

4 Steps to Staging for an Open House

Give your home the "wow" factor it needs to impress potential buyers.



Holding an open house can be a great way to get your home for sale noticed -- that is, if your home is in good condition. If not, well...

"I have personally witnessed people who have walked into a house, turned around, and walked back out," says Alice T. Chan, a professional stager in San Francisco.

If you're even thinking about selling your home, chances are you've heard of "staging," or the process of preparing a home for sale via de-cluttering, depersonalizing and neutralizing, among other techniques. If you want to avoid an open house snub similar to the one described above, staging, repairing and generally prepping your home for sale is a must in today's market.

"Buyers really want turn-key these days," Chan says. "If a buyer can get a loan right now, they're so strapped after they purchase a property that they literally just want to move in and live. Even if they want to make upgrades later, they want to feel like they're getting the best value possible. So, give it to them."

So how do you make your home open-house ready? Depending on your home's current condition, it can be a large, overwhelming job, so you'll want to stay organized, take it slow and work step-by-step.

Step 1: Plan and Prioritize

Before getting started, it's important to understand what improvements will help you sell your home and to make a realistic plan that fits your budget and time frame. Three tips to get you started:

- **Let go emotionally.** The moment you put your house up for sale, **it becomes a product**, so you must train yourself to stop thinking about it as your home. Sellers need to start calling it their property instead of their home.
- **Identify the target audience.** Think about what kind of neighborhood you live in. Is it young and hip and filled with first-time buyers, or is it mature and established with lots of families? It's important to know what type of buyer you're targeting so you can stage accordingly. For instance, if you live in a neighborhood that's popular with first-time buyers and your home hasn't been renovated since 1977, you'll want to strip the wallpaper and remove the dated draperies to appeal to young buyers. If you live in an upscale neighborhood, buyers will expect certain high-end features and upgrades.
- **Determine what buyers want.** Homebuyers are looking for three things: an emotional connection with the home, value for their money, and move-in ready conditions. As you're preparing your home, think about these factors, because you have a lot of control over them.

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For instance, a buyer will not be able to envision themselves living in your home if your family photos are plastered all over the walls, but you can easily fix that.

Keeping your target buyers and what they are looking for in mind, your next step is to grab a pen and paper, walk through your property as a buyer would and jot down your home's problem areas.

"Really be hard on yourself," Chan says. "Look through the buyer's eyes as much as you can. If you can't be objective, bring someone along who will tell you exactly like it is, not just what you want to hear."

Once you've finished your list, rank it, putting top-priority issues that are sure to turn off buyers first. Depending on your budget and time frame, it may not be feasible to address everything on your list. But remember, today's buyers are looking for move-in ready properties. Putting a little more time and money into updates could lead to a quicker sale and a higher sales price.

Step 2: Tackle Projects

When you made your list, you likely found some broad issues that apply to your entire home, like worn-out carpeting or chipped paint. Or perhaps your home seems cluttered and dated in general, a quality that will make it hard for buyers to envision your home as their own.

Make a good first impression. You want to freshen up the landscaping and exterior paint, plus consider purchasing a few new items, including a garage door, mailbox, exterior door and house numbers. Clean the driveway and walkways, and get the cars out of the driveway and from in front of the house.

- **Clean, clean, clean.** This is a no-brainer. The property has to be in pristine condition when you have the open house. If potential buyers walk into your open house and see dust on the coffee table and soap scum in your showers, say goodbye to your chances of making a sale. Cleaning your home from top to bottom is a cheap and (relatively) easy way to make your home show much better during your open house. Pay special attention to your kitchen and bathrooms -- those tend to get dirty the fastest. This could mean hiring professional house cleaners, having the windows washed and having the carpets cleaned.

- **De-cluttering and Depersonalizing**

If the house has too many pieces of furniture and knickknacks, it's hard for potential buyers to see the home's features. "Homebuyers want to walk into the house and visualize it as their new home," Mitchell says. When a potential buyer sees your family photos and your children's crayon drawings on the refrigerator during your open house, that becomes more difficult.

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Sellers should start packing before the house goes on the market, making the home as sparse and streamlined as possible. Personal items are distracting and need to be put away, preferably in storage, before your open house. Just think of it as getting a head start on your packing.

Don't forget to clean out and organize closets and storage space. Buyers will look there too, and messy, overflowing closets give the impression that your home doesn't have enough storage space. Removing seasonal items -- like winter coats and holiday decorations if you're selling in the spring -- is a good place to start. You can also pack up and donate items you have in duplicate and clothes and toys your kids have grown out of.

Front Yard and Entryway

Even though it's not actually a room, don't overlook these areas. Sprucing up your yard and your home's entrance is essential because it's the first thing buyers see, so you need to impress them off the bat.

- Keep your lawn mowed and well-maintained. Consider hiring someone to take care of this for you while you're dealing with the other details of selling.
- Plant some bright, colorful flowers.
- Replace a grungy, old welcome mat with a clean, new one.
- Give the front door a fresh coat of paint.
- Make sure the front door and the storm door open and close properly.
- Replace old, faded house numbers with new ones.
- Make sure the screens are in good shape.
- Clean out your gutters and pressure wash your home's siding. If your home's exterior isn't well-maintained, **buyers will think you've slacked off throughout the rest of the house as well.**

Living Room

The living room (or the first room buyers see when they enter your home) is another one that needs to have the "wow" factor. Generally speaking, less is more when it comes to living rooms. "Most people have more than enough things, so it's really about editing what you have and moving things around," Chan says.

- Remove large furniture, like huge sectional sofas.
- Arrange furniture to create a focal point, perhaps around a fireplace or a large window.
- Don't push your furniture all the way against the walls.
- If your sofa or chairs are not in great shape, disguise them with slipcovers or luxurious throws -- a much cheaper option than buying brand new furniture.

Kitchen

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"Kitchens and the bathrooms never look good naked; they always look better dressed up," Chan says. Once your kitchen is spotlessly clean, give it some style.

- Remove magnets and photos off the refrigerator.
- Clear off your countertops, except for the essentials. "If you use your coffee machine every day, it's OK to have it out on the counter, but you don't want your countertops to be a display of every small appliance you own," Chan says.
- Add stylish accessories, tying them together with a theme, Chan suggests. For instance, you could go with a pasta theme and decorate the space with an Italian cookbook, decorative bottles of oil and glass jars filled with colorful pasta.
- Use greenery to fill in empty corners and add color.

Bedroom

A good rule of thumb when staging your bedrooms is to emulate a hotel room -- emphasize luxury and comfort.

- Turn your master bedroom into a proper master bedroom: no extra beds for the kids, no workspaces, no every day, nice-to-have things that don't really belong in a bedroom.
- Cover your everyday bedding with luxurious bedding or a nice throw. You don't have to spend a lot of money here -- discount stores have plenty of inexpensive options that look high-end.
- If your mattresses are sitting on the floor, buy or rent bed frames to lift them up.

Bathroom

Like the kitchen, your bathrooms will show a whole lot better with a little bit of style.

- Put away your everyday towels and replace them with new towels. Also add a new shower curtain and fresh, fancy soap.
- Hide toothbrushes and other toiletries in baskets or other storage containers. This keeps them easily accessible, but lets you stow them away quickly before an open house.
- Dress up the space with some candles or a silk flower arrangement.

Backyard

For many people, the backyard serves as a dumping ground. Clean this space up and make it a place where buyers can see themselves spending time.

- **Add furniture** -- a bistro table and two chairs for a smaller area or a dining set for large yards.
- **Stage it as a place for entertaining.** Set out a tray with a pitcher of lemonade, or put out some coffee and bagels for a breakfast scene.

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Stage your home with furniture and accessories. Cannon Christian, president of the Southern California-based Renovation Realty, says his company adds furniture and accessories to vacant homes. If you're living in the house, consider some small touches such as fresh towels in the bathroom, vases of flowers and a few well-chosen accessories. With furniture, less is often more. Wild-colored walls should be painted and, depending on your budget, you may want to paint kitchen cabinets, add new hardware or change faucets.

Fixing What's Broken

Remember all the little home maintenance projects you've been putting off for years? Now's the time to do them. Make sure all broken windows, leaky faucets and nonfunctioning light switches are in working order before your open house.

Painting

A fresh coat of paint on your interior walls is by far one of the most cost-effective ways to make your home show well. When choosing a paint color, think neutral (warm beige or pale green), not bland (stark white). Whatever you do, don't just leave your bright magenta bedroom as-is. You may love it, but most buyers won't feel the same way.

Paint can also work wonders on outdated or cheap cabinetry. Just rolling on some paint can instantly update your kitchen and make it look more high-end.

Replacing Flooring

Flooring is an important update that sellers are often reluctant to make. Some sellers choose to offer a credit instead of replacing their flooring, but Chan says that's not an effective strategy.

"Giving buyers a credit is not going to have the same effect as doing it for them because they only know what they see, and they focus on the negative," Chan says.

Try cleaning your flooring first, but if it's worn or stained beyond repair, replace it. You don't have to go with top-of-the-line options here unless you're selling a high-end home. Any neutral-colored carpet or even peel-and-stick linoleum tiles for a kitchen or bathroom will make a big difference.

Updating Light Fixtures

Light fixtures are the jewelry of a home, Chan says. "They really make a big difference, and they're also one of the first things to date a property. You can pretty much tell when a house was built or when it was last renovated by the type of light fixtures that are in it," she says.

So, what can you do about those circa-1986 brass chandeliers? You could buy some inexpensive, contemporary fixtures, or if you're really on a budget, you can simply revamp your old fixtures with a can of spray paint.

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Larger Problems:

You don't have to be a pro to know what buyers look for at an open house. Larger problems can seem daunting to fix, but they're the ones that buyers will certainly notice during your open house, but especially in a home inspection.

When Buyers are on the hunt for a new house, weekends spent touring open houses can quickly veer from fun to daunting by house number three. Keeping track of which home had that great kitchen (but terrible master bath) versus the home with a terrible backyard but a great floor plan can be tough. And while no house is likely to be perfect, when it comes to a budget, some updates are harder to swallow than others. Unfortunate paint colors, are hard to see past for many buyers. Although it shouldn't sway their decision, because things like this is an easy fix, it nevertheless does.

However, a smart buyer should focus on larger issues because these issues will require more costly repairs, or will indicate larger, underlying problems that simply can't be fixed. Sellers need to make sure these items are in good shape, because they will certainly come back up in a buyer's home inspection. But if you take care of them early on, they could sell your home faster:

1. How old is the roof?

Look beyond the new kitchen and bathroom to consider the bones of the home. One of the biggest "bones" of a house is the roof. The typical life span of a roof is up to about 20 years, but the average cost to replace one runs into the five-figure range, averaging about \$5,000 but going up as high as \$25,000 or more. Buyers need to pay close attention to the age and condition of the roof before making an offer.

2. Are there issues with the home's foundation?

This is what everything is resting on — literally. While superficial blemishes might not matter enough to affect a sale, if there are wide **cracks in the foundation**, it's most likely not worth the time and anguish that can come with fixing it.

3. What is the state of the sewer system?

When it comes to sewer and septic systems, many people are in the dark on a few elements: first off, their level of responsibility. If something goes wrong, it's the homeowner, not the city, who must cover damages (frequently through homeowners' insurance). The condition of the sewer lines is also something that is **not part of a regular home inspection**, so a few hundred dollars for a dedicated sewer inspection could prove to be a worthy investment.

4. Have insurance claims been made on the house?

If **insurance claims** have been filed on the house, a buyer may inquire about any insight into any past issues that might not be immediately obvious at an open house. If the house is located

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near a pond, lake, or stream, flood insurance is required, because that can affect buyer financing or create difficulties that can delay closing.

5. Is there noticeable water damage?

While it may not be easy for a buyer to spot a wet basement, there are some signs buyers will look for at an open house. If the utility systems and basement storage is propped up a few inches or more off the ground, that may be an indication that the basement has had water issues. This is one instance where you should pay close attention to furnishings. If a basement has a nice, fresh carpet and furniture, and there's no musty smell, that's a likely sign the space has stayed dry.

6. How old is the wiring?

If your home is an older home, don't ignore the possibility of outdated electrical systems and wiring. Older systems may still be functional but can pose a safety risk, can be difficult to insulate, and are sometimes hard to insure. One example is the knob-and-tube system dating back to the 1930s and '40s, which can be spotted by its white/off-white knobs connecting to wires, often in an unfinished basement — and can be a big expense to replace. Another telltale sign of a potentially pricey upgrade? Old fuses with circular knobs in the fuse box (newer boxes have many small toggle switches). An electrician should verify any seller-provided details about wiring or electrical systems.

7. How old are the windows?

Older, original windows often look great but can be painted shut or not airtight, which can make utility costs skyrocket in certain climates. Buyers will consider the cost of replacement windows when they're making an offer on a new home. Replacing old ones can be expensive, but having functional, efficient windows can increase savings overall — and be attractive to buyers when the home hits the real estate market.

Step 3: Hone in on the Details and Put on the Finishing Touches

Now that you've tackled the big projects, the hardest and most expensive part is out of the way. The next step to getting your home open-house ready is to "dress it up," and luckily, you can often do this by repurposing what you already own and adding small details. Working room by room is a good strategy on this step -- it's less overwhelming, and you'll feel increasingly accomplished after each room you finish. Other preparations for the Open House:

Spread the word. Sellers need to share their listings and open house dates [through all their social media channels](#), including Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Friends, neighbors, colleagues, and relatives could know someone who is looking, plus you never know who outside your direct network might stumble across your tweet or Facebook post.

Many times, neighbors attend open houses, even if they're not looking to move, out of curiosity. Most agents encourage that, and some even send flyers to neighbors because they may have friends and

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relatives who are looking for a home. The more people that come by a property, the better chance you have to sell it.

Provide information. You or your agent should provide information for prospective buyers to take with them, including a brochure or flyer with photos of the house, information on comparable home sales and perhaps school or community information. A local lender can provide information on payments with a few loan scenarios. You don't want homebuyers to leave your home empty-handed. This is not going to be the only house they're going to tour that day. It's hard to remember all the different homes that they walked through.

Step 4:

It's here: the big day of your open house! Your home should be in tip-top condition and ready for potential buyers. Don't forget these last-minute details:

- **Set out vases of fresh-cut flowers.** They'll make your home smell nice and add a splash of color.
- **Let in the light.** Buyers want a bright, open house, not a dark and dreary cave. Open all the curtains and blinds and turn on lights in every room, even on a sunny day. Make it as bright and cheerful as you can.
- **Adjust the temperature.** Keep the home comfortable -- not too cold or too hot.
- **Serve food and drinks.** A cold glass of lemonade and water and/or some warm, freshly baked cookies will encourage buyers to stick around longer, giving them more time to check out your home and interact with the agent to provide feedback. Not all agents agree on the importance of refreshments, but most think they're a good idea.
- **Safeguard your stuff.** Remove or lock up any valuables (prescription medications, jewelry, etc.) in a safe place. Your agent cannot be in every room with every prospective buyer at once, so be smart about what you leave out.
- **Remove pets if possible.** Dogs, cats or other pets should neither be seen nor heard during the open house. If they can't be removed from the house, they need to be confined to a less trafficked space.
- **Leave!** You're probably proud of how fantastic your house looks right now, but don't stick around to point this out to buyers. The last thing you want to do is make them feel uncomfortable. Spend the day out and about and let your perfectly prepped home sell itself!

Listen to feedback. One valuable takeaway from an open house is being able to hear what people think about the price and features. If neighbors think the home is overpriced, it probably is. If you don't get opinions and people's thoughts, you're wasting a lot of audience. Your agent will collect names and contact information from everyone who visits and contact them afterward to see what they thought of the house.