

The nose knows: What your house is telling buyers | Home & Living

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The popularity of home-improvement/renovation/real estate and gardening channels on cable television has had an inarguable impact on the business of homebuying and selling. It has set a high standard for how buyers expect to see a house presented and how sellers must prepare their homes for showings.

Most people today know that when a house is shown it should be decluttered and sparkling clean. It's even better if kitchens and baths are updated to modern standards. Opening the blinds and leaving the lights on creates a welcoming interior, and many sellers make sure to have pleasant music playing softly for added ambiance.

But many homeowners preparing their house for sale don't think about how their house smells. They have gone "nose blind" to their home's own scents and, if a house has an unpleasant odor when the buyer opens the front door, it forms an immediate and powerful negative impression.

There are several ways to address the very important issue of odor when marketing a property.

When a homeowner is preparing for market, it would be wise for them to invite honest opinions about how their house smells. Most Realtors will be diplomatically honest about odors with a seller because, as professionals, they know how critical this is.

The most common offenses when it comes to smells in a house are pets, cooking/food odors and closets made stinky by shoes. The good news is that all can be ameliorated without taking drastic or costly measures.

While your house is on the market, consider going out to dinner if you absolutely must have cooked cabbage or smelly fish. Don't leave garlic or onion bits in the kitchen trash can. Instead, put them down the disposal, or take them to the outside garbage bin. Better yet, empty all trash cans in the house before showings.

One smart trick is to bake cookies about an hour before a showing. That aroma generates an incredible sense of welcome, and leaving freshly baked cookies out for potential buyers is a nice gesture all its own.

Buyers are keenly interested in closet and storage space, and those areas should not be forgotten when preparing a house for market. Closets can be made to look more spacious by paring down and organizing the contents, but also paying attention to odors here is critically important. If you keep the dirty laundry hamper in a closet, it would be smart to move that laundry to the washer and spray freshener in the hamper, or remove the hamper altogether.

Apply a little nose detective work when it comes to shoes. Not all shoes smell, but some

do, and the offending pair or pairs should go. Because the smells in a closet can be so significant, adding a gentle fragrance diffuser in an obscure spot can go a long way to neutralizing any offensive scents.

Taking care that your house is free of pet odors requires a little planning. Make sure dogs are frequently groomed, food and water bowls sparkle, and pet bedding is clean. Cats do not require such frequent bathing, but keeping the litter box fresh is a must.

Don't forget about the cages of birds and pocket pets like guinea pigs, hamsters and gerbils. Those cages can become quickly odoriferous, so be sure to clean them frequently and particularly before showings.

These tips are suggestions for best practices, but I suspect that every agent reading this has a story about a short-notice showing where there was no time to prepare, but the house sold anyway. Here is my personal favorite.

Many, many years ago I listed a beautiful, high-end home with four Labrador retrievers. The house was lakefront, and those labs were in the water a lot! The entire house smelled like a wet dog. The homeowners were oblivious to the odor, but they trusted my nose, were good sports and took measures to mitigate it. They prepared for showings with neutralizing sprays and some quick just-before-the-showing cleaning, which produced a lovely fresh scent.

It took a few hours to accomplish getting it all done, but they were dedicated to putting the best foot forward when buyers visited. They even left the house with their beloved, stinky dogs when showings occurred.

Then the day came when a buyer and agent driving through the neighborhood spotted this house, liked what they saw and asked to come in right on the spot. There was no time to prepare. The owner and his friendly dogs invited the agent and the buyers into the house. As I recall, the welcome included some dog-jump greetings and wet doggy kisses.

To my delight and surprise those buyers purchased the house that very day, and never during the entire transaction did the house odor come up. It turned out that they themselves had dogs they adored, so they either didn't care about the odor or didn't notice it.

The moral of that story is that you do the best you can to prepare a house for market and for showings. But, at the end of the day, it's not perfection that seals the deal. The real magic occurs when the right buyer comes along and, to that buyer, the house is truly "home."

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