



Home Sellers: Preparing your Home to Sell!

The housing market is slowly stabilizing, and you've decided to list your home. But what, if any, improvements should you tackle before selling? Should you just leave it all to the new homeowner?

There are two ways to look at pre-sale home improvements. You can either improve the curb appeal or the home's outward appearance with quick and often low-cost improvements, or you can make some higher-dollar changes with the goal of adding value to the home and increasing your asking price. The reality is that all houses benefit from a little "spiffing up" before being shown to buyers, and smart home sellers will take the time and effort to do so.

View your home with a critical eye

Great curb appeal with immaculate landscaping, fresh paint, tidy closets and cabinets, spotless windows and a clutter-free feeling are essential to make a home really stand out. Impressing potential buyers is often a one-shot deal, so take the time to make some minor improvements that can lead to a faster sale and a higher offer.

Assume the role of a home buyer. Give your home a critical look for dirt, flaws and cramped spaces. Then imagine the work ahead of you if you were to make this your new home. Think of your house as a commodity to be sold for top dollar, and you'll soon be eager to make needed improvements.

Drive around and notice well-cared-for homes. Yards are groomed, paint is fresh and entrances are neat and welcoming. Then take an honest look at your home, and roll your sleeves up to tackle the tasks below:

- Pressure clean rust, mold and mildew off exterior walls, sidewalks, decks, the roof and the driveway.
- Clean smudged windows and unclog gutters.
- Sweep sidewalks and driveways – and keep them clean.
- Edge sidewalks and remove weeds along the house and in the garden.
- Mow the lawn regularly.
- Trim back trees and shrubs that block the street view of your house for a more inviting appearance.
- Rake and remove leaves regularly.
- Trim tree limbs that are near or touching the roof.

- If you lack outdoor lighting, add a front porch light fixture and keep it turned on. Buyers often cruise by after dark to check out homes.
- Keep lights that are visible through front windows on for a warm appearance.
- If it's in your budget, fresh exterior paint makes a house look like new.
- An attractive front door, perhaps with leaded glass inserts, creates a great first impression. But if you can't afford a new door, replace worn handles and locks and apply a fresh coat of paint or stain.
- Clean carpets to remove odors and stains

Indoor re-dos

1. Every room, even the garage, should be spotless. Hiring a cleaning service is worth the minor investment if you are unable to give your home the once-over yourself. Clean major appliances, inside closets and do not forget to polish bathrooms.

2. Eliminate offensive odors – cigarette smoke and pet odor are permanent turnoffs and kill a sale. Send smokers outdoors, keep pets groomed and their bedding clean and out of the way and vacuum daily.

3. Make inexpensive repairs that greatly improve aesthetic appeal, such as repairing cracked grout, screwing in a loose shelf and replacing a cracked bath tile.

4. Remove clutter. Potential homebuyers can't envision themselves and their belongings in your home if they can't see past all your stuff. A rule of thumb is to eliminate at least one-third of your belongings from each room. If needed, invest in a storage space for your extraneous belongings while showing your home. Other clutter cutters: Store small kitchen appliances and other items off countertops and tables; Remove photographs and knick knacks from tables; and organize closets, pantry and cabinets.

Tips for vacant homes

Your home should be welcoming to buyers even if it is vacant. Keep your empty home inviting with the following tips:

- Vacant homes accumulate stale or mildew-laden air. Leave the heat or air conditioning running (depending on the season) to cut down odors. Set up a few softly fragranced air fresheners.
- Keep the lawn and landscaping groomed, even if you have to hire a service.
- Put a few lights on a timer switch to come on throughout the day.

Improvements that are worth your time

While you don't want to take on a major renovation project that could cost thousands right before you sell creating chaos and delaying your listing date, you should examine the list of improvements you might have done if you weren't selling. Weigh whether it is worth your while – and the potential boost to your selling price – to go ahead with the improvements. Here are some tips to add value to your home:

- Complete half-finished projects. No one will pay full price for a home that has half-painted rooms or a partially re-tiled bathroom. Now that you're selling, it's time to complete those projects you thought you could knock out yourself but never seem to have time to complete.
- Focus on the kitchen. Kitchens, centrally located in many homes, are critical to most buyers. An outdated kitchen can lower the value of your home, and something as simple as repainting cabinets and changing hardware can provide a modern update that can increase your home's value. Add new cabinets and replace counter tops and you could add thousands to your asking price.
- Paint the interior. Whether you have just a few too many smudges and dings, or your color scheme is too "1980s," it can be well worth the dollar to transform interior walls with a few coats of neutral color. Get bids for the best deal and you'll be surprised by how much better your home looks.
- Update or repair light fixtures. You can be sure that during a walk-through all lights will be switched on and questions will arise if a switch yields nothing but darkness.
- Repair appliances. Repair any appliances listed with the home or you can expect to not get your full list price.

Don't bother

- You might think adding a pool would increase your return on value but the truth is, most buyers aren't willing to give you the full price you paid for installation. Other major projects, such as adding a new story to your home, adding a master suite or installing carpeting may not give you the return at the sale that you were hoping for. Skip the project and let the buyer perform the projects he or she wants to do. If you need a new roof, you might consider splitting the cost with the buyer. Many buyers are willing to meet you half way on major repair projects, since they will be benefiting from the repairs for years to come.
- Whether you choose to make lower-cost improvements or higher-dollar renovations that can raise your home's asking price, it's a proven fact that real estate listings in great shape typically sell for more than those that are in only passable condition. Time and again, sellers who prep their homes for sale in advance reap the benefits with a faster sale and a higher sale price.