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Wow appeal: How to woo buyers in slow housing market

By **Nicole Warburton**

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Pam Dreier Nebeker had hung the picture minutes earlier and the simple image had a startling effect.

It added an element of interest and "wow" to the previously nondescript room. The red of the couch, the sheen of the bamboo floor and other touches of style were suddenly highlighted.

While Utah homeowners could once get away with basic fixes before selling their property, real estate professionals such as Nebeker say current market conditions require sellers to work harder to woo a buyer by staging and arranging their homes to create an impression.

There's a lot of competition, and Utah has been fairly insulated from the national housing slump. Last quarter, 8,216 homes were listed for sale in Salt Lake County and only 2,284 homes were sold, according to the Salt Lake Board of Realtors.

"Especially in this market, there are buyers out there looking for homes because interest rates are low and there are a lot of homes for sale in certain areas," said Jim Bringham, broker with The Bringham Group. "It's important that your house stands out."

The top tips from market experts are to clean, de-clutter and make sure the yard looks appealing at first glance. After that, it's recommended a person stage and accessorize.

And the best thing is that these recommendations can be used by anyone, regardless if they're selling or just updating their home, said Nebeker, who is also a trained interior designer.

Belma Michael Johnson, host of the popular HGTV television show, "Designed to Sell," said he believes one or two "power accessories" in a room (think back to Nebeker's picture) can add a freshness and visual interest that will help sell a home. Removing clutter will make a room look larger, while cleaning is just plain smart, he said.

"People don't want to buy your dirt," said Johnson, who was in Utah recently to speak at a home show and promote his new book, "Easy Green."

He tells the story of working on a home in Chicago for his show. The homeowners had a collection of dead flies in their light fixture and Johnson had to clean them out.

Not a good selling point, he said, laughing.

Kimberly Hammond, an interior designer with Colemere Realty Associates, LLC., said sellers should look to make their homes appeal to the senses of a buyer, including sight, smell, touch and sound. During a tour of an entry-level home she helped stage in West Jordan, Hammond described how she advised the owners to paint the white walls with a more soothing neutral such as light beige.

Furniture was removed from some rooms to make them look bigger, while accessories were added to rooms such as the kitchen and laundry room to help buyers visualize how the home could look once purchased.

On average, Hammond said a person could spend anywhere from \$1,000 to \$5,000 to prepare their home to be sold. Paint is one of the cheapest options for a person looking to fix-up on a budget, she said.

Scott Colemere is the agent for the West Jordan home that Hammond helped to stage. After meeting to tour the house, Colemere sent an e-mail saying his seller had just accepted an offer on the home. It had been listed for less than two months.

In the current market, it normally takes four to six months for a home to sell, said Jillinda Bowers, president of the Salt Lake Board of Realtors and an associate broker with Coldwell Banker. That's a better time on market than last year, although if you go back a year, some houses were getting offers their first day on market, she said.

Bowers believes first impressions are critical to getting a buyer to purchase a home. If a yard has weeds and looks run-down, a buyer isn't likely to walk in the front door, she said.

Other tips include removing personal pictures from walls and other items that may distract a potential buyer.

"People who come into the house will spend time looking at those and thinking the house belongs to the seller rather than visualizing themselves in the home," she said.

For Kjell Nyman, who is trying to sell a home on the east bench of Sandy, his whole goal is to outshine the competition. He's replaced the hardware on his front door, weeded his flower beds and cleaned the carpet.

"It all comes down to out-competing the other guys and making people want your house," Nyman said.

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Curb appeal: First impressions are key to getting a buyer inside the front door. Remove weeds and other yard clutter. Trim the lawn and plant bright flowers.

Cleaning: People don't want to buy your dirt. A dirty home means work, according to Pam Dreier Nebeker, associate broker with The Bringham Group and a trained interior designer. Meanwhile, Colemere Realty recommends a person scrub their windows and appliances, draperies and blinds to ensure their home looks inviting.

Clutter: Remove knickknacks and other distractions, and make sure your house looks almost as if it were a model home. Clear all appliances from your kitchen counter, eliminate most of your children's toys from the floor and remove extra shampoo bottles from the bathroom. Clean your closets, too.

Paint and lighting: Paint is one of the cheapest ways to freshen your home. Choose a neutral color and paint your trim in white. Lighting is another inexpensive option to transform a room and will make your home look more high-end.

Accessorize: Choose one or two items to highlight a room and then store other unnecessary items.

Check your floors: An investment in flooring nearly always pays for itself, according to Colemere Realty. If you can't afford to update to tile or hardwood, clean your carpets and refinish a scratched surface.

Fix, fix, fix: Check for squeaky floorboards and sticky doors and windows. Remove water stains and clean caulk around tubs.

Add a "wow" factor: Sometimes the fixes advocated on television are bland, said Pam Dreier Nebeker. Look for something to add a "wow" factor to a room. It can be as simple as green apples in a bright bowl or a simple picture on the wall.

SOURCES: Colemere Realty, Pam Dreier Nebeker, The Bringham Group, Jillinda Bowers

E-mail: nwarburton@desnews.com