

How to make your home stand out

You can help your house sell quickly and at a good price -- even in a slow market -- by following these suggestions from readers.

By MSN Real Estate staff



It takes a lot more than sparkling windows, scented candles and chocolate-chip cookies to sell a home in today's market

But those are among the take-home tips for home sellers from the folks who replied to MSN Real Estate message board request for advice on making a house stand out.

Readers' No. 1 suggestion, expressed in many variations: Clean every square inch of property and keep it clean until closing. More than 200 respondents started at the curb and didn't stop until the back fence as they posted suggestions to help attract buyers. Here are some of the best reader comments. (Editor's note: Posts have been edited for grammar and spelling.)

Online appeal

"The loveliest home doesn't have a chance with the poor photography I see in a huge portion of Internet listings, which are the first impression of your home for many buyers. With so many listings posted in some areas, trying to make out details in dark, blurry photos when there are a lot of other listings to look at could have a very negative effect. I always think that if I were trying to sell in this market, I'd be furious with my Realtor had a stylish, attractive home represented by a fuzzy, dark rectangle!" -- **suefrog**

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"We just learned from our buyer's agent that one outside shot of the home is usually Realtor code for a foreclosure or corporate-owned house." -- **Buying and Selling**

"Another thing in a listing that can sometimes make people shy away from even looking at your home is pets in the picture or notes about pets on the listing. My sister-in-law is VERY allergic to cats and cigarette smoke. When they move, it is always to a new house so they know there have been no previous owners to leave any lingering odors or allergens." -- **Az Native**

"If it's in your budget, get a small Web site just for your house address. I give all my clients one for free -- e.g., 123mainst.com. This enables you to put a ton more photos on your Web site, disclosure statements, (and) up-sell your house!" -- **Real Estate Diva**

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First impressions

"'Curb appeal' literally begins and starts with the curb! How clean and presentable is your curb? Does it need to have sand or pebbles swept clean? Does it need to have leaves, cigarette butts or other debris cleaned up? Are there weeds or grass growing in the cracks and crevices of your curbs and sidewalks? Concrete curbs (sidewalks, driveways, etc.) that are badly cracked or broken should be replaced. You'll be amazed at how other things in your yard start taking on a much more attractive look." -- **Curb Appeal**

"If the house is small, remember if you plant your bushes and trees at the corners of the exterior the house appears much larger." -- **B. Glass**

"Wash down the exterior of your house. You don't necessarily need to rent a power washer. A hose and broom and some dishwashing cleanser work great. ... Look for cobwebs and hornets nests weekly. Beg, borrow or steal a lawn edger if you don't use one regularly. Trim back all grass at every edge, including the street. Sweep the street gutters! You may have to

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the neighbors on both sides, too (I did), to make sure your section of the street looks really tidy and well-kept." -- **wecanhope**

"Curb appeal is huge, especially in the winter when sidewalks are icy and snow-covered. If you take time to shovel and seal your sidewalks, the home looks like it's been taken care of even when the buyers can't see the lawn under the foot of snow covering it. In the spring and summer, lawn ornaments are a no-no, and a quick driveway resealing is inexpensive and well-wondered for the drive-by appearance of your house." -- **Waddle**

"Being a real-estate agent myself, I come across many things that help sell a home. The most obvious is landscaping. Good landscaping makes a home look 100% better. Even if it's just some shrub and tree/shrub trimming along with some fresh mulch, do something to spruce up the outside appearance." -- **Realtor61**

Keep it clean

"Clean: Believe it or not, this can make your home more valuable. Either do it yourself or hire a cleaning service to come and deep-clean your house. Nobody buys a dirty shirt. Why would they buy a dirty house?" -- **mpharnish**

"When we found out we were going to move, I followed the best advice given to us: Make your house look like a very comfortable, expensive hotel room -- clean, uncluttered and not like anyone else has ever been there. We rented a storage unit and moved close to 75% of our belongings into it, including everything in the attics, and cleared out the closets to get those clothes we would need in two weeks. We sold in one day, \$5,000 above our asking price. ... However, it took a lot of work. I literally cleaned the tracks of the windows with Q-tips -- total craziness!" -- **anlatima**

"Make sure the areas around your furnace and hot-water heater are clean, neat and spacious. The components themselves should not be covered with dust, cobwebs, rust spots, etc. Even if they're old, they should look shiny and well-maintained. Change the filters often to help with dusty smells. ... Take everything out of the garage, vacuum all floors, walls and ceiling then paint it bright white. If there are shelves and brackets, paint them bright white too. Then bring back only a little of what once dwelled there." -- **wecanhope**

"The average time on the market in our Ohio city is now over six months! We listed and sold our home in three months with very little investment. We packed the things we didn't need in our daily lives. Gone were the kitchen appliances that get used once every other month, gone were the pictures/frames/art items, gone were the books, video games (we weren't currently addicted to) and other junk. Not only did we get a sale much quicker than our neighbors, but we got asking price -- just by getting a head start on the packing we were going to have to do anyway! -- **MajicJewel**

"Consider the following distractions I saw at my neighbors' house when they had it 'show ready': dirty bars of soap at the sinks, an empty plastic dish rack obscuring a nice almond-colored kitchen sink, unfolded and mismatched towels on the towel racks, several dirty windows, a bleach-stained pillow sham in the master bedroom, food-stained potholders near a lovely stove, faded lawn furniture cluttering a rather small backyard, and bulky furniture lined up military style against the wall in the family room. Really think out of the box when it comes to clutter and cleanliness; every wine-stained tablecloth and bunched-up throw rug chips away at the positive image you'd want to project in your home." -- **beebeebooks**

"An old kitchen can be a killer to even the nicest home. If your appliances are more than 10 years old, replace them. Upgrade laminate countertops to Corian, granite or something comparable. Dark wood cabinets could be painted white. Cheap cabinets could be refaced, if replacing is not within your budget. New hardware is an inexpensive and effective way to improve cabinet appearance. Replace vinyl tile with ceramic, Pergo or wood. Improve the lighting to make the kitchen as bright as possible. Clear the countertops as much as you can. Don't just clean the drip bowls on your stove, replace them. Every penny you put into a kitchen will be worth it in the end." -- **Maryland Realtor**

"Whenever it was time to sell my house, my husband said 'Better Homes & Garden' it. We even washed the light bulbs off and (polished) every bit of wood cabinetry and molding. I borrowed a good friend's bookcase to finish off a living room; I stored boxes and boxes of our things at my brothers'; and when there was a showing, put our dirty laundry in the car and drove it down the road. We even took the dog's dish and food (and the dog) to the neighbors." -- **midwestrealtor**

The great color debate

"Certainly you can decorate your house however you like, but once you are selling, you have to keep in mind what buyers are looking for. If you want to know what they like, go look at popular model homes in the area that are selling hot. However, they are decorated should be how you do it. No pink bathrooms or green walls. Paint it all a soft white!" -- **jchandjd**

"As far as colors go, it's good to have some color in your home. Buyers like to see that you've cared enough about your home to do that arduous sponge painting. However, don't use colors that look like they'll take three coats of primer and three coats of paint to cover up. Don't make every room a different pastel color. Don't use more than two colors in a single room. Do use any dark colors, as they make a room look smaller." -- **Maryland Realtor**

"I agree that garish or designer color schemes don't sell well. On the opposite end, stark white walls make a house look cold and unfinished. Painting walls a warm cream or taupe, with white trim, makes rooms more inviting but is still neutral enough for most buyers. ... If your furniture is shabby or mismatched, consider putting it into storage and renting some new furniture, rugs and silk plants just until the house sells. Visit some of the model homes at new developments for ideas. The decorators know what makes a home look attractive and classy." -- **CountryCousin**

The Smell Factor

"Consider the smell of your home. Have a neighbor come in and smell it. You might tell them that you have been smelling something and wondered if they could smell it too; that will help encourage them to tell you the truth. They might tell you what nobody else has -- that your house smells like cigarettes, mold or cat urine." -- **Perplexed Neighbor**

"When I go into a house with smelly candles, simmering oils or baking cookies, all I wonder is what odor they're trying to cover up! I once looked at a house where we arrived to some frantic cookie baking -- and I thought nothing of it until I went into one of the bathrooms that had a distinct odor of sewer! So please, can the candles -- they come across as overkill (lil intrusive perfume) at the least, and at worst they smack of deception and dishonesty. I find myself thinking, if they'll cover up an odor, what else will they conceal?" -- **OregonSal**

"I just bought my first home and I have to say smell was an interesting factor. The house I bought always smelled amazing every time I toured it. Some of the other ones smelled like trash or pets. I think a nice air freshener is a good, subconscious way to sell your home." -- **Lauren in Dallas**

"Something else that really helps is the interior smell. If you don't feel like baking chocolate-chip cookies (seems to be a common favorite), put a little water in a pot, add a little vanilla extract and put it in your oven at about 200 degrees. Can be a good alternative. I would avoid cinnamon at all costs, however. People from certain areas of the world find cinnamon to be an offensive smell." -- **Realtor61**

"As far as candles and cookies and such ... you really can't leave those things going in the house while you're gone. So you have to count on cleanliness and clean-smelling things to do the trick while you're away. No. 1: Don't allow any smoking in the house while it's on the market. To help with other typical smells, I'd recommend the following. For the bathroom: Try swabbing the toilet daily with a little squirt of dishwashing liquid or clean-smelling shampoo. For the kitchen: Run some ice and dishwashing liquid in the garbage disposal daily. For carpets: Steam clean. Then steam clean again. I'd think that all things being equal, most folks could live with a paint color that wasn't to their taste for a few months after moving in. But one would pay top dollar for a house that appears ill-maintained and smells just plain weird!" -- **wecanhope**

"No offensive house odors. ... Many homes were great in appearance, but smelled horrible; we just walked out." -- **petjor**

No surprises

"My wife and I sold our 1984 bi-level in three months while there are still similar homes on the market a year later that were up for sale when ours was. The best thing we did was have a home inspector go through our house as if we were buying. He told us everything that a potential buyer would be told, and we corrected these issues in advance. Our first serious offer came with an inspection contingency. The buyers were thrilled when the inspection came back great. SOLD!" -- **dwb1996**

"Operating costs: Have reasonably accurate information on the costs of your home taxes, annual heating bills, along with documentation of any recent major repairs or upgrades such as a new roof or new wiring or plumbing." -- **Coldwell Banker Terrequity**

Precision pricing

"With so many houses on the market today there are two factors that actually sell a house. ... It MUST be 1. the best house for 2. the best price." -- **waddle**

"The absolute most important thing you can do to help sell your home in our current market is to price it either at or below fair market value. That isn't to say that you should give your home away at all. If you price your home too high, today's educated buyers won't even bother looking at it. If you price it 5%-10% below fair market value, you up your chances of multiple offers in which the buyer will put their best foot forward on their offer. By doing this, you may actually get more than fair market value for your home!" -- **Realtor61**

"There is an adage in real estate: 'There is NO objection that cannot be overcome by price!'" -- **Coldwell Banker Agent**

"What makes a home stand out is price. ... This is a business deal. Price it right and then pray." -- **Grandpa Frank**

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