

YOUR PLACE

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REAL ESTATE CLASSIFIED INSIDE AND ONLINE

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Illustration by Jon Ueland

HOW NOT! TO SELL

By Leslie Mann | Special to the Tribune

Picky people, those home buyers. They get their way, especially in today's buyer's market, where houses for sale outnumber the buyers.

If you really want to sell your house, employ the army of stagers, real estate agents and handymen ready to help you. But if you want to send those pesky buyers packing, make your house the real estate equivalent of a holiday fruitcake.

The Tribune asked experts for the top 10 ways that sellers devalue their house, so it sits on the market or sells well below asking price. Here's what they say:

1. Mix and match

Make your house the neighborhood blooper by ignoring its architectural integrity. Outside, your addition should reflect a style from a century other than that of your house's origin. Mismatch styles and sizes of new windows. Strip your Victorian of its gingerbread. Close in or tear off a wraparound porch.

Inside, slather paint over the mahogany woodwork. Cover coffered ceilings with acoustical tiles. Hide that lovely mural with paneling.

"Even people who don't have architectural backgrounds can tell when a house just doesn't look right," says Scott Berger from Kane County's Development Department. "The homeowner usually has good intentions but unknowingly mucks it up."

People like Berger and groups such as Elgin's Gifford Park Association offer free advice to homeowners about to embark on remodeling projects. Architects can help design an addition that complements the original in materials, scale, proportions, form and detailing.

2. Curb unappeal

About 80 percent of buyers begin their home searches on the Internet, according to the National Association of Realtors. So a good way to stop them in their tracks is to make sure the picture of your house lacks what Realtors call "curb appeal."

Erase your curb appeal by neglecting your lawn, says Mike Golden, president-elect of the Chicago Association of Realtors. Or, he adds, paint the house offensive colors or leave your garbage cans at the curb.

"Today's buyers can't see past needed repairs, which they don't have time to do," says Golden. "Show them your house is not in move-in condition."

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TURN-OFFS

Avoid having house with 'issues'

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3. Castle in the clouds

Anything that clouds a home's title delays or prevents the home's closing. Some of the best ways to cloud the title are to trigger liens on the property or to create encroachments.

You can generate a lien by failing to pay a contractor or by refusing to pay your real estate taxes.

To make sure your property is encumbered with an encroachment, look the other way while your neighbor builds a fence on your side of the property line or pours a new driveway 4 feet into your lot.

4. Permit-shun

A great way to send buyers running for the hills is to try to sell a house that has been remodeled without a permit. Depending on how strict the community's building code is, this can include something as minor as installing a new furnace. "Decks, pools and finished basements are the big ones," says Mark VanKerkhoff, Kane county's director of building and community services division, of projects that do-it-yourselfers complete without permits.

Other homeowners apply for permits but never call for the final inspections, says VanKerkhoff, because they figure their contractor took care of it or they want to delay increases in their property taxes.

You could come clean with the officials and pay the fine. Or, if you don't want the house to sell, you could make sure it continues to wave this red flag.

5. Yank that welcome mat

Home stagers prepare homes so buyers feel welcome. So, if you want to drive buyers away, personalize your house so buyers will feel like intruders, says stager GraceAnn Simoni of Yours Redesigned in Naperville.

"Start at the front door, where you should plant your kids' large plastic toys instead of flowers," Simoni says. "That will turn off buyers without



AP photo

Fresh paint done in neutral colors can boost your house's curb appeal.

kids right away."

Inside, hang lots of pictures of your kids and pets. Frame your diplomas. Display your trophies.

If you smoke, don't stop now. Smoke odors rank high among buyers' turn-offs, Simoni says.

Embarrass buyers by posting your menstrual cycle calendar on the refrigerator, your Alcoholic Anonymous book on the night stand and a big bottle of antidepressants on the vanity, adds Simoni, who cited these as real-life examples she has encountered in her own work. If that doesn't send them fleeing, be sure to leave the ironing board set up and the dishes on the counter. Then they will know you just stepped out and you'll be back any minute.

6. Safety schmafety

Today, 85 percent of buyers hire home inspectors, says Frank Lesh, president of the American Society of Home Inspectors. They find things that compromise homes' safety and report them to the buyers. So you can de-value your house by making sure your house has plenty of hazards.

Many a Tim the Tool Man Taylor tries to install his own ceiling fan, for example. "He doesn't attach it to a joist, so when he turns it on, it wiggles free and goes flying," Lesh explains.

He uses a flammable, plastic pipe to vent his clothes dryer instead of a safer metal one. To repair his concrete walkway, he uses patching compound, which freezes and pops off. He attaches a deck to the house's siding, not its structure, so it caves in dur-

'Keep everything you've ever owned, as opposed to donating it, throwing it out or eBaying it.'

—Jeanne Harms of Organize Inc.

ing the first summer barbecue. On his deck and stairway, he installs horizontal railings, which his kids call "ladders."

When he replaces his garage door opener, he attaches the safety beams too high for children and pets. But the most common Tim trick, says Lesh, is wiring the new garbage disposal incorrectly. "Sure, it works," says Lesh. "But it electrocutes the first person who has one hand in the water and the other on the switch."

You could beat the buyers to the punch and hire your own inspector. Fixing defects before putting your house on the market can avoid delays at closing. Or, you could be like Tim.

7. Hip today, horrid tomorrow

Two words: avocado refrigerator. The trendier it is or the stronger its color, the more likely it will scream "dated" to future buyers.

Add these trendy amenities that real estate agents identified as potential buyer turn-offs in a recent survey in the Agent to Agent e-zine, published by Evanston-based agent Mark Nash: ebony hardwood floors ("They show every bit of dust," Nash says agents tell him), totally mirrored walls or ceilings (perceived as a hassle to remove), vessel sinks (cool-looking but hard to clean), spiral staircases, glass-front cabinets (too hard to keep contents tidy) and anything with a polished-brass finish.

8. House of ill repair

Smart buyers can tell if you have not maintained your house or if you have used Band-Aids to cover up problems.

So ignore leaky pipes, peeling paint, cracked mortar, dented siding, sloping sidewalks, drippy faucets, filthy flues, cracked caulk and mysterious odors. Ignore missing roof shingles and clogged gutters so they cause leaks.

"Consider every ignored repair a potential deal-killer," says the House Doctors Handyman Service president, Ron Gibbs. "Then, if your house sits

unsold for six months, it will can be labeled as a house 'with issues,' you will be labeled as a desperate seller and buyers will low-ball you."

9. S-t-r-e-t-c-h the truth

Buyers hate sellers or real estate agents who stretch the truth, especially in the listing information, says Lorraine Denham, a Realtor with Coldwell Banker's Lincoln Park Plaza office.

So if you want to generate some negative buzz about your property, pass off that postage-stamp den with no closet as an extra bedroom.

"Once I took buyers to a property that advertised an 'atrium' and it was a skylight in the hallway. C'mon," says Lorraine Denham, a Realtor with Coldwell Banker's Lincoln Park Plaza.

Obviously, you want your home to stand out from a crowded marketplace, so instead look for words that convey curb appeal and avoid phrases such as "motivated seller" or "must sell" when describing your home. Such words can imply that you initially overpriced the home or that there's something wrong it. According to study by Paul Anglin, a real estate economist at the University of Guelph in Ontario, Canada, listings that included the word "landscaping" tended to sell up to 20 percent faster, with "granite" and "maple" also scoring big with buyers.

10. Disorderly conduct

Buyers don't want houses they can't find among the clutter.

"Keep everything you've ever owned, as opposed to donating it, throwing it out or eBaying it," says Jeanne Harms of Organize Inc. in Batavia. "Pack your closets with clothing that dates back to high school, backpacks the kids outgrew and stuff your grown kids don't want anymore like their yearbooks, report cards and sports equipment."

Keep all your college textbooks. You never know when you will use them again.

Make sure your basement, attic and garage are dumping grounds if you want to turn off male buyers, especially, Harms adds.

Clutter makes a home look smaller and distracts buyers. So, keep in mind the bottom line: The better it looks, the higher the price. The harder to show it, the lower the price.