

Creating space

Make Any Room Look Bigger

How to sell a home faster by showing off every room to its greatest advantage.

Your new listing has a very small living room, bathrooms, or kitchen. What do you do?

Just because you're given small spaces to work with in preparing a home for market doesn't mean that you're stuck with them. You can easily make any room look larger or more attractive, according to designers and home stagers who have developed strategies to show off the best features of every room in a house.

The key, say the experts, is to get rid of clutter, clean everything down to the switch plates, and create a neutral space that buyers can picture themselves living in.

“Buyers only know what they see—not what could be,” says Barb Schwarz, ABR®, president of Stagedhomes.com, a home-staging consultancy based in Concord, Calif., and founder and president of the International Association of Home Staging Professionals. “I tell people to put things away, bring the outside in—like touches of greenery and nature—and emphasize the best of what's there. Rooms will look bigger, and the buyer can mentally move in.”

Other home design and staging experts provide a room-by-room rundown on how to make every space look bigger so that you can sell your listings faster. Here are their best tips:

The Living Room

Linda Russell, a home stager and salesperson with RE/MAX Village Square, REALTORS®, in Montclair, N.J., recommends that practitioners stand inside the front door to see where their eyes go first in the living room.

“Take the furthest corner and put something there to draw the eye,” says Russell. “A lot of times, that means moving a couch, so that's not the first thing you see. Sometimes a lamp or piece of art is what you want people to see first, so that you're immediately taking in the size of the room.”

Ed Marshall, a home stager with Marshall Design Group in Los Angeles, suggests that you make sure window coverings are sheer, or are pulled back, to bring more light in. Brighter rooms look bigger and more inviting. Scale the furniture to fit the size of the room and don't block walking pathways, he adds. Having oversized sofas or too much furniture will make the living room look smaller.

Lori Matzke, president of Center Stage Home in Arlington, Minn., says if you've got a fireplace or a view, direct the buyer's eye to that as the focal point of the room.

Stacy S. Pulse, a home stager and salesperson with Prudential Carter-Duffey, REALTORS®, in Kansas City, Mo., suggests having no more than three items on a coffee table, and removing most personal photos from the area will not only de-personalize it but also help to clear up the clutter—which overwhelms a small room.

The Dining Room

Tables should be positioned for maximum effect in the dining room, Russell says. “They don’t need to have a lot of leaves in them with six or eight chairs,” she says. In fact, taking all the leaves out and making the dining table as small as possible will make the room look bigger. Another good trick: “If there’s a heavy rug on the floor, take it out to create the illusion of more floor space.”

“If there’s a China cabinet, keep a few pieces in it, but don’t fill it up with items,” Pulse recommends. Overcrowding with too many items will overpower the room.

Don’t bother setting the table, advises Matzke. “It just draws attention to the table, and not to the room,” she says. “Over-accessorizing things makes it feel like a plastic model home. You want to simplify.”

The Kitchen

According to Heidi Meyer, founder of Home Highlights in Madison, Wis., the kitchen is the heart of the home, so make the investment to update an old kitchen. “If the room is dated, update it with new cabinet hardware or paint it,” she advises. That will give it a more open, clean look.

Marshall suggests clearing off the counter as much as possible. “Try not to have the coffee maker, mixer, and toaster all out at the same time or people will think there’s not enough room for everything,” he says.

Decorate simply, using just a couple of cookbooks, says Russell, or fill a pretty bowl with lemons or green apples and put it on the counter or a sideboard.

Matzke advises cleaning wood cabinets with degreasers and then applying orange oil. “Let the oil soak in a couple of hours, then wipe it off,” Matzke says. “It makes the cabinets look brand new. Clean the inside of the stove and refrigerator, and shine the counter tops, sinks, and faucets.” When a kitchen is spic-and-span, buyers will focus on how great it looks rather than how small it is.

The Bedroom

The biggest no-no in the master bedroom is having a television set in the room, Russell says. “It’s not as important in the guest room or kids’ rooms, but you want to create a soft, romantic, relaxing space in the master bedroom,” she says. A television also adds more clutter to the bedroom and can potentially make a small room look more crowded.

Neutral colors on the wall and on the bed open up the room. “No busy wallpaper, which

makes the room smaller,” Russell says. “Get new bedding in light colors, and use throw pillows on the bed.”

Meyer says to make sure all signs of daily life—like ironing boards, laundry baskets, and clothes thrown on chairs—are put away. “Seeing things like that says to a buyer that you don’t have enough space in the closets,” she says.

The Bathroom

Russell says bathroom shower curtains aren’t always to everyone’s taste, so pull the curtains back to maximize the view of the tub, which is what people want to see anyway. If your eyes can see all the way to the back of the tub instead of stopping at the shower curtains, the bathroom will appear bigger to buyers. If you don’t have glass shower doors, choose a light-colored or transparent shower curtain to make the room brighter and seem larger.

“Clear off all the counters,” Russell says. And for ambiance, you can “put out some fragrant candles, but don’t light them, unless it’s for an open house. Have some nice, colored soap in the dish, and use fresh flowers or live plants.”

If the bathroom is in an upscale property, put a champagne bucket with glasses, or silver-backed mirrors and brushes on the counter to create a feeling of luxury, suggests Marshall. “It’s not something you’d do in a \$300,000 condo, but it’d be appropriate for a \$3 million house,” he says.

Be sure to remove all area rugs to create the illusion of greater space, says Pulse. “No covers on the toilet seat or rugs around the toilet,” she adds. “Make sure all the light bulbs are working, and are the same wattage.”

Putting the Best Face Forward

It’s understandable for some sellers to be resistant to removing sentimental family photos or changing their favorite decorations before putting their homes on the market. However, if the items in question contribute to the rooms looking smaller and more cluttered—and ultimately distracting potential buyers from seeing themselves living there—then removing or changing the décor is the best bet to a quick sell.

“Your home is a product you’re marketing, so you need to make sure yours stands out,” Pulse says.