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Don't blow this chance to prep home

THE LOCAL SCENE BY MARY ELLEN PODMOLIK

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There is a silver lining out there for homeowners who, despite being eager to sell their homes, have opted to sit on the sidelines and wait out the current market's malaise.

They've got months, rather than weeks, to ready their houses for listing next year. That's good because there's some work to be done.

Bonnie Massa is moving forward with getting her two-bedroom South Loop townhouse ready to sell, although she's not sure whether she'll put it on the market this year or next.

She realizes that the current environment is a much different one than when she sold her last home in 2004; that time, she sold it by herself and in three weeks.

"I didn't do squat to it but clean it," Massa said. "But this is a very different ballgame now. There's a lot of competition, and it's a sophisticated buyer."

This time around, she already is planning to put some belongings and furniture in storage and get rid of the cherry-colored paint, that she adores, in a half bathroom.

Experts say Massa is taking the right approach in a market that likely will continue to favor buyers. Despite how perfect a home may be for its current owner, it's not ready to show prospective buyers, say real estate industry professionals.

Houses are either cluttered, outdated or just plain grimy.

"Sometimes I walk into spaces and I'm mortified. I don't know where to begin," said Debra Secher, owner of Home Staging of Chicago.

A homeowner's first step should be to hire a home inspector and turn the findings into a worksheet of problems to correct before listing the house, said Sid Davis, a Utah real estate broker and author of "Home Makeovers that Sell."

He also suggests letting potential buyers see that a home inspection was completed and any problems were remedied.

"That puts you head and shoulders above anybody else in the market," he said.

Clutter, professionals say, often is the biggest problem. Homeowners need to remove family pictures, trophies, knick-knacks and anything else that is going to distract buyers. You don't want to have them pay attention to the home you've created; you want them to see the house where they can make their own memories.

Make sure clutter is kept under control in children's bedrooms and play areas, too, by buying toy boxes now, and encouraging tykes to use them in advance of when the home goes on the market.



Homeowners need to take a critical eye to other parts of the home as well. Vivid color schemes and expensive decorating touches certainly reflect personal taste, but it is the owners', not the potential buyers. In the months before listing, wash walls to remove dirt and repaint where necessary in neutral tones.

"[Buyers] may not care if you have \$50,000 in decorating on the wall because they are going to do what they want anyway," said Naperville appraiser Chip Wagner.

Real estate agents advise clients to consider the characteristics of similar homes in the neighborhood that have already been on the market to gauge what a buyer's expectations will be. Existing cabinets may be OK, once they've had a good scrubbing and been wiped down with lemon oil; if not consider having them repainted or refinished.

Granite countertops and stainless-steel appliances seem a standard feature in most kitchens today, and Secher tells clients that it's better to make the upgrades themselves than offering buyers a credit to update the kitchens themselves.

The pitfall of such a strategy, she said, is it is one more impediment to a buyer simply moving in and enjoying a home.

And despite the retro or kitschy rooms that vie for attention in home magazines, Davis said it's better to replace 1980s-era fixtures and tile and color schemes. "Don't believe everything you see in the decorator magazines," Davis said. "You want what people will buy, not what looks good in the magazines."

Outdoor spaces also can easily be tackled in the fall to ready the home for spring. Plant spring bulbs, reseed brown areas, and spruce up a home's entryway by ridding it of any peeling paint.

"You can do it upfront and have it done and your sale be less stressful, or you can do it along the way and get panicky because the home isn't sold," Davis said.

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