

How to get buyers to fall in love with your home in a slow real estate market

by Debra Gould, The Staging Diva®

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Home buyers shop with logic but they buy on emotion. In a slow real estate market, prospective buyers don't feel pressured to make an offer because there are so many homes to choose from.

But somewhere during the emotional roller coaster ride of looking at disappointing listing after listing, they walk into a house that almost immediately feels like home. That's when a prospective buyer will be motivated to make an offer rather than risk losing his or her "dream home."



The goal of home staging is to create the right environment for potential buyers to fall in love with a home and imagine themselves living there.

Here are the most important ten steps you can take to help buyers fall in love with your home, even in a slow real estate market.

Step 1: Identifying what you don't need right now

Many people don't feel they have enough room for all their belongings or the activities they want to enjoy in their home, so they start looking for a bigger house.

In fact, that might be why you're moving!



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In this step, you identify all the things you don't need right now. Eliminating clutter includes putting away personal items. Is your fridge covered in photos and school notes? Does the edge of your bathtub look like a drugstore shampoo aisle?

These distractions make it harder for potential buyers to imagine themselves living in your space.

You want to show prospective buyers that there is plenty of space in your home. For example, you don't want to draw attention to limited closet space, or that your kitchen doesn't have room for all your gadgets or that there's nowhere to keep all your toiletries. Every house has its drawbacks, you just don't need to highlight them!

You want every room to feel open and welcoming rather than overcrowded with furniture. To accomplish this you need to de-clutter every inch of your home and often cut back on the furniture you have in some rooms.

Open every closet, bathroom and kitchen cabinet and any other built-in storage space. Get rid of everything you don't absolutely need right now or over the next 3 months.

Typical items you'll need to get rid of include:

- Off season sports equipment
- Off season clothing
- Expired medications
- Old toothbrushes and toiletries you're not using
- Outdated and ill fitting clothing, shoes, boots and accessories
- 5 year supply of toilet paper, canned goods etc. you bought on sale
- Old bags and gift wrap
- Empty bottles
- Broken chairs, bicycles and similar items
- Trophies, photo albums and other collectibles
- Old magazines, school textbooks and notes
- Wedding and holiday gifts you rarely use or don't even like
- Old toys, games and childhood mementos not being used
- Extra furniture and accessories that don't fit the space or you no longer love
- Excess toys and games (do your kids really need everything right now?)

Step 2: Getting rid of what you don't need right now



Before you can start decorating to attract home buyers you need to have a clean slate to work with. Now is the time to get rid of all the items you don't need while your home is on the market.

Remember that whatever you pack up and get rid of now will make moving so much easier.



This home (pictured at left) got a whole new exercise and work room once all the junk was cleared out of the basement for showings!

Once you've identified all the items you don't need in Step 1, it's time to find a new home for it all.

Your options include:

Having a garage sale

Unless you have considerable time before your house hits the market, forget about holding a garage sale. It's very time consuming to organize and promote the event and then stand there all day while people haggle with you about whether they'll pay you 25 or 50 cents for that mug you wanted to get rid of. Do you really have the time and energy for this right now? Is the money you might make worth the hassle?

Donations to charity

Now is a great time to support a worthy cause. Whether it's disaster relief, the local shelter— there are always groups who need gently used clothing, toys, furniture and household items.

It feels great to donate things. You paid for it long ago so forget the garage sale and share with people who are less fortunate. This is a much faster way to get rid of what you don't need than having a garage sale.



Give it to whomever shows up first

If you have some things that you don't want to keep or donate, consider calling everyone you know and saying, "I've got some great stuff to get rid of. I'm happy to give it to you but you need to come by this weekend." Setting a deadline and keeping to it is important. You don't have the luxury of time when you need to sell your house.

One of the fastest ways to get rid of something without throwing it into the garbage is to drag it to the curb and stick a free sign on it. It's amazing what will magically disappear within hours.

Throwing it away

The least environmentally friendly solution. You can cut back on garbage by using the other ideas listed above, but some things have just exceeded their useful life and it's time to say good bye.

Off site storage

Don't turn your basement or garage into a dumping ground for clutter. It will turn off buyers who want enough storage themselves. Anything you want to keep, but don't need while your home is on the market should go to off-site storage.

Beware of your temptation to store everything. Ask yourself whether you really want to see this item again in your new home. If the answer is no, then don't take it with you!

Moving is a great time to wipe the slate clean of the extra baggage and clutter in our lives that only weighs us down. Don't fall into the trap of taking it all with you into your next home!

Step 3: Getting painting, cleaning and repairs underway

All those annoying fix-it projects finally need to be attended to. If you don't, prospective buyers will notice them and deduct their estimated cost (with a generous allowance for the "hassle factor") from what they're prepared to pay for your home.

You'll need to go through every room in your house and all around the outside and make four lists:

- To Clean
- To Repair
- To Replace
- To Paint

In this attic (at right) an attractive home office was created by rearranging furnishings and replacing the wrinkled and worn carpet with a floating floor (cost \$400 for labor and materials, installed same day).

It's important to attend to even small details since dripping taps, moldy caulking around tubs, doors that don't open/close properly, burned out light bulbs, cracked walls, etc. all get in the way of romancing the home buyer.

And, since everyone is leery of possible hidden defects, prospective buyers worry about what they can't see when there are so many obvious and easy-to-fix issues. When a home is obviously clean and well maintained, buyers are more likely to assume the things they can't see are sound too.

It can take some effort to find painters, handymen and cleaning teams to come in as quickly as you need them.

This is one reason many home sellers hire a home stager— they have these contacts and can pull a team together more quickly than you can do on your own.

A word about cleaning . . .

This is the time to be obsessively compulsive about making your home sparkle inside and out. No water spots on the taps, no sticky counters, no pet hair on the floors, no dust on the furnace or electrical panel. Every detail must be attended to. Think luxury hotel bathroom when trying to decide how clean is clean enough.



Most people can't live in a spotless environment all the time. This is one of the more stressful aspects of having your home on the market— but it's worth the effort to sell your home for top dollar. You can hire a professional service to come in and deep clean everything; then take 20-30 minutes each day to maintain it.

Appliances should sparkle even if you're not including them with the house. After all, you might throw them in later as a negotiating tool.

Counter tops, taps, sinks and bathtubs should be shiny and free of water spots. If you have a pedestal sink, don't forget the dust that collects on top of the plumbing where it attaches to the wall. If the whole sink is spotless and the taps, it will look new!

Dust shelves and vacuum or "Swiffer" the floors. Naturally, all beds should be made.

Remember clean windows let in more light and look newer. Hire a service if you have to — it's worth the investment.

A word about painting . . .



Take down any personal photos, graduation certificates and religious items (none of which belong in a well-staged home) and don't put any of them back after painting. They belong in offsite storage.

Generally the more neutral your paint colors, the more you'll appeal to a wider range of buyers. But, don't paint everything white or the same shade of beige.



This is boring! It's better to warm it up with a palette of 3 to 6 different but complementary tones throughout the house.

If you're catering to a younger more urban buyer, don't be afraid of color. Check through decorating magazines for ideas on the latest trends in wall colors.

You might find the "[Staging Diva® Ultimate Color Guide: the easy way to pick colors for home staging projects](#)" helpful. It's written for home stagers, but it will give you 15 home staging color palettes to work with and more. I provide specific color names and numbers so that you can match them at any paint store in North America.

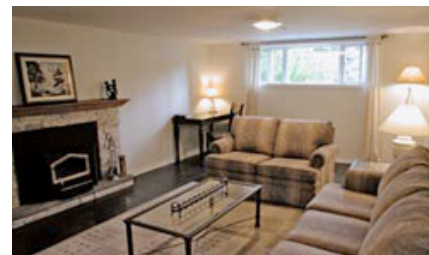
Step 4 Deciding on furniture placement

A common problem I encounter when staging a room for home sellers who are living in their home, is that the furniture is not arranged well for selling (where the intention is to show an open and welcoming environment to potential buyers).

Large couches or dressers are often visual barriers when entering, or the furniture is arranged awkwardly.

How you live and how you sell are two different things. If don't have the eye for how to rearrange furniture, consider hiring a Home Stager.

For only a few hundred dollars you can have a consultation done and get the best advice of a professional. Then you can do the rest of the work yourself if you're trying to save money.



You can get help finding a home stager at the [Staging Diva Directory of Home Stagers](#).

Step 5: Buying or renting and arranging furniture



Your home might be furnished quite well for how you want to live in it, but that doesn't mean it's in the right shape for showings.

While home buyers aren't buying your furniture, they are buying into a perceived lifestyle. To be motivated to make an offer they need to imagine how they will live in your home.



If you've been too busy or "house poor" to get around to furnishing every room, now is the time to change this, if only temporarily.

Vacant rooms make prospective buyers wonder what situation the sellers are in and how badly they need to sell. You never want to appear desperate to sell or you'll have buyers thinking "low ball offer."

If you don't know where to get rental furniture, or you don't have the eye for how to furnish a room to show off its best features, consider the services of a professional Home Stager. It will be money well spent!

You can get help finding a home stager at the [Staging Diva Directory of Home Stagers](#). I also do home staging consultations by phone throughout Canada and the US, working from digital photos you provide.

Step 6: Buying or renting and arranging art and accessories

Remember your goal in decorating your house to sell is to help buyers imagine themselves living in your home. To that end, it's important to remove all personal photos, graduation certificates, trophies and religious items.



Unless you have art stashed away in storage or you can borrow a few pieces from friends or relatives, you'll need to look at purchasing or renting art.

Art for home staging should:

- ☞ Make a room feel comfortable, open & inviting.
- ☞ Not become a distraction to buyers.
- ☞ Complete the look of a room.

For examples of the type of art that is appropriate for different rooms in your home, visit the [Staging Diva Home Staging Art Shop](#).

At the Staging Diva Home Staging Art Shop, you can also order my free special report, "Staging Diva Top 10 Tips for Using Art for Home Staging."

In the entrance hall pictured below, a simple black and white image balances the look of the glass half-moon table. The area was small so this created a focal point without making the space feel crowded.

The table and artwork were rented to replace a large wood desk that sat there previously making the space feel cramped, and blocking easy access to the stairs up to the second level.

It's important to hang art in the right place. It must be in proportion to the furniture below and add to the sense of balance. It's also critical to hang it at the right height. A professional home stager knows how to do all this for you.

Window treatments are also important in all but the cheapest of homes. Consider adding decorative rods and pre-made drapery panels to dress up a window or hide an unappealing view.



Step 7: Set the right mood with lighting and music

It's important to let in some light. It might be mood lighting to you, but if you're trying to sell your home, keep it bright! Dimly lit rooms tend to look small and dingy— especially during the day.



If you have a particularly dark room, consider investing in a floor lamp that will bounce light off the ceiling.

It's important to open all window coverings and lights prior to house showings. Don't assume the agent showing your home will do this.

You can also request that any agent showing your home leave the lights on for the next showing. Even if there isn't another showing booked, it creates the impression of lots of activity. This is especially effective if you announce it on your way out so the potential buyer hears you.

Soft background music can help create a soothing environment and camouflage neighbor and traffic noise.

But make sure the volume is very low. Blaring TVs are definitely a no-no, but you'd be surprised how many people leave them on for showings!

Step 8: Buy and arrange flowers

You don't need to spend a fortune to have fresh flowers throughout your home. Even a daisy in a bud vase brightens a bathroom counter.

Ask your florist which blooms last a week. You can also use potted flowering plants that are in season for a low-cost solution.

Don't use plastic or obviously fake flowers, especially in an expensive home!



Step 9: Don't forget your cologne

Actually don't use any "cologne", ie: artificial room scents. They're offensive to many people and some buyers will be allergic to them. Contrary to all those TV ads designed to convince you to spray artificial scent all over your house to camouflage odors, it won't be necessary if your home is spotlessly clean.

Open some windows for at least 10 minutes. There is nothing worse than walking into a stuffy house or one that smells of smoke and pet odors with some fake scent layered over top of it.

What about baking cookies?

To answer a question I'm often asked, yes, the smell of freshly baked cookies does create a homey ambience for buyers, but only bother with this if you've done everything else on this list perfectly. If you still have time for cookies, pop a few in the toaster oven from pre-made dough. It will save you lots of time and create the same effect without all that baking mess to clean up.

Step 10 Don't forget curb appeal



Just like you wouldn't show up on a blind date with holes in your jacket and shoes, realizing (we hope) the terrible first impression you'd make, you shouldn't neglect the outside of your home when it's time to put it on the market.

House hunters usually have 8 or 10 appointments booked with their agent in a day. That's a lot of ground to cover and if they drive up to your home and think it looks bad, the most likely scenario is they'll say to the agent, "never mind, we don't need to see that one. Let's keep going to the next appointment."

So, you may think you have lots of showings booked on your home, but prospects might not even be walking through your front door.



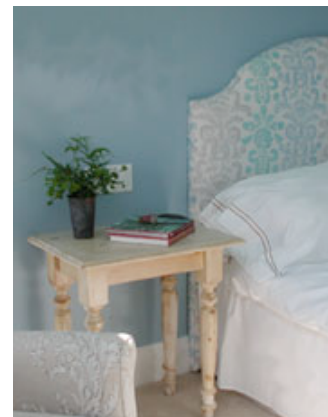
To increase your home's curb appeal, follow these tips:

- Replace rusty mailbox with a new one that fits the look of your home.
- Replace ugly or hard to see house number.
- Clean or replace (if necessary) exterior light fixtures, ensure maximum wattage to keep your home bright at night.
- Remove storm door.
- Clean, paint or replace front door as necessary.
- Clean door and window trim, porch, railings, steps, windows, etc. as necessary.
- Clean or replace welcome mat (you'll take it to your new home too!).
- Consider replacing door hardware if dated or in poor shape. Ensure door hardware and door kick plate, number sign and mailbox match. For example, don't have a brass kick plate and brushed nickel door handle.
- Use planted urns or window boxes, especially if your front yard landscaping isn't that great.
- Power wash the exterior, drive way and paths leading up to the house.

Final Thoughts

Step back and look at your home with the eye of a highly critical buyer. One of my clients said it well when he described what he called “the sock on the TV syndrome.” In other words, something has been sitting for so long in one place in your house that you don't even see it anymore.

By the way, this client hired me after his \$949,900 home had sat on the market for 6 weeks without a single offer. His agent wanted to drop the list price by \$50,000, so he called me instead.



After 6 hours of rearranging almost all the contents in his home, he got three offers and sold at 98% of his original asking price. How's that for a return on a minimal investment in outside advice?

If you've completed these 10 steps and you're still in a panic to get your house showing-ready, why not look at how hiring a professional home stager can help you?

About the Author



Internationally recognized home staging expert Debra Gould is President of Six Elements Inc. and the creator of The Staging Diva® Home Staging Business Training Program. Debra bought staged and sold 6 of her own homes in 4 cities prior to launching her staging company in the fall of 2002.

Debra Gould is the only person teaching the business of home staging who combines an MBA in marketing, 20 years experience as an entrepreneur and the proven track record of actually growing a successful home staging business herself from scratch— not as a sideline to a real estate practice, but as a stand alone and profitable home-based business.

Debra knows from first-hand experience what it takes to get a home staging business



off the ground with a shoe string budget, and she knows how to attract home staging clients as proven by the hundreds of satisfied clients she's served.

Debra used her marketing talents to grow her staging company, Six Elements Inc., very quickly and within the first year had been featured in prominent publications like Woman's Day and Reader's Digest and has appeared on HGTV and Life Channel.



Because of all the requests Debra was getting from women all over the US and Canada who wanted to start similar businesses, Debra launched the Staging Diva® Home Staging Business Training program in January of 2005.

Since that time she has personally trained over 800 women and men in the US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Europe and South Africa, to start and grow a successful home staging business.

This growing network of home stagers is available to homeowners and agents who need help finding a home stager through the free [Home Stager Locator Service](#).

Entrepreneur Magazine identified home staging as one of the hottest growth businesses in 2006. And, The Staging Diva® Home Staging Program is the only home staging business opportunity recognized by Entrepreneur Magazine in all their 2006, 2007 and 2008 Be Your Own Boss and Business Start Ups Guides.



The Staging Diva Debra Gould has also appeared on CityTV, GlobalTV, CBC Television and CBC Radio, CTV, The Wall Street Journal, CNNMoney, Fort Wayne Journal Gazette, CBS NewsRadio, Radio Colorado Network, MoneySense, House and Home, Home & Decor, Style at Home, Centre of the City, USAA Magazine, FabJob Guide to Become a Home Stager, Home Style Magazine, The Globe & Mail, The National Post, The Toronto Star, and many others.

You can learn more at www.stagingdiva.com and www.sixelements.com

NOTE: All room photos in this report are from home staging projects by Debra Gould, The Staging Diva® for clients of her home staging firm, Six Elements Inc.

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