniture with their own rental pieces. "It was amazing," MacLachlan recalls. "They did all that and took care of the details, too. They brought pictures for the walls, decorative articles for the bathroom, plants for the living room, and even serving plates with cookies. All those things contributed to the interest."

And interest there was. After the renovations, his real-estate agent decided to price the condo more aggressively at \$385,000, but after only one open house MacLachlan received seven offers, all above the asking price, and quickly sold his unit for \$410,000-\$60,000 above his original asking price.

Staging is still a relatively new concept in North America. Real-estate agents and developers are increasingly using the services of professional home-stagers, especially for small spaces such as condos, to ensure the properties

look their best and are competitive with similar units on the market-or sometimes even in the same building.

Often all it takes is an objective eye to remind you to declutter your crammed closets and to point out that nobody likes a fuchsia kitchen. But staging can also encompass a near-total renovation, complete with a stylish suite of new, rented furniture. Companies like Revamp are in the design business, and as such they constantly stay on top of the trends, receiving new shipments of furniture and accessories every one or two months.

This is especially important when a condo is full of oversized, overstuffed, outdated furniture. Having correctly proportioned furniture and accessories will turn a too-small space into a more luxuriously laid-out abode. Rental pieces from staging companies are ideal in this situation, as you'll get some contemporary pieces to make your condo look more modern and desirable, while also creating the illusion of a larger space.

It takes less than a minute for potential buyers to form an opinion about properties they're viewing. "This is a very hot market right now, and it's only going to get hotter," emphasizes Barry Pockay of RE/MAX Crest Realty. "The real-estate market increased by 10 percent last year and will increase by another six percent this year." Even though it is still a seller's market, putting a property on the market in this town has reached a whole new level of design. Because of this, Pockay now recommends professional staging services to 95 percent of his clients.

With a glut of designing and DIY shows on TV, Vancouver buyers have acquired a more sophisticated and demanding standard when it comes to home living and buying. Research has shown that staged homes have a definite advantage over their unstaged competitors. According to MoneySense magazine, a 1999 Coldwell Banker Realty survey of nearly 3,000 properties in eight large Californian cities found that unstaged homes sat on the market for an average of 30.9 days and sold at 1.6 percent above the listing price. Staged homes, however, spent an average of only 13.9 days on the market and sold at 6.3 percent above the listing.

Selling your home is a unique process, in that it's your personal sanctuary. However, keep in mind that people don't want to buy your personal sanctuary. They don't want to see how you live in the condo; they want to be able to see how they can live in the condo. This is where a little strategic staging can help sellers get past the personal ties to their home and see it as an investment.

"You want to package, present, and profit," states Sharma firmly. "You can't sell your lifestyle to others, so don't try. Just sell the condo. You might have to spend some money, but you'll earn it back when you sell."

Whether you have \$500 to spend or \$5,000 (or more), here are a few do-it-yourself home-staging tips from the experts:

> **DECLUTTER.** Clean the cupboards, tidy up the bathroom shelves, and discard the dying plants. A clean and tidy home shows you take care and pride in your home and maintain it accordingly.

> **STORE IT.** Space is always at a premium, especially in condos. If you have to, clear out half your closet space and remove some of the shoes in your closet. It's illusory, but if it looks like there's enough space for everything in there, it simply looks larger than if things are crammed in.

> **FRESHEN IT.** "If you smoke, Febreze for seven days," Sharma insists. That and an open window will be your best friends if you smoke or have pets or are partial to robust cooking. How your place smells is almost as influential as how it looks.

> **NEUTRALIZE IT.** While burnt sienna and mustard yellow may be inspiring colours for you, they will probably be turn-offs for buyers. It's too difficult for people to imagine their own belongings in such a strongly accented condo. Paint your home in soothing, neutral colours.

> **BUFF UP** bathrooms and kitchens. These are the two most important rooms in any home. If you are on a budget, spend your money here on some fluffy towels, a new shower curtain, fragrant hand soap, shiny new faucets, and crisp tea towels.

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