

Sell: The right tactics can sway home buyer in winter

FROM PAGE 1H

realistic about the price will help sell property in the winter."

Dobo notes that there are things that sellers can't control, such as terms (which actually are very good at the moment) and location.

What they can control is condition, and a realistic review of your home's condition can mean a realistic price and, hopefully, a quicker sale.

In short, don't defer your maintenance. A lot of new things might look good to potential buyers, but then again, it might look as if your house was in really bad shape before the work, and it probably wasn't.

Doing projects as they need completing rather than waiting until right before you put your house on the market also is a lot easier on the pocketbook.

"If the property isn't up to the condition, it needs to be priced relative to its value in the marketplace," Dobo says. "That said, everybody deserves the most that they can get."

The good news? "The people who are out in the winter are very serious," Dobo says.

That means if it comes down to two properties and a decision, the more realistically-priced house might get the nod, since the buyer won't have to go back and forth so much on price negotiations.

There also are several tactics to consider if you selling:

Let there be light: This is an obvious one, given that real estate professionals will tell you this even when it's summertime. But have you really done it and also paid attention to the *outside* of your house, too?

"The same things that apply year round apply even more so in the winter," says Joan Cheek, a Realtor with The Filkerton Co.

"In the winter, the first things I think of are light and warmth."

Most agents make sure every light in the house is turned on before people come over, but doing this step yourself means you're covered if folks decide to come a few minutes early to an open house.

Open all the curtains and blinds, too, to take advantage of the light we have at this time of year, no matter how bleak.

Keep your exterior lights on in the early evening, too. Since it's dark so early, by the time folks decide to drive by your house after work, you want them to be able to see something.

And if you haven't made an effort to make your address numbers super-clear on your mailbox and on your house for the benefit of emergency personnel, by all means, do it now. You want buyers to find you.

Banish the holidays when they are over: "You don't want a rotted pumpkin on the back porch," says Kelly Coty, owner of Prix de Solde, a local home-staging company that offers a consulting service for sellers and also can be contracted to prepare a house for sale.

Likewise, don't leave depressing-looking Christmas lights and tired-looking garlands on display in mid-January, either.

Think winter, think festive, not post-holiday.

If you want something decorative, go for something seasonal and natural, like wheat sheaves, pine cones or a twig wreath.

Have a wood-burning fireplace but don't want to light it for an open house?

Consider a neat stack of birch logs or an arrangement of glossy magnolia branches.

Don't forget scent: Since it's colder, you might not have had your windows open in a while, but you might consider putting on a sweater and flinging open those

windows for a little while on the morning of an open house. It will make a difference.

In any event, don't go overboard with scented sprays, candles, potpourri or other man-made odors.

Cheek says she has had smart clients who made a point to make bread or chocolate chip cookies on the morning of an open house. The delicious smell lingers without being overwhelming.

Another trick is to fire up the bread machine if you have one. "That is just really delightful," she says about the subtle scent of bread that's recently come out of the oven, "but it's not a contrived smell."

If you use a lot of chemical scents, potential buyers might wonder what you are hiding.

Give 'em something they don't have: Along with having to go the extra mile to convince the smaller, but serious, pool of buyers that your house is "The One," consider giving buyers something they don't have at home. Prix de Solde's

Coty says.

Sparkling windows, spotless closets, super-clean refrigerators are starters.

"Anything we can do to make it feel cheerier," says Coty, who suggests adding extra accent lights, such as uplights behind your sofa or in the corner to brighten a room.

Another idea from Coty's file: Have at least one room that feels more like spring. Maybe it's a peaceful room with bright, colorful accents, or a pot of bulbs that are rooting. "Offer some spring," she says.

Empty houses can be harder but not impossible.

"I always like to put furniture in empty rooms," Coty says. "The problem in the winter is that it's cold, and if you walk into an empty house, it feels cold, still."

If you're not furnishing a house, at least try to borrow some rugs from your friends to visually warm up the floors and get rid of the echo of empty hardwood floors.

Landscaping still counts

"Anything you can do to make it look like this is a well-manicured, well taken care of property is a good thing," Cheek says.

Nobody expects a pot of blooming flowers, but a neat yard with raked or mulched leaves, tidy flower beds, trimmed shrubs and a swept porch, sidewalk or stoop looks good.

Instead of dark mulch in planting beds near the entry, consider pine straw, which is lighter, smells good and adds a nice color.

If you have a lot of empty planters and containers, either plant hardy, miniature-variety evergreens (which you'll need to keep watered and well-mulched) or simply plant inexpensive winter rye grass for a bright green splash that requires little maintenance.

And everybody out there needs clean gutters on their house by this time of year, whether or not you're selling. ■

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