



Charlotte Schmid-Maybach/Staff Photographer

To romance potential buyers, Ginger Atherton creates a setting in each room. Details include a champagne bucket next to the tub, above, and a fire in the fireplace, at right.

All the home's a stage

By Barbara De Witt | Staff Writer



Looking for an easy sell, owners turn to a new breed of designers to spruce up living spaces

The welcome mat is out, the For Sale sign is neatly in place, but there's no buyer in sight. Oops — did you remember to scrub the tub, straighten the closets and put fresh flowers on the table? Every little detail counts when you're trying to sell a home, says Ginger Atherton, who literally sets the stage to attract home buyers.

"I try to create a lifestyle that someone else wants, where they can fantasize themselves entertaining, cooking, playing with their children," Atherton explains. She uses her expertise to study the strengths and weaknesses of a home and then rents truckloads of furniture and accessories to complement the architecture and makes sure each piece is perfectly scaled for the size of the room.

Atherton is part of a new breed of interior designer hired to decorate a house to sell — even in an unfashionable ZIP code — and her services represent a growing part of the booming real estate business. Fees vary, depending on the neighborhood, the size of the house and the asking

price.

Marshall Design Group of Sherman Oaks charges 1 percent of the asking price with a minimum fee of \$5,000, while L.A.-based Baer & Associates gives estimates based on the amount of work, taking into account obstacles that slow down a job such as flights of stairs.

Baer's minimum fee is \$10,000 and the firm decorates mostly million-dollar homes that are built with prospective buyers in mind.

Atherton, who has staged 60 homes throughout the San Fernando Valley and Beverly Hills, charges a minimum fee of \$25,000, based on a 4,000-square-foot home. She's paid up front, completes the work within 10 days and has helped all 60 of her clients get multiple bids at more than the asking price.

"They all sold except one. The person actually bought everything and stayed in it rather than selling it," she says with a laugh.

When a house is nearly ready to be placed on the mar-

ket — or has been there too long — real estate agents will often introduce the sellers to a stager.

Hopefully, it's a match made in real estate heaven that results in multiple offers and a short escrow. But staging a home can backfire if it's not done in a discreet way, observes Anthony Marguleas, owner of the Pasadena-based AM Realty agency that specializes in million-dollar homes in Sherman Oaks, Woodland Hills, Burbank and Beverly Hills.

"On one hand, a first-time home buyer will be a lot more influenced by a stager because they have a harder time envisioning the home," he said. "But experienced buyers and investors will recognize that it's been staged and that can turn out to be a negative."

He adds that a good stager gives a house a lived-in look with personal photos and other special touches.

Steve Erdman, whose Encino house was on the market for 11 months with no offers, hired the Marshall firm in a final attempt to move the property. The plan worked; the

custom-built house sold in six weeks.

"They dressed it up and gave it a personality and a sense of color and space," said Erdman.

Often, professional stagers are recognized by their design signatures.

For instance, Los Angeles stager Meridith Baer says she always leaves slippers by the side of each bed and a few books, while Ed Marshall of the Marshall Design Group is known for orchids in the bathroom and making small bedrooms look bigger.

But a lot of hard work comes before those special flourishes.

Susie Coelho, host of HGTV's "Surprise Gardener" and author of "Susie Coelho's Everyday Styling" (Simon & Schuster, \$30), breaks the art of staging into three winning elements: organization, aesthetics and sensation. And she believes clutter therapy is the first step.

Sales tips

Got a house on the market and no takers? You can hire your own stager, or do it yourself by using our pros' top 10 tips:

1. Make it sparkle. Scrub the entire place down. Wash both sides of the windows, the sinks, toilets and tubs — don't forget the light fixtures and all those switch plates (unscrew, scrub and replace).

2. Freshen up with paint. If it's a really small house or condo, off-white paint will make it look larger as well as clean. But a more upscale home should have a paint job worthy of its asking price. Think about multiple shades of cream, taupe or beige, with attention to woodwork trim. And paint the inside of cupboards and closets

because you know people love to peek inside.

3. Clear the clutter. Prospective buyers know it's lived in (and it has better vibes than an empty house), but they don't want to see piles of dirty underwear, unfolded towels and unread newspapers.



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Too many personal items can be a turn-off for buyers.

Dirty dishes, messy cupboards and refrigerators, smelly kitty litter boxes and major collections of ceramic angels.

4. Bathroom beauty. In addition to scrubbing the tub and tile and mirrors, hang a new shower curtain, add new rugs and towels and make it look inviting. Place your necessities (toothbrushes and cotton balls) in attractive containers and your toothpaste in a drawer, along with your hairbrush, tweezers, deodorant and other personal products.

5. Create romance. To make your home inviting to strangers, script the scene with soft music playing in the background, a fire in the fireplace, a pie or cookies baking in the oven (which can mask the odor of cat boxes and fried fish), candles and fresh flowers.

6. Set the table. Real estate sales people always comment that homes sell better when there's furniture. If your dining set looks great, just dust and add candles and fresh flowers, but if the table is a tad worn, cover it with layers of elegant linens and get out the silver and china as if you were expecting guests for dinner. And make sure you've cleaned the chandelier and changed the bulbs.

7. Inviting bedrooms. Home buyers are looking for master bedrooms that can accommodate a king-size bed, so do your best to make it happen, even if it means removing most of the furniture. Smaller rooms look bigger with twin beds or decorated as a nursery. Always have fresh, attractive linens, duvets and window coverings, and add a few personal touches, whether it's books, photos or bedroom slippers.

8. Clean out the closets. Make closets look like there's plenty of room for the new owners' stuff, but don't have them completely empty. Consider investing in closet organizers for shoes, ties and folded sweaters. A mirror in a walk-in closet also magnifies the size.

9. Curb appeal. Although two-story homes and corner lots are known by the real estate agents to have the most curb appeal, you can still get would-be buyers to come to a screeching halt at your place if it's painted a soft neutral (pale yellow is hot this year) with well-tended lawns and flowers, accented with decorative details such as fountains, statues and park benches that complement the architectural theme.

10. Leave the customers alone. Make sure you, your children and pets are gone during broker walk-throughs and appointments with clients. Anxious homeowners can undo the best staging.

— B.D.



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When readying your house for sale, keep the bathroom spotless, top; the kitchen well-organized, center; and the closet free of clutter, perhaps using little extras such as this built-in cupboard for ties, above.