

For Real Estate Professionals



FEATURED

# 8 Shockingly Bad Staging Decisions (And What to Do About Them)



Tara-Nicholle Nelson

February 3rd, 2014

30

[inShare](#)

Real estate is an intensely personal experience for many buyers and sellers. After all, a home, at its core, is a personal expression of a homeowner's entire life wrapped inside four small (okay, sometimes not so small) walls.

And while, ultimately, buyers should be more focused on the bones of the home—the things that will stay after the current owner has vacated—staging can often be the difference between a

buyer bonanza and a dearth of hot offers. Don't let your sellers suffer at the hands of poor staging.

It may be challenging, but a little tough love now, will make for a love fest post-sale—after the big offers come flying in. Here are 8 of the biggest staging sins sellers make and how agents can help their sellers avoid these pitfalls before it costs them a sweet deal.

## 1. Collection Overload.

It is very difficult for almost any collection to look orderly and neutral, two high-level aims of home staging. Unless the homeowner has attractive, high-end built-in cases to house the collections *and* the target buyers share a similar affinity for the objects, even the coolest collection can come off as a pile of space-consuming clutter.

When it comes to shockingly bad staging decisions, the choice to give a taxidermy or gun collection a starring role in a home's staging is high in the oh-so-bad rankings. For some buyers, these collections can trigger ethical and sanitation and can distract from the strengths and features the property has to offer.

### **What to Tell Your Seller:**

Remember that uber-personal thing we talked about earlier? Collections are often a source of pride or hold sentimental value. Tread lightly. Let your seller know that while you appreciate the collection, their home sale will benefit from a more neutral, less-personal aesthetic. You may also want to mention that open houses mean many people in and out of the seller's home. All prized possessions should be stored ahead of time.

## 2. Echo-Chamber Staging.

In an echo chamber, sounds are amplified because they simply bounce around in that closed space. When left alone, the same thing can happen to sellers if they do not have outside input. And unfortunately, it seems to be the bad staging ideas that get amplified, more than the good ones. Echo chamber staging happens when the sum total of a staging team, well, one person. That bold wallpaper in the bathroom may seem like a good idea, but a little perspective—and another opinion—may prove otherwise.

### **What to Tell Your Sellers:**

The truth can hurt—but backing into your argument can take some of the sting out of the professional staging talk. Sellers who stage with zero external or professional input, are often the sellers who are unable to see:

- that their homes are still significantly cluttered or over-full,
- that their furniture is too plentiful and too large to show how spacious the home truly is, or
- that their sweet feline companions are also rather malodorous to strangers.

Take a little staging field trip with your sellers. Take them to one home with tasteful bring-in-the-buyers staging and another to a home with cover-your-eyes-bad décor. It can be tough to self assess, but once you show your sellers what a big difference a little staging makes, they may be more open to the suggestion. If your clients have a bare-bones budget, see if they'll hire a pro stager for just an hour's worth of advice.

### 3. Failure to edit.

You've heard thirty-somethings who still live at home diagnosed with failure to launch? Well, failure to edit is a close cousin of this syndrome. As the New York Times recently put it, “the job of stagers is to reverse the accumulated creep of hundreds of small and misguided design decisions, and to erase any hints of the messiness of daily life.” Your client might have a fantastic rug, a beautiful sofa, amazing tchotchkes and the highest-end personal effects, but chances are good that their cumulative first impression to a buyer viewing the home will still fall short of the “one broad stroke of gorgeousness” the Times piece correctly says home sellers should aim for, with their staging.

The failure to edit is a generalized syndrome which can manifest in all sorts of specific staging woes, from garden variety clutter to disastrous decor style mash-ups.

#### **What to Tell Your Sellers:**

Edit, edit, edit. Then go back and edit again. Sellers should think of de-cluttering as pre-packing. If your client is a DIY stager, tell them to ask their friends to come in and help decide what still needs to go, once they think they're done removing furniture and personal effects. A sassy best friend or a nit-picky sister-in-law can sometimes be an agent's best friend.

### 4. Silly scenarios.

The difference between staging and interior design is simple: staging is cost-and-time efficient design undertaken with the specific objective of showing a home off to its best advantage, playing up its features and helping prospective buyers visualize the best lives they could possibly live in the home, should they choose it. Unfortunately, this has led some well-intentioned sellers and stagers to believe they should stage one bedroom as a Parisian boulevard (Eiffel tower mural included), another with a full-blown butterfly theme and the third as the beach—complete with umbrella, towels on the wall and sunscreen bottles on the nightstand. I saw this house, folks. With my own two eyes.

### **What to Tell Your Sellers:**

Be firm. Let sellers know that they should stage their home to show off its space, light and conveniences, and the best, basic purposes that unusually small or large spaces could be used for. If the backyard is a huge selling point, stage it with outdoor dining or living room furnishings. Similarly, if the home is a two-bedroom with a bonus room in an area of four-bedroom homes, staging the bonus room as a bedroom or home office helps buyers understand the solutions that can minimize the brunt of your home's challenges.

Staging your home to create “cute” scenarios with no relationship to the selling points or solutions buyers care about is of no value and can create a low-budget feel.

## **5. The 'lived-in' look.**

When a home is being shown for sale, it must be immaculate, every single time it's being shown. It should look like no one lives there: no toothbrushes, curling irons, protein shake mixes or paperwork allowed.

Is this difficult to keep up? Absolutely. But you'd be surprised at how bad an impression just a few personal toiletries or dishes can make.

### **What to Tell Your Sellers:**

Work closely with your sellers so that they understand the importance of a flawless showing. Encourage your clients to set up a system for putting everything away and wiping down all kitchens, bathrooms and other daily mess hot spots every single time the home is going to be shown.

## **6. Closet cramming.**

Out of sight is not out of mind. Home buyers today are desperate for storage space and will undoubtedly open those same, crammed-tight doors in an effort to evaluate how the home ranks for storage. Beautifully organized closets with ample room create an impression in the buyer's mind that they, too, can have an orderly life in the home.

### **What to Tell Your Sellers**

Encourage sellers to see the exercise of staging as an opportunity to sell, donate or throw out things they no longer need. Remind them that even huge closets, if crammed to the gills, make buyers wonder how they'll ever get by with so little closet space.

## **7. Failing to stage for all the senses.**

A house that smells like pet mayhem or smoke or has a noisily defective heater is a tough house to sell, no matter how beautifully it is staged. Unfortunately, smells and sounds are very easy to get acclimated to, when you live with them. Buyers, though, will detect them the second they walk in—and the moment they do is the moment we in the business call “turn-off time.”

### **What to Tell Your Sellers:**

It may be uncomfortable—but honest is the best policy. Be gentle and sensitive (‘musky’ comes across softer than ‘moldy, dank, and gross’). Offer to work with them to fix it or refer them to a trusted vendor who can.

## **8. Not to.**

Ultimately, the most shockingly bad of all staging decisions is the surprisingly frequent decision not to bother staging the home at all. This explains homes like the one I once viewed which had residents still sound asleep in their beds, *in the dining room*, as the listing agent walked myself and my mortified buyer clients through the property. On the less bizarre end of the non-staged spectrum, this is how lovely homes with vast potential end up selling at a discount, as cosmetic fixers at a discount. This is a particular tragedy in cases where the owners could have painted, spruced, moved loads of things out and a few newer things in and made much, much more money on their homes

### **What to Tell Your Sellers:**

Ask them what about staging feels off-putting. If it's a budgetary concern, focus on de-cluttering and small accents or paint, which can make a big difference on a dime. If the issue is—you

guessed it—a little more personal, remember that showing can sometimes be more effective than telling.