

Home staging very important, is your home ready for a close-up?

REAL ESTATE: Professional 'staging' helps owners sell for more
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Province

Sunday, March, 12, 2006

Even in a sizzling real-estate market, a home may need more than a vase of fresh flowers and a quick clean-up to attract the best offer.

And old tricks, such as baking chocolate-chip cookies or simmering cinnamon sticks before the open house, don't smell as sweet to prospective buyers any more.

In fact, you might want to consider getting professional help.

Home stagers are gaining popularity as homeowners embrace the concept of displaying their homes as a product for sale rather than hoping buyers will appreciate the homey, lived-in look of the place.



Dekora's Tracey Mills (left) and Ron Sowden are experts at making homes look their best. Photograph by : Les Bazso, The Province

"We're bringing what developers have been doing for years with show suites to the residential homeowner," said John Carter, a partner in Vancouver home staging company, Dekora. "It's common sense -- homes are products, and if you've got a product for sale, you merchandise it."

Home staging involves transforming new and lived-in spaces into show suites. It can be as simple as helping homeowners remove the clutter or repainting a garish bathroom to renting furniture and artwork that shows the potential of a living space.

Three years ago, when Dekora first opened its doors, the idea of home staging drew blank stares from realtors and homeowners alike. Now, thanks to marketing efforts and TV shows such as *Sell This House*, the idea of staging a home for sale has become more widely accepted.

Three partners, Carter, Vancouver businesswoman Barbara Rae and long-time film set designer Ron Sowden, started Dekora with a \$30,000 line of credit.

In its first year of operation, 2004, the firm earned \$5,000. Last year, Carter said sales

jumped to \$1.2 million and this year, the partners are projecting sales of \$1.6 million.

The partners are now looking to take their business concept across Canada, with the first franchise expected to open within a few months. If it works, Dekora hopes to move into the U.S., Carter said.

The main office will provide the business model, marketing and operations support while the franchise owner takes care of staffing and staging work.

"A lot of people think they don't need home staging -- the house is going to sell," Carter said. "That's true, but how much money have you left on the table?"

"Home staging maximizes a home's value, and when you're also buying when the market is hot, you want to get every dollar from the property you sell."

The company stages everything from small condominiums to large houses.

Homeowners can choose a consultation for a couple of hundred dollars and do the work themselves, or Dekora will take care of some or all of the work, including furniture rentals for fees ranging up \$5,000 depending on the scope of the job.

Even in a hot market, some homes sit on the market unsold for weeks. On Vancouver's west side, an attractive new house has been for sale three months and last week, the owners turned to Dekora to hopefully help get them an offer.

Interior designer Tracey Mills had less than a week to turn the beautifully finished but vacant house into a home prospective buyers could imagine themselves living in.

She rented furniture, brought in lamps, artwork and area rugs to bring the house to life. Fluffy towels and tasteful knick-knacks now fill empty shelves and the house has the cozy, if impersonal, look of an upscale hotel.

"In a lot of cases, it's the battle of the clutter," said partner Ron Sowden a motion-picture set decorator for 17 years. "We try to clear the way for prospective buyers to see themselves in the home, and that usually means turning down the visual noise and presenting the house as aesthetically as possible."

There is no formal research on the return on investment for home staging, but a 1999 survey by Coldwell Banker Realty in California found that staged homes sold for an average of five per cent more than unstaged homes -- and in half the time.

"Everybody is too close to their own home," Sowden said. "The challenge is to take a dispassionate view -- once you decide to sell, it's not your house any more. That's the mindset that has to shift."

Last summer, Dekora was called in to stage a small townhouse in east Vancouver that had been on the market for six months with no offers.

"It repelled everyone who looked at it," Sowden said.

"The people were very nice, they had two small children and one parent worked from home. But the place was full of stuff, and it was dirty -- it was just a mess." He advised the family to move to a motel for three days, and the designers went to work. They hired cleaners, sent boxes of stuff to a storage garage and moved in area rugs, lamps and accessories to complement the couple's furniture.

The next day, the first open house brought 16 offers in two hours, and the townhouse sold for \$20,000 more than the asking price, Sowden said, adding staging cost about \$1,500, plus the two nights in a motel.

"There is no home that won't benefit from attention," he said. "The work can be very satisfying -- people can't believe how beautiful their homes can look."

Vancouver realtor Andrew Hasman is a huge fan of home staging for obvious reasons: Homes sell faster and for more money when they look like show homes. "I go and see homes every day and more times than not, homes don't show to their best advantage," said Hasman, who owns Re/Max Andrew Hasman Realty.

"They may have beautiful rooms, but they don't present very well."

He said last fall he was trying to sell a house in the city's elite Point Grey, but after six months, the owner had only a few lowball offers, so Hasman suggested staging the house.

"The first person who came through the door paid full price, and the client was thrilled," Hasman said.

"Three years ago, I didn't think anybody would pay for the service, but people are pretty open to it now. It's a great way to go, no question."