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Fixing it up on the cheap: Tips to help sell your home

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In many neighborhoods across America, an unusually large supply of unsold homes is making prospective home sellers nervous.

What's more, few sellers have the extra funds to do the fix-ups they need to command buyer attention in a highly competitive market.

"Many sellers are in a bind now. Their properties have to be in the 'best of the best' condition to sell. But they don't have money to hire contractors," said Sid Davis, the author of several real estate books.

Davis, a veteran broker, believes a housing recovery will occur by late 2008. But that's small consolation for homeowners who must sell now for financial reasons.

All eight of the home listings he's currently handling are involuntary sales. Many owners must sell because their mortgage payments have escalated, or because someone in the household has lost a job.

The good news is that sellers who lack cash to hire contractors can, on their own, take several significant steps to improve the condition of their property.

Here are several pointers for cash-short home sellers:

- Face the emotional hurdles first.*

"There's always a psychological problem when people are forced to sell a home. But the longer their funk goes on, the worse it becomes. It's a downward spiral, like an airplane in an uncontrolled nosedive," Davis said.

One way family members can help each other pull out of their bad mood is to call a family meeting to assess the situation, develop a step-by-step approach to solving it and generate a little teamwork and optimism, Davis said.

Besides the classic "to-do list," you'll want to create a timeline for your presale work, which can easily span several weeks or longer, said Vicki Norris, a professional organizer and author of "Restoring Order to Your Home."

It's also important to give yourself small rewards along the way.

"Protect your sanity. Schedule time for you, including at least a few minutes each day to unwind, gather your thoughts, update your lists, and take a hot bath," Norris said.

•*Upgrade your kitchen through your own hard work.*

Are your kitchen cabinets showing their age? If so, Davis recommends several low-cost ways to improve their appearance without hiring a contractor.

"Many wood cabinets look much better if you rub them down with lemon oil. Or consider sanding your cabinets and then repainting them in high-gloss white paint. Also, for under \$50 you can improve the looks of your cabinets with new door pulls and hinges," said Davis, author of "Home Makeovers That Sell."

In addition, you can replace a worn kitchen floor inexpensively by laying new tile, a skill easy to acquire by taking a free or low-cost class offered at a home center store, Davis said.

•*Paint your way to a better home sale.*

One time-honored and cost-effective tactic for adding appeal to your interior is to paint the walls and trim throughout the place. For advice on painting technique, consult the Web sites of major paint companies, or borrow a manual or video on the topic from the library.

"You shouldn't need a whole class in painting. Ninety percent of good painting is just grunt work, including the sanding and surfacing you should do in preparation," Davis said. He adds that choosing neutral colors and decent quality paints is better than using the cheapest paints.

•*Stand out from the pack through de-cluttering.*

Virtually all home purchasers seek to make a fresh start in the new place. Consequently, they're put off at the sight of a property crammed with too many furnishings, toys, papers, electronic gear and personal memorabilia. They can't picture themselves living there.

Fortunately, de-cluttering a home is nearly cost-free. And, as Davis said, a property that's free of junk has the potential to make a strong positive impression on home shoppers.

"De-cluttering is an especially powerful tool because only about 10 percent of sellers ever get around to doing it, even though their listing agents urge them to," Davis said.

Unless you face a major emotional barrier to letting go of belongings, Davis said you won't need to pay a professional organizer to help make your de-cluttering project happen.

You just need to go room by room to cull through your possessions, allowing plenty of time to do the work. Scheduling donation pickups by charitable groups also can save you time and money, while helping good causes.

•*Schedule a "clean freak" weekend.*

Once you've completed easy-to-do home improvement projects and purged your property of excess belongings, it's time to take on another fundamental task: making your place sparkling clean.

As Davis said, it's wise to clear your schedule, setting aside at least one full weekend for in-depth cleaning. To ensure focus, purchase any basic cleaning supplies you need, (natural products like vinegar are especially inexpensive), before the weekend begins.

Don't forget window cleaning throughout the house, which can make a home seem noticeably lighter and brighter.

•*Don't attempt to do complicated home upgrades yourself.*

To be sure, those selling their homes under duress rarely have the money to call in contractors for complex or hazardous repairs such as roofing or electrical work. But that doesn't mean they should attempt these projects themselves, Davis said.

Instead of trying to take on this risky and potentially hazardous work yourself, Davis suggested you offer would-be buyers of your property certain concessions on price that are equal to the cost of hiring professionals for these jobs.

"No matter how stretched you are for money to get your home in salable condition, never go beyond your area of expertise on difficult home repairs," Davis said.