



Home Stager extraordinaire Lise Desormeaux staged this living room to be devoid of clutter. Its complemented with chic furnishings that provide it with a sense of modernity and aesthetic beauty, while also giving it a clean look that persuades prospective home buyers to make an offer worthy of the home's true value.



Lise Desormeaux in action, proving that successful design really is all about the details.

Stage Right

Style strategies and home-staging secrets

In the current home-buying climate, staging has become not only vital but also an increasingly popular imperative, especially among owners struggling to sell their homes in a stagnant but competitive market. Home staging—defining and enhancing a living space—is a style science: If done

right, the results are positive and responsive, helping increase a home's overall value so that its owners can up the asking price—and get it. Whether staging involves tending to a few small details (a picture here, a window dressing there) or calls for major renovations (new lighting and wall modifications), some principles are universal—rules that, if ignored, can lower a home's worth and draw out the selling process. With the professional savvy of Master Stager Pat Shankle, owner of Georgia Home Staging; Lise Desormeaux, founder and CEO of RMR—Real Estate Marketing Results; and John Gidding, host and designer of HGTV's *Designed to Sell*, JEZ stages a home intervention.

UPSTAGING THE COMPETITION

Price and condition are the only factors a seller controls, according to Shankle. Citing a recent study by stagedhomes.com, she says 93 percent of staged listings sold within 30 days, opposed to unstaged listings, which took up to, and in some cases more than, 160 days to sell. Naturally, real estate agents prefer working with staged properties, which are creatively packaged products meticulously designed to entice buyers into making an offer. “Advantages [of staging] include expert service, [saving] time and money, and a high return on investment,” says Desormeaux, a former real estate professional and listing agent. According to Desormeaux, 1,000 real estate agents surveyed throughout the United States in 2007 by HomeGain reported that the overall asking price of three-bedroom, two-bathroom residences in the South increased an average of \$21,470 after having received \$5,000 to \$8,000 in staging improvements.

THE FIRST IMPRESSION

When it comes to home staging, is there more than meets the eye? Considering that humans are visual responders, probably not. This is why it is crucial that a homebuyer's initial observations are favorable. Enter the home stager. "Our strategy at Georgia Home Staging is to create a 'model home type' environment [that] buyers can emotionally connect [with]," Shankle says. "Staging highlights a home's strengths, downplays its weaknesses and appeals to the greatest possible pool of prospective buyers. Buyers focus on imperfections, but staging creates an atmosphere where buyers can visualize." Desormeaux notes that the No. 1 reason a home doesn't sell is that the seller is more emotional than the buyer. "Real estate is sold or not sold on emotion," she says.

Home stagers are experts at tapping into the psychology of the buyer, suggesting specific changes so buyers can envision living in a particular space. How do you know if you need a home stager? When in doubt, make a house call.

SETTING THE STAGE

Anyone can self-stage, but flying solo (usually to save money) is not as advantageous as investing upfront to gain later. The first step: Collaborate with a design professional experienced in implementing and executing small- to large-scale changes with minimum financial outlay. You can throw up a few pictures and slather the walls with paint, true, but maybe you don't have to do that. After all, markets and design trends fluxuate, and, without professional know-how, self-prognosticating to save a few bucks can lead to a costly error in judgment.

Do-it-yourself home stagers may have a great aesthetic eye, but, unlike professional home stagers, they usually have only a rudimentary understanding of the emotional factors that are persuasive in buying and selling. "Often a homeowner will have lived in a space for so long that he or she may no longer have an objective view about how the space can be used," Gidding says.

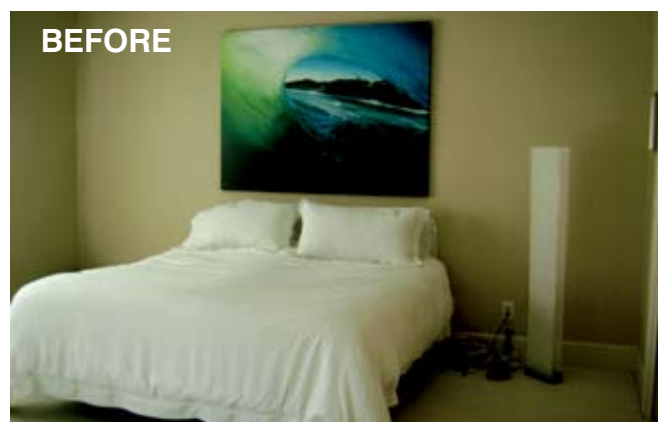
Equally important is tending to details that can make a difference. "When you see something that has been cared for in every detail, it gives you the feeling that it always has been, which in turn gives the buyer confidence that the home is in good repair and maintained properly," Desormeaux says. "Confidence and emotion will drive ink to paper and [lead to] an offer that meets the seller's expectations."

AVOID THE PITFALLS

Beyond staging a home's interior but neglecting its exterior, the most common mistake sellers make is convincing themselves that the investment is not worth the cost, often because sellers have confused decorating with staging. "Decorating is creating home décor that reflects your personal style and taste," Shankle says. "Staging is depersonalizing and creating a style that will appeal to a large audience base. The way we live in our home and the way we sell



AFTER



BEFORE

Presentation is everything! Pat Shankle of Georgia Home Staging transformed this high-end luxury condo at One Ivy Walk in Vinings into one with distinct character. The master bedroom is a key space. Before staging, this bedroom was dull and uninviting. The staging process infused it with vibrant colors, additional furnishings, art and accessories, which helped transform the space into an elegant and welcoming sanctuary.

it are two entirely different things." Fees typically are determined after a consultation and renovation analysis, which determine the scope of the project so the seller can budget accordingly.

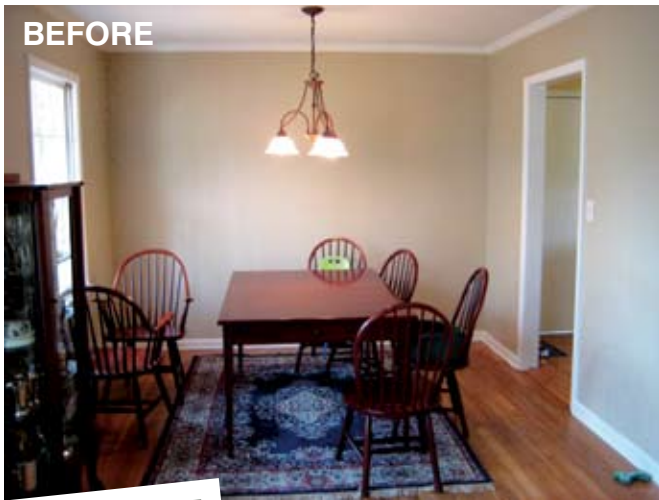
Another common mistake is not depersonalizing a home to a level that will lure prospective buyers to make an offer. "People get too personal with their accessorizing," Gidding says. "Potential homebuyers are frequently turned off in a space that feels very much like it belongs to someone else and they're just visitors. It's very important to depersonalize a space you're hoping to sell, even if the photographs of your nieces are just to die for."

If still unconvinced that it is possible to get results through home staging, especially in a weak market that has been slow to rebound, Desormeaux issues this timeless missive: "The truth is that any buyer will pay for value when they see it, and they'll do it quickly because they want to live in a home of their dreams as soon as possible." There really is no place like home. —JENNIFER THORNTON

domicile

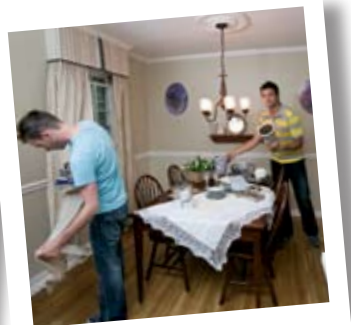


BEFORE



On the set of the wildly popular *Designed to Sell* on HGTV, the crew of which was busy transforming a home in the Murphy Chandler Park neighborhood. Pictured above are before and after photos from the homeowner's dining room.

The team (Host John Gidding, Carpenter Chip Wade, Contractor David Wink and Seamster Joshua Thomas) turned a plain Jane room into one that will surely impress buyers. They added a partial separation wall in between the dining and living rooms, molding, window treatments, décor and more.



STAGING SECRETS

With a background in architecture and a gig as host and designer of HGTV's hit show *Designed to Sell*, John Gidding shares how to separate your listing from the competition. His first bit of advice is to sweat the small stuff—minute changes make a big difference.

Here's more:

Accessorize: Buy vases and fresh-cut flowers; color coordinate books and arrange items in groups of three or five on shelves and bookcases; dress dining tables formally; buy decorative cushions for beds; hang framed artwork; place a bowl of fruit on kitchen countertops; and open doors for the open house.

Clean: Hire a cleaning service and pay for its "spring cleaning" process. A couple hundred dollars removes years of grime.

Declutter: Reveal surfaces and remove any mess.

Dress windows: Setting up curtain rods and drapery panels is a 20-minute, \$75 project—with huge effects. Accentuate a room's colors by using complementary colored drapes. Tall curtains make ceilings seem higher.

Pack clothes: The best way to display closet space is with few clothes. Keep only what you need for the next month and pack everything else.

Paint: Invite guests over to get their honest opinions about your home's colors. Take notes, review the least popular colors, go to the paint store and peruse its neutrals collection—then paint!

Reduce furniture: Use only 60 percent of furnishings. Too many furnishings make living rooms and bedrooms look cramped. A few well-chosen pieces make rooms seem well-proportioned and well-sized.

Reveal hardwoods: Rugs are great for comfort, but don't hide beautiful hardwood floors. An area rug over a small portion of hardwood floors is OK to break up space, but reveal most of it.

Store: Install shelving; replace mismatched cabinets in the bathroom; purchase boxes to organize closets; tidy the pantry. The more storage potential seen by prospective buyers, the more offers sellers will receive. Adding built-ins is a great option.

Update the kitchen: If you can't afford a full kitchen renovation, the next best thing is a partial redo. Get new hardware and repaint cabinetry, change the lighting and, if possible, replace laminate countertops with either one that's new or with a butcher's block. Get new appliances if possible. Prospective homeowners love them, and for good reason: Old appliances are the first thing a homeowner will want to replace.