

CLINCHING THE SALE!

The trick to selling a house is to make it look inviting and clean – never cluttered or controversial, according to experts. To carry that off takes some skill and, more important, the ability to take a searching – and objective – look at your own house. If you can realistically assess your house and see its weaknesses, you're more than halfway to selling the place.

Real estate brokers tell sellers to start by looking at that part of the house first seen by house-hunters: the front. "Is there peeling paint?" Peeling paint has to be taken care of right away."

Drive by your own house. Look at the yard. Is it full of high-maintenance shrubs? Lawn mowers and hose winders? It should look simple to maintain – people don't want to think of themselves spending hours slaving over the landscaping.

If the front of the house is obscured by a high and scraggly hedge, it might be wise to trim the greenery to a manageable height and put a small gate in the middle of it. Even if no one uses the front door, the gate gives the impression of friendliness, without taking away the privacy that the hedge offers. Adding a wooden gate – and a picket fence, if there is no hedge – adds distance as well as charm to a house that sits close to the road. (Home-improvement stores sell prefabricated unpainted wood picket fencing for \$15 to \$20 for an eight-foot length.)

Brokers and designers agree that is unwise to spend a great deal of money fixing up a house, because the cost of improvements can be difficult to recoup. One of the cheapest and best tips is to put in higher watt lightbulbs in back halls and closets. The customers see that you're not trying to hide anything – and the hallways look bigger and cleaner, too. Sellers are advised to open all the curtains and let in whatever light there is. If there's not much light, you might as well let people know it right away. If the curtains are closed, the first thing they'll do is open them. And if dust flies out, you've got another problem: they'll think of the place as being dirty.

Dogs, especially snarling or jumping ones, are a distraction even for people who like them – and a turnoff for those who don't. A real estate agent in the Northeast might advise sellers to light a fire in the fireplace in winter, a West Coast agent might stress rearranging the patio furniture. You've got to set the scene wherever you are.

After the main rooms in the house are de-cluttered and looking their best, it is time to investigate the basement and the attic. Tell sellers to spend an inordinate amount of time in the basement. Look for little watermarks – nothing turns buyer off more than even the faintest suggestion of a water problem. Even when we tell them it's an old problem that's been corrected, there're reluctant to believe us. If the basement or the attic is immaculate, it surprises the customers and makes them think that if this normally disgusting part of the house is so well maintained, the whole house must be in great shape.

Outbuildings need to be spotless, too. Rent a space in a storage warehouse rather than clutter the garage with things you clean out of the house.

Finally, try to anticipate the results of an ever-increasing battery of tests that savvy buyers insist upon as part of the contract to buy. Contracts today are often contingent on a structural and engineering study, water tests, termite test, lead and radon tests so it's smart for you to have these tests performed first. That way you can find the problems and correct them, eliminating the possibility that the buyer will panic and back out of the deal. Often such work is relatively inexpensive, considering the price of the house. Even a serious termite infestation can be treated for between \$500 and \$1,500.

All these preparations may seem like a lot of work, but they pay off. A spiffy, well-priced house will sell faster, saving time, mortgage payments and, perhaps more importantly, frustration and aggravation. In addition, customers are less likely to make a low offer for an immaculate house.

And the hard work has other rewards.

It usually takes a while to actually close on a house, even if it sells the first day. So in the interim your house may be neater than it has been since you have moved in; sit back and enjoy it.