WINNING THE REAL ESTATE WAR
10 Tips From Home Stagers

MoneySense

By Julie Cazzin

Part 1: Introduction

Last spring when Jim and Heather Thompson decided to sell their home in Vancouver, they realized they knew little about how to get top value for their biggest possession. "We were talking about our life savings," says Jim, 47, who works as the head of sales for a technology company. "But I was really clueless as to what sells."

The Thompsons enlisted the help of John Carter, co-founder of DEKORA, a "home-staging" firm in Vancouver. Carter spent a day going through their home room by room and drawing up a list of suggestions aimed at maximizing their house's appeal for prospective buyers. After discussing his proposals — which ranged from removing some shrubs in the front yard to powerwashing the driveway and walkways — the Thompsons gave Carter's crew the go-ahead to implement some of his ideas. Total cost: $4,000.

We know what you're thinking — $4,000 just to get your home ready for sale? — but consider the results. After a single Sunday showing early last year, the Thompsons' home attracted three offers, all of them higher than the couple's asking price of $649,000. Three days later the Thompsons agreed to sell their residence for a $41,000 premium over the listed price. While a hot real estate market helped, the Thompsons are convinced that Carter's primping and attention to detail was a big reason for their house's runaway success. "Our place fetched the highest price of any bungalow sold on our street — ever," says Jim.

Home stagers like Carter claim they can help anyone get a premium price for their home. Practically unknown in Canada even three years ago, stagers are now a presence in the real estate markets of Toronto and Vancouver and are popping up in many other cities as well. These home professionals — many of them former decorators or real estate agents — specialize in knowing what motivates potential buyers. They use all the tricks of the trade to help homeowners come out on top in the perpetual battle between buyers and sellers. "Getting a house ready to live in and getting a house ready to sell are two totalldifferent things," says Carter. "Decorating is about making a home comfortable for you and your family; staging a home is about merchandising properties. It involves making a house clean and clutter-free so people can connect with the home. Done right, it helps your place sell faster and for more money."

How much more? Coldwell Banker Realty tracked 2,772 properties, ranging in price from $229,000 (U.S.) to $4.8 million, in eight major U.S. cities. It found that while the average home was on the market for nearly 31 days, the typical staged home sold in just under 14 days. And while the average home sold for a mere 1.6% over the seller's asking price, the staged homes went for a hefty 6.3% more.

Home stagers perform their magic by playing up the best features of your house and minimizing the worst. They rearrange artwork on the wall, pack up your prized bowling trophies and clear out your son's high chair. Most stagers charge about $100 for an initial consultation; you then have the option of executing their suggestions on your own or hiring the stager to do it for you at $100 an hour.

We asked Carter and other home stagers to share their 10 best tips with us. Want to get top value for your home? Sit back and listen up:

Part 2: Tips

1. Make an impression
Prospective buyers make up their minds about your house even before they get out of the car. To ensure they have the right idea, clean up your yard, rake the leaves, shovel the snow, and sweep driveways and porches. Get out the rags and cleanser and spend 30 minutes scouring your front door, porch, railings and steps. Then tuck away all your recycling cans and bins at the back of the house.

Debra Gould, who owns the Six Elements home-staging firm in Toronto, says it's important to avoid planting negative associations in buyers' minds. When attending an open house she had to climb several steps to get to the front door. "I couldn't help but think that this could be a nuisance with groceries," says Gould. "Then, when I finally got to the top, the recycling bins were sitting right there on the porch. I immediately told myself, 'Imagine carrying one of those bins full of newspapers, cans down several slippery steps.' I couldn't see myself doing that, so I left, knowing it wasn't the house for me."

2. Unclutter
Clutter eats equity, say stagers. So purge your closets, empty cupboards, box up small appliances. Rent a storage locker to keep what you want, then toss the rest. "I give storage boxes to my clients and tell them to edit, edit, edit," says Theodore Babiak, a Toronto real estate agent with Royal LePage. "I suggest they take some of their books off the shelves, reduce the number of CDs or DVDs, pare everything down."

The stager's motto? Be ruthless. When Tamara Roberts was selling her Vancouver condo last year, she paid $150 for a one-hour consultation with home stager Carter, who gave her a detailed to-do list that included instructions to leave only one thing on the kitchen counter (a bowl of crisp

green apples) and to remove fridge magnets and small area rugs. "Everyone knows to unclutter," says Roberts, "but John brought it down to specifics. He even had me keep a storage container under the bed so I could throw my pajamas and bedtime reading in there so buyers wouldn't see it." The payoff? Her condo sold in one day for $6,000 more than her asking price of $339,000.

3. Impersonal works
You want buyers to imagine themselves living in your home, not to feel like a guest in it. So stash anything connected to your family or personal interests. Hide your son's hockey trophies, store family photos, remove all traces of day-to-day life. "If someone goes into the bathroom," says home stager Gould, "and the rim of the tub is covered with shampoo bottles while people's toothbrushes are lying around the sink, it's hard for that person to imagine that this could be his or her bathroom. The buyer becomes very conscious of being in someone else's environment. That won't get you an offer."

4. Keep it fresh
Barb Schwarz, president of **StagedHomes.ca** of Concord, Calif., has been staging homes for 30 years and she says a disturbing number of home sellers don't realize that their home … um, smells. "There's nothing worse than stepping into a house that smells of smoke and pet odors," says Schwarz. The easy solution is to keep your windows open for 10 minutes a day. This strategy works better than deodorizers, says Schwarz, since a lot of people have allergies to artificial room fresheners. The oldest trick of all? Leave chocolate chip cookies baking in the oven. Yes, it's hokey, but the smell does do wonders to help buyers bond with your home.

5. Declare war on grime
Cleanliness helps put a buyer's mind at ease since it suggests that you've probably taken good care of your residence in other ways as well. So clean everything: walls, door handles, light fixtures and pantry cupboards. At Carter's suggestion, Jim Thompson, the Vancouver home seller, hired a professional cleaner to scour the inside of his home and a contractor to powerwash windows, walkways, eavestroughs and pathways.

Toronto home stager Gould recommends you pay special attention to the furnace room since every home buyer wonders what shape the furnace is in. "If the furnace looks clean, it looks newer," says Gould. That goes for the fuse box and electrical panel, too.

Hall. "When those are dark, it gets depressing for buyers going from room to room."

6. Hire a handyman
Dripping faucets, cracked tiles and mouldy caulking around the bathtub can knock thousands of dollars off the price of your home. "I have a lot of clients who say, 'Well, that's a little problem, the buyer can deal with it,' says Gould, who makes a practice of walking through sellers' homes and compiling a list of what needs to be fixed. "And I say, 'No, if it's a little thing, then we should deal with it.' "

7. Color it up
Your single best investment may be a fresh coat of paint in key areas of your home. "Paint your front door and put some urns with brightly colored flowers on your front step or just inside the entryway," says Jane Hall, a Toronto designer and owner of The Voice of Color in Toronto. "Those things make a house seem cared for, different and important."

8. Reduce furniture
An easy way to create a sense of space is to get rid of some furniture. Moving a sofa and end tables into storage can give a small room some much-needed breathing space. So too can storing the table and chairs that normally sit In your kitchen, piled high with mail, magazines, books and groceries.

If your furniture dates from the Mulroney era, consider packing it away and renting a few modern, stylish pieces or borrowing a couple of well-chosen pieces of wall art. "Keep it clean and simple," says Carter, "like a hotel room or the show room for a new house."

9. Light me up
The brighter and sunnier a space, the easier it is to sell. Start by investing in a good window-cleaning service. Stagers say clean windows let in as much as 30% more light than grimy ones. Then thoroughly clean the shades on your light fixtures, change light bulbs and add floor lamps if an area seems dim. Dump those energy-saving 60-watt bulbs and go with higher wattage lights for maximum illumination. Finally, when it comes time to show your home, make sure all the lights are on. "Hallways especially should be lit," says home stager

10. Add a touch of humanity
A couple of planters on your front porch, a vase of flowers on your dining room table, even a simple rose in a bud vase can warm up a room. This is where you can let some of your creativity show through. "You want to get away from making rooms feel dull and sterile," says the home stager Gould. "Flowers and plants are good for that." Candles help, too.

Apply all these tips and the final results can be stunning. "I could never have achieved anything as effective on my own," says Thompson, the Vancouver home seller. "The stagers helped me turn it into a show home. And even though this might sound silly, all the changes made it so attractive that it sort of made me want to stay."

Such feelings are common. Stagers say a few homeowners actually change their plans and take their residences off the market once they see how good their old places can look. Many decide to stage not just their old homes, but their new ones as well. "Home sellers will often ask me to come to their new home and work some of my magic there because they don't want to go back to their old way of living," says home stager Schwarz, who's prepped more than 2,000 homes in the U.S. and Canada. In fact, Schwarz notes that a lot of home sellers don't even want to see any of the stuff they've put into storage because they discover they've never missed it. "They want to live fresh, clean and clutter-free. It's a wonderful thing. Because staging is, above all, a cleansing experience."