

Setting The Stage For A Quick Home Sale

by Steve Tarter

Faced with an empty house that's now on the market, Colleen McLinden brought in furniture to help make the sale. As the Peoria, Ill., area's first accredited stager, McLinden is practicing the art of staging houses for sale in central Illinois. In the case of the Edelstein, Ill., house, a five-bedroom structure on 6 1/2 acres with a price tag of \$350,000, the place "needed something," said Realtor David Castle of Kallister Realty in Peoria. "It needed some pop. I thought that maybe (Colleen) could help," he said. Staging allows a potential buyer to see a home for what it is, said McLinden.

SETTING THE STAGE - Colleen McLinden, owner of Impact Home Staging, scoots a silk plant into place beneath a clock in a vacant home for sale in rural Illinois. CNS Photo by Leslie Renken. In the case of an empty house, rented furniture is brought in to show house-hunters what they might expect, she said. In houses still occupied by the seller, other techniques come into play, said McLinden. "We go through the home thoroughly and make an extensive report that suggests what should be done," she said. If sellers want to do the work themselves, they simply pay for the consultation - about \$250. Or they can hire McLinden to do the staging. McLinden got her staging training from the woman who takes credit for inventing the business, Barb Schwarz, CEO of StagedHomes.com. McLinden was one of 30 stagers who joined Schwarz recently to stage a home in Michigan for NBC's "Today" show. Barb Schwarz offers these staging tips: --Clean up well after pets: "Be sensitive to odors because buyers are."--Pack up all collections: "They distract from the desired focal point - your home."--Remove family pictures from shelves, pianos and tables: "Buyers want to envision their family here, not yours."--Keep soft music playing at all times during showings: "Choose an easy-listening station or light jazz - never hard rock or funeral music." Schwarz, interviewed by telephone, said she staged her first house in 1972 and started the national business in 1985. The Seattle native claims to have taught staging concepts to 700,000 people all over the world. The staging mantra for Schwarz is that "clutter eats equity." "People have too much stuff. I tell them to pack up the small things and let the large pieces define space in the home in a good way," she said. "No one will buy a home until they can mentally move in. That is hard to do when the rooms are full of clutter and too much furniture," said Schwarz. It's a matter of quantum physics, she said. "All things have energy. Energy involves movement, but the energy of clutter bogs us down rather than moving us forward," said Schwarz, noting that she lives in a home that's "staged at all times." Schwarz has a lot of adages when it comes to staging. "If you smell it, you can't sell it," she said, referring to a dirty house or one with pet problems. **MAJOR MARKET** Home staging has become part of the sale process in many parts of the country. "Home staging is very much alive in major markets such as Los Angeles, Dallas and Washington, D.C.," said Nick Maloof of Jim Maloof/Realtor in Peoria. "In the central Illinois marketplace, we're hearing about the buzz nationwide, but we're still studying the process and actual effectiveness that staging a home brings to the mix," he said. Therefore, Maloof said, it is still too early to be able to measure how successful staging has been or will be. Schwarz cites figures indicating that staged houses sell faster than unstaged houses. She also added that the practice is catching on. "In the East Bay Area of San Francisco, less than 20 percent of the homes for sale were staged in 2002. Now I'd say that 75 percent of homes on the (East Bay) market are staged," said Schwarz, adding that New York is also growing as a staging area. In some of big-city markets, sellers are calling stagers before real estate agents, she said. **IN THE BUSINESS** While she doesn't have the certification McLinden possesses, Holly Prayne of Princeville, Ill., is also in the staging business. "I did it for five years on the side until about a year ago, when I decided it was something I needed to devote more time to," she said. "Staging is an exciting thing," said Prayne, presently at work on a home in Wyoming, Ill. "I know I can make a house look better. There are so many simple things that people can do with color and a little shifting to make the house appeal to the buyer," she said. The No. 1 thing in staging for Prayne is the approach you take. "Homeowners have to lose their own sense of style and appeal to the masses," she said. Prayne believes in bold colors. "Color scares a lot of people, but you can use color to draw interest," she said. "Paint is the cheapest thing you can do. I try to save people money and work as simply as possible." The art of staging houses is likely to grow in the future, said Schwarz. "When a good thing happens, you can't stop it," she said. "When you stage your house for sale and it sells quickly for more money, you'll want to stage every house you sell thereafter," said Schwarz.