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Stay focused while your house is on the market

Ellen James Martin / Special to The Detroit News

For the family of five, it took three months and 27 showings before they struck a deal for the sale of their small, ranch-style house. Though 90 days or longer is now the norm in their neighborhood, they experienced the lengthy selling period as one long ordeal -- involving lots of yelling.

"With three kids, ages 6 to 14, the couple had a tremendously hard time keeping the house as immaculate as necessary to make a positive impression on visitors. When they finally got an offer, they breathed a huge sigh of relief," recalls Sid Davis, the real estate broker who listed their 10-year-old house.

As this story illustrates, the strain of keeping an unsold home looking good can mount over time.

"Whenever a house takes more than a month to sell, everyone is under duress. This period is particularly stressful for people with small kids or teenagers," says Davis, author of "A Survival Guide for Selling a Home."

Davis says, sellers in these competitive markets need both patience and coping strategies to keep their homes in showable condition.

Here are several suggestions:

- **Get your home in good order.**

As a former real estate agent turned professional organizer, Vicki Norris knows how tough it can be to keep a For Sale house in prime showing shape. It's especially hard when the turmoil of a move is overlaid on another family issue -- such as the need to find nursing care for an elder parent.

"When life takes us off track and we get disorganized, I call that 'situational disorganization.' It's doubly hard for someone dealing with a major life event to add a move to their plate," says Norris, who heads her own consulting firm, Restoring Order (www.restoringorder.com).

To reduce upkeep demands, Norris urges would-be sellers to streamline their homes before heading into the market. That means sorting through excess items, putting these in storage. It also means designating a spot for all your remaining possessions.

To ready their homes for showtime, an increasing number of sellers are turning to professional organizers, who are generally less judgmental than the friends and family members who might agree to help you de-clutter. You can find a professional through the National Association of Professional Organizers (www.napo.net).

- **Store your excess belongings.**

You may want to hang on to your collections of bowling trophies, Civil War books, antique tea cups and gourmet kitchen gadgets. Yet leaving these in view while your home is shown to prospects could make it less inviting and harder to sell.

One option is to pack your collections in uniform-sized boxes, stacking these neatly in your garage.

Yet, as Davis says, you could be better off keeping these boxes in a rented storage unit until your property sells.

"The garage has become a more important feature of the house, due to all the home and garden TV shows and magazines telling people they should fix up and decorate this space. So, if feasible, it's better to avoid packing boxes into your garage, which will make it look cramped," Davis says.



- **Use a top-quality cleaning service.**

Are you a little more slovenly than you care to advertise to potential buyers of your home? If so, you may wish to invest in what Davis calls a "super-duper cleaning."

"At least once at the beginning of your sale, you need to get rid of every bit of dust and cobwebs. You also need to purge the place of all those dead insects and make sure your chandeliers get the attention they deserve. Either you do all this work yourself or you bring in pros," Davis says.

Though it could cost a few hundred dollars, one in-depth cleaning could spare you the need to repeat the process for another 60 to 90 days.