

First Impressions

Remember what first attracted you to your house when you bought it? What excited you about its most appealing features? Now that you're selling your home, you'll need to look at it as if you were buying it all over again.

A spruced up house makes a great first impression on potential buyers. An attractive property grabs their attention and makes them excited about finding a house that looks and feels well-cared for. Because buyers know they'll encounter fewer problems if they buy it, your house becomes more appealing and stands out from the competition. So if you prepare your home correctly, you'll save time selling it when it's on the market.

A good first impression makes an impact on a number of levels. It's not just the way your house looks to potential buyers, but how it feels and smells to them, how their friends and family will react, how they imagine it would be to live there.

With simple improvements throughout your house, you can grab the attention of potential buyers and help them see why your house is right for them.

Plan Ahead

Create a plan to enhance your property. Keep a notebook for your selling project, and as you stroll through your yard, make a list of what needs to be done. Consider what your property looks like to people driving by or walking through your door. What will they like or dislike? What needs fixing, painting, cleaning? What can you improve? Whether you paint your house or fix up the yard, your efforts don't need to be costly; even inexpensive improvements and minor repairs go far toward attracting serious buyers. But remember, those seemingly insignificant problems you've learned to live with can actually discourage potential buyers. Here are ideas for increasing your home's appeal in order to sell it quickly at the best price.

Interior

Clean Everything

Buyers expect a spotless house, inside and out. So clean everything, especially your windows and window sills. Scrub walls and floors, tile and ceilings, cupboards and drawers, kitchen and bathrooms. Wash scuff marks from doors and entryways, clean light fixtures and the fireplace. Don't forget the laundry room. And put away your clothes.

Cut the Clutter

People are turned off by rooms that look and feel cluttered. Remember, potential buyers are buying your house, not your furniture, so help them picture themselves and their possessions in your home by making your rooms feel large, light, and airy. As you clean, pack away your personal items, such as pictures, valuables, and collectibles, and store or get rid of surplus books, magazines, videotapes, extra furniture, rugs, blankets, etc. Consider renting a storage unit to eliminate clutter in your garage and attic.

It's hard to get rid of possessions, but cleaning and clearing out the clutter can really pay off in the end. Packing away your clutter also gets you started packing for your next move. Make your garage and basement as tidy as the rest of your house. Simple little tasks such as storing your tools and neatly rolling up your garden hose suggest that you take good care of your house. Don't let anything detract from making your best first impression.

Closets

They're an important consideration to many buyers. By storing clothing you won't use soon, you'll make closets look spacious.

Paint

A new coat of paint cleans up your living space and makes it look bright and new. To make rooms look larger, choose light, neutral colors that appeal to the most people, such as beige or white.

Carpet

Check its condition. If it's worn, consider replacing it. It's an easy and affordable way to help sell your home faster. Again, light, neutral colors, such as beige, are best. If you don't replace it, you can suggest to potential buyers that they could select new carpet and you'll reduce your price; buyers like to hear they're getting a deal. At the very least, have your carpet cleaned.

Repairs and Renovations

It's best to avoid making major renovations just to sell the house since you're unlikely to recoup those costs from your selling price. Make minor repairs to items such as leaky faucets, slow drains, torn screens, gutters, loose doorknobs, and broken windows. Make sure repairs are well done; buyers won't take you seriously if your home-improvement efforts look messy, shoddy, or amateurish.

Leaks and Moisture

Water stains on ceilings or in the basement alert buyers to potential problems. Don't try to

cosmetically cover up stains caused by leaks. If you've fixed the water problem, repair the damage and disclose in writing to the buyer what repairs were made.

Exterior

Curb Appeal

The "Wow" factor — that first visual, high-impact impression your home makes on potential buyers — can turn a looker into a buyer. To determine your property's curb appeal, drive through your neighborhood and note other properties; then approach your own house as if you were a potential buyer. How does it look? Does it "wow" you? Will its curb appeal attract buyers? Note what needs improving, such as trimming trees, planting shrubs, or painting gutters. Little things convey that you've cared for your home, and this is your opportunity to sell that important message to buyers who are shopping from the street, simply cruising neighborhoods just looking for houses for sale. To get them through your door, do what you can to make your property look like someone's dream home.

Paint/Stain

If it's peeling or blistering and you can't remember the last time you painted it, your house needs some attention. That also goes for stain that is significantly faded. A newly painted or stained exterior will help sell your house faster. And whether you do it yourself or hire someone, you'll also increase your home's value.

In the Yard

Grab people's attention by enhancing your yard and landscaping. If your house looks inviting and well-maintained from the street, people will imagine that it's attractive on the inside, too.

- Prune bushes and hedges; trim trees.
- Keep your lawn looking healthy and green by mowing it often, fertilizing it, and keeping it edged and trimmed.
- Clean up and dispose of pet mess.
- Weed your gardens; add fertilizer and mulch; then plant colorful flowers.
- In winter, keep your driveway and sidewalks shoveled, de-iced, and well-lit.
- Stack firewood, clean out birdbaths, repair and paint fences.

The Front Door

An attractive entry catches a buyer's eye and says, "Welcome," so highlight this area of your house with decorative touches, such as a wreath on the door or new shrubs and flowers around the steps. For an even grander entry, clean and paint your front door, or replace it with a new one for a few hundred dollars. Don't forget to fix and polish doorknobs, repair torn screens, and then put out that new welcome mat.

Keep yourself organized with the following checklist.

Clean and Maintain

- Windows, sills, and screens
- Walls and floor
- Tile
- Ceilings
- Cupboards and drawers
- Kitchen
- Bathrooms
- Light fixtures
- Ceiling fans
- Carpet and rugs
- Mirrors
- Garage
- Attic
- Basement
- Laundry room
- Yard
- Gutters
- Replace furnace filter
- Dust furniture, TV and computer screens
- Closets
- Remove clutter
- Pack personal items

Repair

- Leaky faucets and plumbing
- Torn screens
- Slow drains
- Gutters
- Loose doorknobs
- Deck boards
- Broken windows
- Electrical fixtures
- Water stain damage
- Broken appliances
- Damaged walls and ceilings
- Worn carpet and rugs
- Damaged sidewalks and steps

Improvements

- Stain or paint deck
- Store tools

- Roll up garden hose
- Paint or stain exterior
- Prune bushes and hedges
- Trim trees
- Mow lawn, fertilize, edge, and trim
- Weed gardens, plant flowers
- Shovel driveways, de-ice
- Stack firewood
- Clean out birdbaths
- Caulk windows and doors
- Repair and paint fences
- Seal asphalt driveway
- Make sure doors close properly
- Enhance entryway
- Replace welcome mat