

Inexpensive fix-ups that can help you sell your home

By Ellen James Martin | Universal Press Syndicate
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In many neighborhoods across America, an unusually large supply of unsold homes is making prospective home sellers nervous. What's more, few sellers have the extra funds to do the fix-ups they need to command buyer attention in a highly competitive market.

"Many sellers are in a bind now. Their properties have to be in the 'best of the best' condition to sell. But they don't have money to hire contractors," says Sid Davis, the author of several real estate books.

Davis, a veteran broker, believes a housing recovery will occur by late 2008. But that's small consolation for homeowners who must sell now for financial reasons. All eight of the home listings he's currently handling are involuntary sales. Many owners must sell because their mortgage payments have escalated, or because someone in the household has lost a job.

The good news is that sellers who lack cash to hire contractors can, on their own, take several significant steps to improve the condition of their property.

Here are several pointers for cash-short home sellers:

•*Face the emotional hurdles first.* "There's always a psychological problem when people are forced to sell a home. But the longer their funk goes on, the worse it becomes. It's a downward spiral, like an airplane in an uncontrolled nosedive," Davis says.

Besides the classic "to-do list," you'll want to create a timeline for your presale work, which can easily span several weeks or longer, says Vicki Norris, a professional organizer and author of "Restoring Order to Your Home."

It's also important to give yourself small rewards along the way.

"Protect your sanity. Schedule time for you, including at least a few minutes each day to unwind, gather your thoughts, update your lists, and take a hot bath," Norris says.

•*Upgrade your kitchen through your own hard work.* Are your kitchen cabinets showing their age? If so, Davis recommends several low-cost ways to improve their appearance without hiring a contractor.

"Many wood cabinets look much better if you rub them down with lemon oil. Or consider sanding your cabinets and then repainting them in high-gloss white paint. Also, for under \$50 you can improve the looks of your cabinets with new door pulls and hinges," says Davis, author of "Home Makeovers That Sell."

In addition, you can replace a worn kitchen floor inexpensively by laying new tile, a skill easy to acquire by taking a free or low-cost class offered at a home center store, Davis says.

•*Paint your way to a better home sale.* One time-honored and cost-effective tactic for adding appeal to your interior is to paint the walls and trim throughout the place. For advice on painting technique, consult the Web sites of major paint companies, or borrow a manual or video on the topic from the library.

"You shouldn't need a whole class in painting. Ninety percent of good painting is just grunt

work, including the sanding and surfacing you should do in preparation," Davis says. Davis adds that choosing neutral colors and decent quality paints is better than using the cheapest paints.

•*Stand out from the pack through decluttering.* Virtually all home purchasers seek to make a fresh start in the new place. Consequently, they're put off at the sight of a property crammed with too many furnishings, toys, papers, electronic gear, and personal memorabilia. They can't picture themselves living there.

Fortunately, decluttering a home is nearly cost-free. And, as Davis says, a property that's free of junk has the potential to make a strong positive impression on home shoppers.

•*Schedule a "clean freak" weekend.* Once you've completed easy-to-do home improvement projects and purged your property of excess belongings, it's time to take on another fundamental task: making your place sparkling clean.

As Davis says, it's wise to clear your schedule, setting aside at least one full weekend for in-depth cleaning. To ensure focus, purchase any basic cleaning supplies you need, (natural products like vinegar are especially inexpensive), before the weekend begins.

Don't forget window cleaning throughout the house, which can make a home seem noticeably lighter and brighter.

•*Don't attempt to do complicated home upgrades yourself.* To be sure, those selling their homes under duress rarely have the money to call in contractors for complex or hazardous repairs — such as roofing or electrical work. But that doesn't mean they should attempt these projects themselves, Davis says.

Davis suggests you offer would-be buyers of your property certain concessions on price that are equal to the cost of hiring professionals for these jobs.

"No matter how stretched you are for money to get your home in saleable condition, never go beyond your area of expertise on difficult home repairs," Davis says.