

## The big sell – styling your home for top dollar

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Presentation is the key to getting the right price when selling property, Jodie Thomson writes.

Buyers fall for it every time. The moody, muted palette, the designer furniture, groovy artwork and artfully arranged knick-knacks. It's all so deliciously sophisticated and modern, buyers just want it, even though all they're really buying is the bricks and mortar.

Professional styling, right down to bringing in hired furniture and accessories, will maximise the value of any property, say real-estate agents. And it's even more important in a quiet market, when most properties need a little nudge to clinch that sale.

"It's definitely money well spent," says McGrath agent Margie Attard, a former interiors stylist. "Generally you'd hope it would add between 5 and 10 per cent to the sale price."

An expert makeover will show off a property's best features and disguise the undesirable bits. It will help buyers understand the space. But most importantly, a professionally styled home will pull all the right emotional strings for buyers who fall in love with the lifestyle the home portrays.

"Buyers and sellers are much more design aware these days," says interiors stylist Liz Barton, from Plan It Interior Design. "Often you're competing against other people who are getting professional styling help."

### The cost of style

So how much does professional styling cost, and how much should you spend?

A full, professional makeover, complete with hired furniture, will cost thousands of dollars. For example, you'll pay about \$4000 to \$6000 to rent furniture for a typical three-bedroom house for six weeks.

Stylists usually charge by the hour, from about \$110 to \$150 an hour, and many offer makeover packages. A cheap option, if you just want to polish up what you've got without spending thousands, is a one-off consultation from a stylist.

"We charge \$110 an hour and a consultation usually takes one to two hours," says stylist Jane Laskaris, of Essential Living. "We do a checklist of what needs to be done in every room, and the clients can do it themselves."

Another cost-friendly option is a part makeover, maybe focusing on a trouble spot in a house.

"We did that recently in an apartment that had a totally dead area near the veranda," agent Attard says. "We created a casual seating area there and the owner couldn't believe the difference."

Working out how much to spend on the presentation of your property before you sell depends on lots of factors, like the size of the property, the market you're in and the overall value.

"If you're selling an apartment for \$350,000 and the stylist wants \$4500 to style it, that's a huge outlay on a lower-end property," says agent Jane Schumann. "But at the upper end you're more likely to get that money back."

### **Less is more**

In many cases, you don't need to spend thousands. Simple, expert tricks can make any home look brighter and more modern.

One thing almost all sellers get wrong is having too much stuff, says Laskaris.

"We nearly always do a big de-clutter," she says. "It's all the little things, the knick-knacks, that people have been living with for so long, they don't even see them."

Reducing clutter instantly adds a clean look to any room and maximises the space.

"Buyers want to see the house and see themselves in it," Laskaris says. "When it's overwhelmingly cluttered and there's furniture everywhere, they can't see the rooms for what they are."

That means clearing everything off the kitchen benchtops and bathroom vanities.

"Buyers don't want to see your toothbrushes. In kids' rooms, we say put all the toys in a basket or container and leave the nicest toy out on top," she says.

With personal photographs, some argue it's better to hide them and de-personalise the space, so buyers can better imagine themselves living there. Others say stylishly framed pictures of attractive people can help sell the aspirational lifestyle.

"We tend to limit the photos to maybe one or two," says Laskaris. "It depends on how they're presented. And it's best to group them together so they make a focus, rather than have them throughout the house."

### **Wow factor**

What's the secret to that magic sparkle that stylists bring to a home?

"It's little things," says stylist Karen Cohen, of Impact Interiors. "It might be opening the curtains and using nice lighting, even if it's daytime, to get that mood. It might be a lovely bunch of flowers in a key spot, or replacing their burnt-out candles with a beautiful decoration."

Adding visual focal points throughout the home, especially at the entrance, is essential.

"It could be a nice painting at the entrance, or a console with a nice accessory on it," says Laskaris. "Some homes might have a long hallway from the entrance, but in the first room they walk into you've got to have that wow factor."

Accents of colour and quality artworks will also give rooms a professional finish. "We tend to put artworks in feature places," says Laskaris. "If there's an artwork behind the sofa, we'll take a colour from it and use that shade of cushions on the sofa."

Sometimes, it's a simple case of re-jigging the furniture layout to make a room flow better.

"Most people don't have an idea of scale and space, and they always put the sofas around the edge of a room," says Laskaris. "I might move the sofas in to create an L-shape or have them facing each other."

### **Fill 'em up**

People mistakenly think empty rooms look bigger than those filled with furniture, but in fact, the opposite is true. Correctly placed furniture helps buyers see the real scale of a room and visualise how their things will look in it.

"Empty rooms actually look smaller," says Schumann. "But if the rooms are small and have furniture in them, people can see what can fit there."

For example, if an average-sized bedroom is left empty, buyers often puzzle over whether they will fit a queen-sized bed and bedside tables in it.

"There's no emotional feeling in an empty home and you can't present a lifestyle," says Laskaris. "Also, empty rooms tend to show up any imperfections in a home."

### **Renters in or out?**

What if you're selling a rental property and the tenants are still in it? Do you rely on their styling skills, or boot them out and fill the space with hired furniture?

That depends on the quality of the tenants, the overall value of the property, and whether you can afford to lose that rental income.

"If the tenants present well and allow good and reasonable access, then we'd encourage them to remain," says Schumann. "But if they don't, and it's a valuable property, it's probably better sold empty."

McGrath agent Attard even recommends some owners move out for the sale period.

"If they're in a small apartment and it looks overwhelmed and overstuffed, people think it's too small and has no storage," she says.

### **Selling essentials**

Follow these golden rules to get the maximum sale price out of your property:

**DE-CLUTTER:** Clean, lean rooms look bigger, more modern and appealing to buyers.

**CLEAN + GO:** A totally spotless, odourless home is a must, inside and out.

**DE-PERSONALISE:** Hide family photos and belongings so buyers can visualise themselves living there.

**GO NEUTRAL:** A classic, neutral colour scheme will appeal to the widest range of buyers.

**ALL NATURAL:** Let nature in for a fresh feel. Open windows and doors and bring in fresh flowers.

**STREET APPEAL:** Give a good first impression, with an attractive, tidy front entrance.

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