

Story by Judy Ostrow

designed to move

TRYING TO SELL IN A TOUGH MARKET? ATTRACT A SERIOUS BUYER—OR JUST LIVE IN A BETTER-DESIGNED SPACE—WITH ADVICE FROM SOME OF THE COUNTY'S BUSIEST HOME STAGERS.



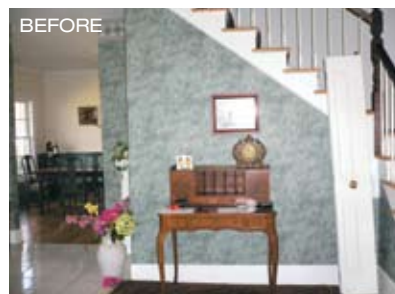
AFTER



AFTER



BEFORE



BEFORE

Kitty Schwartz of Classic Home Staging in Goldens Bridge transformed the living room and entryway of this Goldens Bridge house (above) for homeowners who were thinking about selling. They were so happy with the results, they opted to stay.

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HOMEOWNER ENRICA STAEGER had an unusual property: her house full of collectibles sat on an island in the middle of Mohegan Lake in Yorktown. The place had been on the market for a few months, and she received two serious bids. But the deals fell through, and her real estate agent recommended that she try staging her house to help attract more buyer interest.

"I'd heard about home staging, and how having someone come in and help you declutter and arrange your house can speed up the process," Staeger recalls. Following her agent's suggestion, she called Jennifer Stoltz, owner of First Impressions Home Staging, based in Fairfield County.

Stoltz advised Staeger to put a sizable portion of her furniture in storage, along with the cherished collectibles, and to move some of the remaining furnishings to new spots in the house where the scale and colors would combine more effectively. After Stoltz completed an in-home consultation and drew up a list of recommendations, Staeger hired a firm to help her execute the plan.

"She put rugs and chairs in new rooms, and the house really did look more up to date," says the grateful homeowner. "I could understand how, with the house's cleaner look, a buyer could see himself there."

Stoltz's guidance worked its magic. After staging, Staeger fielded two serious offers, selling her home within a month.

ONE SURE SIGN OF SPRING IS THE blossoming of "For Sale" signs along the curbs of villages and towns throughout Westchester. But this year, an abundant supply of real estate has placed sellers in hot competition for buyers made shy by recent turbulence in the mortgage and credit markets. For help in this more challenging sales environment, many



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homeowners are now turning to home stagers to give their properties an advantage.

When Jill Steinberg and Deborah Novick launched their Larchmont home-staging business, Showcase Your Space, in 2004, the market was a red-hot seller's dream, and many Westchester homeowners and real estate agents were unfamiliar with staging as a sales tool. At that time, with lots of properties flying off the market at or above asking prices, spending on extra curb appeal might have seemed, for many, a point-less expense.

"We had to actively market our business. It was—and still is—a process of educating real estate professionals and homeowners about the benefits of home staging," Steinberg explains.

With the proliferation of home-design programs and staging-oriented shows on cable television, Steinberg, Novick, and other stagers around the county see an upsurge in demand for their services. People understand the designed-to-sell concept better now than they did back then. Like most other professional stagers, Kitty Schwartz, whose Goldens Bridge-based business, Classic Home Staging, is sought by homeowners throughout Westchester and surrounding counties, works not only with houses still lived in by their owners, but also with other properties that need their best features accented. Some of her clients have empty homes to sell—investment properties, builders' speculative properties, and houses whose occupants have already moved on. "Staging is about selling real estate," says Schwartz, "not about decorating."

Jill Posner, a licensed sales agent for the Houlihan Lawrence office in Pound Ridge, recalls a couple who bought a tiny house as a weekend property, then promptly changed their minds.

"It wasn't working for them, so they quickly put it on the market," says Posner. "Because it was so small—just one bedroom—and it was being shown empty, no one could really see its potential. There were very few showings."

Posner recommended that the homeowners call in Kitty Schwartz for

a consultation. Her suggested changes—which included painting, adding new hardware to the dated cabinets in the home’s tiny kitchen, and bringing in small-scale furnishings that complemented the home’s diminutive proportions—were just the right formula. Within two weeks, the house was in contract.

While some staging projects involve furniture rentals, repainting, and other expenses that can add up to a non-insubstantial bottom line, the results of a single consultation and recommendations from a talented stager can turn the tables for a ho-hum listing.

As Schwartz points out, there’s a well known industry catchphrase: staging your home will always cost less than your first price reduction.

six star tips from the staging pros

IF YOU’RE THINKING OF SELLING and want to put your home’s best foot forward, you can begin today. (You just may like the results so much that you decide to stay a while.) We asked four of the county’s premier home stagers for some pointers for making a home more marketable:

1. Do a drive-by. Check out your home’s curb appeal. “Look at your house the way a potential buyer would,” says Westchester stager Gabrielle Shannon, who early in her career was a photo stylist for top designers and retailers. “Drive by slowly. Would you stop?”

Shannon, who renovated and sold a half-dozen homes before she founded her South Salem-based business, Stage to Show, reminds anyone who is considering selling to do some basic things to enhance curb appeal. “Light is vital to a home, so prune bushes away from windows, and clean them inside and out,” she says. “Make sure your lawn is green and your gardens are weeded and mulched. These are the basics.” >>

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2. Point and shoot. Get out the digital camera and take some photos of each room of the house "as is." After living in a home for years, you may no longer be able to see your own space objectively. "These photos help you 'see' what the buyers are going to see," advises Kitty Schwartz.

3. Declutter. What's clutter?

According to Jill Steinberg, clutter is everything that the buyer doesn't need or care to see: your reading material, your photos, your collection of (fill in the blank).

"Clear all horizontal surfaces as much as possible and all floors of everything inessential," she says. "Pare down closets and cabinets." Buyers presume that if your things fit easily into the closets and cabinets, there's enough storage. If your closets runneth over, people will think your storage area is too small.


4. Neutralize décor. Jennifer

Stoltz suggests replacing floral bedding with white bedding and removing any quirky or oversized furnishings, putting them in storage. Buyers often get distracted looking at homeowners' belongings. "The goal of staging is to get buyers to focus on the benefits of your home, not the décor," Stoltz explains.

5. Appeal to the senses. It

may seem obvious, but make sure your home is spotless, because people respond to a clean house. Don't leave things out on the kitchen counter, except for a bowl of beautiful fresh fruit, and put away the clothes lying on the floor and the papers piled on the night table. "And think of aromatherapy," says Shannon. "Prior to a showing, burn a scented candle or heat some cider with a cinnamon stick. These subtle enhancements appeal to the senses."

6. Think ahead. If you think you need the help of a stager, don't call two days before your first open house. All the stagers interviewed recommend calling a professional at the point when

you begin thinking about putting your home on the market. "Don't wait," says Novick. "Using a stager for a consultation is usually quite affordable and will give you a lot of new ideas. Trying to clean, rearrange, and declutter on a rushed schedule is stressful." 

Author of five books, Judy Ostrow writes about interior design, architecture, renovation, and home repair for regional and national publications. She lives with her husband Sam in an 18th-century farmhouse in Pound Ridge.

finding a home stager

THE INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION of Home Staging Professionals has a website (www.iahsp.com) that can help you find members in the Westchester area. All members of the association have been accredited by StagedHomes.com and have the designation ASP (Accredited Staging Professional) after their names. Real estate agents also are good connections for finding home stagers.

All four companies interviewed for this article work throughout Westchester and the tri-state area.

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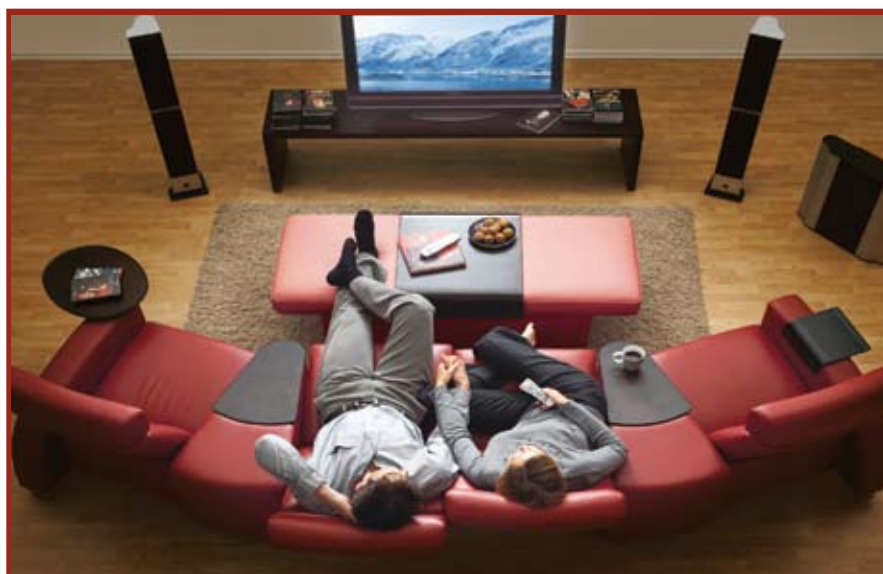
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