

House stuck on the market?

Hide the kitsch, the stale smells and the traffic noise for a quicker sale.

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Having your house on the market at the end of the year is a little like being in the final trimester of a pregnancy. Sellers, like expectant moms, feel as if they've been waiting forever for their house to sell, and every twinge of interest from a possible buyer brings as much excitement as those first labor contractions.

However, unlike a baby, who is certain to arrive sooner or later, a house can remain on the market for months or even years.

Any number of issues or problems in a property can cause it to go stale and languish. Area real estate agents identified these problematic areas for us, as well as some possible solutions:

- Remove the mounted animal heads. These do more harm than good, as more potential buyers are turned off by hunting trophies than admiring of them, said Stuart Moulton, a real estate agent with Green Mango Real Estate in Austin. They are distracting. You want buyers to notice the spaciousness and quality of your house, not the dead antelope on the wall. Ditto with large displays of guns. Better to have those stored safely away.
- Have an open house, and then ask the visitors what they don't like about the home. Open houses most often attract curious neighbors and passersby, said Todd Smith and Shaunna Terry, agents with Capital City Sotheby's International Realty in Austin. But these people can be useful even if they're not considering buying the home, Smith said. It's not enough to ask "What do you think about the house?" because most people are inclined to be polite. But if your agent asks each person, "What did you *not* like?" they can pinpoint potential problems, such as dark rooms, clutter, odd furniture arrangements or odors. And then you can try to fix these issues. People are more inclined to be honest if you give them permission to be negative.
- Lower the price. If your house has been on the market for a few months and is getting less traffic, it's time to lower the price. Smith and Terry believe in correct pricing so much that they will consider refusing to work for someone who insists on an unrealistic price. "If they want to overprice the house and it's so far over, is it in the best interest for us to accept the listing?" Smith said. "Our professional reputation is at stake."
- This is not the time for nudity. You might really love your painting of a nude woman (and it might have been really expensive) but it's distracting for visitors. You want them to look at your house, not your artwork. Each listing in the National Association of Realtors' Multiple Listing Service comes with a "remarks" section, which usually contains comments such as "Don't let the cat out when showing." Moulton remembers one listing where the remarks said, "Seller is professional photographer of male nudes." There were many nude photos displayed throughout the house. Nude photos, like nude paintings, can alarm and offend people, and some buyers will refuse to even view such a home. (Although, Moulton said, he did have one female client who said, "Great, let's go see it!")

- Eliminate the smell of cigarette smoke. This is one of the top reasons that buyers dislike a house, said Chad Goldwasser, a real estate agent with Keller Williams in Austin. It's not enough to smoke outside while your house is on the market. Have the carpets steam-cleaned, the curtains cleaned, and put in air fresheners or potpourri if necessary.

- Take down the giant inflatable Santa. Since Monday is New Year's Day, there's no reason to keep the holiday displays up. And while you're at it, remove religious items as well, Goldwasser said. Displays of religious imagery can deter some buyers, and sellers are better off keeping those items out of sight until they move into their new home.

- Mask the sound of traffic with the sound of water. Smith and Terry listed a house in the \$600,000 range in Spicewood. The biggest complaint from potential buyers who saw the property was the noise from the road. The house backed up to a busy highway, and people thought the noise would ruin their enjoyment of the back patio. Smith and Terry suggested having a fountain built. The seller hired a landscaping contractor who built a backyard fountain with jets that spouted water 6 feet into the air. The fountain was pretty, but most importantly, it made a soothing sound that blocked out the passing cars. The house sold quickly after the fountain was built. Spending \$3,500 on a fountain was cheaper for the seller than lowering the price of the home, Terry said.

- Not everyone is a Longhorn fan. If you have a giant display of Longhorn (or Aggie) memorabilia, potential buyers who favor another team might be annoyed. In fact, large collections of almost anything are a bad idea because it makes visitors think about your hobby more than your house. "I looked at one listing that honestly looked like a country craft store threw up in that home," Moulton recalled. "Everywhere you looked, it was dried flowers or figurines or paintings. There was so much you couldn't get past it."

- Take a look at what your real estate agent is doing. You need to get as much information about the market as possible, Goldwasser said, and he or she needs to be clear about why your house is not selling. If you have had several conversations and you still are not satisfied with how your house is being marketed, it's time to consider switching agents.

- If there is a room that's not doing anything except holding junk and odds and ends, clear that stuff out and stage the room as something else. Smith and Terry had a case where a small room near the bathroom was holding barbells and other odd items. Visitors weren't sure what to make of this room. The real estate agents took the clutter out and made it a soft and feminine area, a relaxation room designed for women. They put in a chair, lamp and bookstand, and made pretty arrangements of fluffy towels, scented candles and scented soap. The room turned from a deterrent into an attraction, and the house sold quickly. A small room could also be staged as a nursery or office.