

Home prices have fallen and many homeowners are mortgaged to the hilt. This makes it difficult for some sellers to justify spending a penny to get their home ready for the market.

However, the home-sale market also is very competitive in areas that are still bloated with inventory of unsold homes. When buyers have a choice, they pick the best. They want a home at a good price, in a good location, and one that they can move right into without having to do any work.

Investor buyers are snapping up foreclosures at an increased pace. These homes are usually not in good condition. And, in some cases they are selling for half of what they sold for four or five years ago.

If you're a seller who's selling in a market where there is competition from distressed-sale foreclosures or from other sellers who are offering their homes in top condition, you will be at a disadvantage if you don't fix up your home before selling. It will take longer for you to sell and you could sell for a lot less than if you had invested time and money in properly preparing your home for sale.

There is a lot you can do to get your home ready that doesn't cost much money -- it just takes time and hard work. For instance, most people have too many personal possessions in their homes, particularly if they have lived there for years.

Decluttering benefits you in a couple of ways. You won't pay to move things you no longer want or need. More importantly, buyers will be better able to see what your home has to offer instead of focusing on your things.

**HOUSE HUNTING TIP:** It's worthwhile to consider hiring a home staging decorator. Some sellers only need a consultation of one to two hours. Ask the stager what you should keep and what should be moved out before you start showing the house. Also, get recommendations for furniture and artwork arrangement. The way you live in your house is not necessarily the best way to show it off to prospective buyers.

For example, many homeowners place their sofa across from the fireplace, which can mean that a buyer is greeted by the back of the sofa when they walk into the room. It stops them in their tracks. If the sofa is moved to one side and two chairs are placed opposite the sofa, the room will appear more open and the traffic flow won't be obstructed.

Sometimes the scale of your furniture isn't right for showing your home to its best advantage. Recently, buyers who had been looking for more than a year for the right house saw one that they thought could be it. However, they were concerned that the bedrooms were too small.

They had the good sense to go home and get a tape measure. They came back to the house and measured the rooms they were concerned about. It turns out they were larger than they appeared. The house was furnished with beautiful pieces, but they were large and made some rooms appear smaller than they actually were.

Today's buyers have a lot to think about when they buy a home. Are they buying at the right price and time? Will the house work for the long term? Can they qualify for and afford the financing they need? It helps the process along if you can create an ambiance that enables a buyer to fall in love on the first visit.

**THE CLOSING:** You need to create the wow factor so that when buyers walk in they say, "I better act quickly. This house won't be on the market for long."