

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/business/chi-0610070195oct07,1,5048268.story>

Stagers enter home sale scene

In a slower real estate market, some sellers--even builders--are turning to staging experts to try and gain an edge

By Mary Umberger
Tribune staff reporter

October 7, 2006

Andrea Osterkorn was very specific: That White Sox poster had to go.

And so did every trace of the much-loved Daisy.

Erik Blitvich, meet tough love, real estate style: If you're trying to move a property in a slow market, you're not only going to have to clean it, you also might have to stage it, too.

Staging is the practice of dressing up, or sometimes dressing down, a home to make it more appealing to buyers. As a business, it's a relatively young field that's gaining a foothold in the Chicago area as anxious sellers look for a way to attract that increasingly scarce commodity: a sales contract.

"When there's a ton of houses on the market, you have to set yourself apart and help the buyer's imagination kick in," said North Side real estate agent Beth Wexner, who routinely uses stagers to help make her listings look more like builders' models than places where people live.

Sometimes, that might be as simple as re-arranging the furnishings, she said. Or it might entail an all-out decorative assault--whatever it takes to rub out the imprint of the person who currently lives there so that potential buyers can envision themselves lounging on the patio or puttering around in the kitchen.

Renting a truckload of furnishings and paying a stager to orchestrate the process can cost thousands. "They might spend up to \$30,000, oh, sure," Wexner said.

But most spend far less. On a recent day, for instance, Osterkorn had hauled about \$350 worth of rugs, vases, tables, prints--even a bowl of plastic lemons--into Blitvich's Lockport home in a whirlwind effort to "neutralize" it.

Advertisement



To do –
10/29/2006

- Reach out to current customers
- Generate new business**
- See measurable results – today!



Constant Contact®
The smart way to reach your customers™

Try it Free for 60 Days

She was staging Blitvich's townhouse, which also would get some paint and tile, because he had just signed a contract to build a single-family place nearby. His builder, Pulte Homes, wanted to ensure the deal wouldn't fall through if Blitvich got stuck with his townhouse, so it offered him \$2,000 worth of staging services to make sure he bought one of its homes.

It's a pilot program, and about half of Pulte's Chicago subdivisions offer it to combat a high rate of contract cancellations industrywide.

"A big objection we were hearing on the sales floor was that it was taking [would-be buyers] too long to sell their existing homes," said Kim Bachmann, a Chicago-area Pulte sales manager. "We were seeing people not wanting to take that next step because they were afraid of their home not selling."

That is why Osterkorn was turning Blitvich's townhouse into a veritable Ikea catalog setting. She explained it was her job to make sure the unit would not only wow the right buyer, but that it would not offend anyone, either.

That's why she rejected the Sox poster ("You might get a Cubs fan in here," she said), and why the chew toys and comfy bed of Daisy, the Lhasa Apso, would be stuffed into the garage during showings, and the dog would leave temporarily.

"Not everybody likes animals," said Osterkorn, who in a six-hour stretch would re-arrange the furniture and replace Blitvich's knick-knacks with her own, aided by Naperville stager Heather Klein.

Pet accoutrements were among a litany of possessions that presumably could distract someone from looking at the home itself. Besides the trappings of animal ownership and expressions of baseball devotion, she would remove family photos and as many toys as possible because they might turn off a childless buyer. As she stashed away two gigantic margarita glasses, Osterkorn said a seller should take no chances that a teetotaler would come for a walk-through.

"The weirdest thing will turn someone off," explained Marcia Smart, a Thousand Oaks, Calif., stager who is executive director of Interior Redesign Industry Specialists, an 850-member trade group based in Chicago.

"You have to get the home as generically appealing as possible. Paintings of nudes, personal collections, religious items, weaponry--if there's a collection of swords on the wall, it has to go."

Smart estimates 2,000 to 3,000 people work as stagers, who prep homes for sale, or redesigners, who reconfigure a home's furnishings to freshen it. Some do both.

Many are part-timers and they come from backgrounds that range from trained interior designers to real estate agents to those who just have a flair for decor, Smart said.

Osterkorn is a former human resources executive who started her Smart Surroundings staging firm in Glen Ellyn a year ago in what she described as a midlife crisis. She enjoyed decorating and took a five-day course in staging and redesign.

Though staging probably had its roots more than a decade ago in California, it's gaining momentum wherever home sales have stalled, she and other stagers said.

"Six months ago, we would say 'staging,' and you would get that look of a deer in the headlights," said John Vaile, a former investment banker who in March founded Staging Chicago, which has worked

primarily on North Side condos. "This is no longer the case."

Vaile said interest picked up when the market dropped off in the last few months. He said he's hearing from builders whose spec homes aren't getting much attention and from anxious sellers who want to cut the number of days on the market instead of cutting their asking price.

"The staging dollars you put upfront are usually less than your first price reduction would be," said Osterkorn, who said staging in Chicago could range from a few hundred dollars for a consultation to many thousands. And it's generally footed by the homeowner.

Some stagers charge by the hour, by the complexity of the job or by a percentage of the listing price; Smart estimates the typical client pays \$500 to \$1,500.

Staging isn't always an easy sell.

"We've used stagers, and sometimes it's justified," said James Kinney, president of Rubloff Residential Real Estate in Chicago. "But I caution people that they shouldn't bring someone in to stage a house just to justify an overpriced listing."

Others worry that there could be liability issues if the owner's furnishings are damaged. Or they're nervous that at the staging could be off the mark.

"I once got a quote to have it done after my clients moved out," said Chicago agent Colette Cachey. "I decided a staging company wouldn't help. Pottery Barn furniture in that elegant co-op would take away from the place."

And homeowners may be offended when told that their cherished furnishings are outta here.

"I wasn't thrilled when they told me to pack up 80 percent of my 5-year-old daughter's toys or to move my comfortable La-Z-Boy recliner out of the family room because it was taking up too much space," said Chip Wagner, a Naperville appraiser who conceded that staging probably speeded his home's sale last summer.

Blitvich said the process was less intrusive than he expected.

"I can see where some people would be uncomfortable with this," he said. "I came home, and it didn't feel like it was my home anymore."

But he said he realized that's the idea.

"I'll do whatever is going to make it sell faster," Blitvich said. "I need to have somebody walk in and want this townhouse pretty quick."

numberger@tribune.com

Copyright © 2006, [Chicago Tribune](#)