



# How To Prepare Your House For Sale

Expert insights on selling it quickly and for top dollar

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Your Local Real Estate Expert

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# 1. Preface

For most people, listing their house for sale isn't a spur of the moment thing. People often think about selling their house for *years* before ever actually selling it.

Yet, given how much time and thought people tend to give it, many people don't do enough to prepare their house for sale (or prepare *themselves* for what's to come). They just get to a point where they decide it's time to sell and they pop a sign in the yard.

This often leads to people not selling their house for as much, as quickly, or as smoothly as it could have. Or at all.

On the other hand, there are people who do too much and spend way more time and money than they should.

They may very well do things that help their house sell as quickly as possible and for as much as possible, but they don't *net* as much as they could have because they put more money into it than they can recoup from the sale.

It's a fine line. You don't want to do too little *or* too much...

Which is why I created this booklet — to help you prepare for the sale of your house just the right amount.

The more time you have, the more leisurely and thorough you can be. At the same time, don't worry if you're in a rush. Much of what you'll read here can be done in a pinch. Whether you have a few years, a few weeks, or a few days before you put your house on the market, this booklet will help you put your best foot forward.

As you read through it and as you prepare your house for sale, feel free to reach out to

me if you're ever in doubt about something you're considering doing (or not doing). I'll be glad to give you my thoughts on whatever you're considering!

## 2. Try On Some Shoes

The first thing you should do doesn't require much work, but that doesn't mean it's an easy thing for everyone to do...

Leave your house.

Go for a ride, go run some errands, or just go to work. Pretend that you have an appointment later on to see a house you might want to buy...and that house is your house.

When you return home, you're going to look at it through the eyes of a buyer. It sounds easy enough, but it's hard to look at your own house objectively. It's easy to get used to things that might turn a buyer off. So your task is to put yourself in the buyer's shoes and try to think and feel how they would about your house when they see it for the first time.

As you head back home, pay attention to what you see as you drive up...

- ▶ How does the landscaping look?
- ▶ How about the exterior?

Now walk up to the front door (or whatever door a potential buyer will walk through)...

- ▶ Was the pathway in good shape?
- ▶ Beyond that, was it actually appealing?
- ▶ Is the front door striking or just blah? Or worse, is it in bad shape?

Walk inside...

- ▶ Stop. Look around. Don't just go through the motions of walking where you normally walk when you come home. Buyers won't just rush in; they'll pause for a moment or two.
- ▶ What do they see in those first moments?

Walk around the inside...

- ▶ If you didn't know the house, which direction do you think you would walk as the buyer? Go that way. Look through each room with fresh eyes. Make sure you open up closet doors because buyers certainly will!

If you have a garage, check that out too...

- ▶ Make sure you take a peek around the garage because most likely that's the way you (and a future buyer) actually leave and come into the house.

Walk around the outside...

- ▶ Buyers won't just see the exterior from the front if they're interested. They'll want to take a walk around the entire house and property. So make sure you head outside. You might want to use a back or side door since that is how many buyers will go outside when they come see your house.

OK, you're done. Are your feet sore? (It can be tough walking in someone else's shoes...)

Now be honest: How'd it look? Would *you* buy your house? Would you be willing to pay *top dollar*? Would you be worried that if you don't hurry and make an offer someone else will come along and scoop up your dream house right out from under you?

If you're being honest, there's probably at least a few things you made note of that you should do something about. But before you go knocking things off that list, let's take a look at a few of the most common things sellers overlook.

### 3. Declutter

The image most people have from watching TV shows is that most people live in pristine houses where everything is orderly and in its proper place.

However, if you were to randomly pick 100 houses to go into on a “normal” day, without warning, you’d find that most people live with a decent amount of “clutter” in their homes...not like Martha Stewart or a Pottery Barn catalog.

We’re not talking “hoarder” level clutter, but most people have a certain level of clutter they live with. Which is fine. Most people truly live that way. In fact, the buyer and future owner of your house will probably live that way. But before you put your house on the market, it pays to give the clutter you’ve accumulated some attention.

One of the first (and most important) things you should do is declutter.

Go room by room and get rid of anything you don’t want, use, or need. This is the best time in life to rid yourself of stuff you never even realized you still owned. Then put away whatever stuff you still want or need (but don’t actually use on a daily basis). Yes, that includes the pile of mail bills on the kitchen counter!

And I don’t mean stuff it all in a closet or the garage! Remember, buyers will look in those places. If you have too much stuff and not enough room to keep it all in a tidy manner while you sell your house, rent a storage unit. You can reunite with all your stuff once your house is sold. This is just temporary.

## 4. De-smell

Ok, “de-smell” probably isn’t a real word. But just hang with me for a moment...

*Does your house stink?*

Whether it does or not, it’s unlikely that anyone would actually say yes. We get used to how our house smells, so it’s hard for most people to honestly answer that question.

The best way to determine if you need to address an odor is to ask someone who doesn’t live there. Try not to ask someone who visits your house regularly though.

The best suggestion I could give is to ask a real estate agent to come by and give it the sniff test. We’re in houses all the time, so we know when something just doesn’t smell right.

The most common smells homeowners are often unaware of are:

- ▶ Pet odors
- ▶ Pungent or distinct food odors from cooking
- ▶ Teenage sons
- ▶ Cigarette or cigar smoke

Even when people are aware of an odor they should deal with, they often think that masking it with candles, potpourri, or air fresheners is a good solution. It isn’t. Even though they smell nice, doing this can trigger curiosity from buyers about the smells you might be trying to hide.

The best thing to do is to eliminate the source of the smell (if possible) prior to putting the house on the market. Obviously this isn’t easy to do with pets or teenage sons, but if and when possible, get rid of the source. Like, stop cooking tuna fish and onion sandwiches while smoking cigarettes. And maybe convince your stinky son that



camping outside in a tent with the dog would be loads of fun for a while. (I kid, I kid.)

You should also give your house a thorough cleaning. This is probably a good idea even if there's no distinct smell. If you're a good cleaner, this involves just a little time and elbow grease. If not, this is a great reason to splurge and hire a cleaning crew to come in and freshen up.

If that doesn't work, sometimes people have to replace carpeting or repaint in order to eliminate extremely foul odors. Hopefully you won't have to go to that extreme. But if you do, it's worth the money because *a house with a smell will not sell...*

...at least not for as much or as quickly as it might have.

## 5. Don't Take It Personally

Most people have heard that you should “depersonalize” your house when you’re selling it. That term gets thrown around a lot. Most people think it just refers to pictures of themselves or family.

But taking down some pictures isn’t the *whole* picture; it also means removing any decor that’s more of a personal taste.

For instance, you might be super proud of your hunting skills, but displaying your taxidermy trophies on the wall might be off-putting to buyers. Or you may just have some really interesting or artsy furniture. While it may be hip and stylish, it could be distracting to the average buyer.

Buyers need to be able to come in and focus on how *their own* furniture and belongings will look. If they can’t overlook your personal flair, they could be less likely to make a strong offer (or one at all).

As proud as you might be about what makes your house *your* home, make it as easy as possible for them to feel like it could be *their* home.

## 6. The Lightbulb Moment

Here's another bright idea! Make sure all of your lightbulbs are working, and make sure they cast an appropriate amount of light upon each room. You wouldn't believe how many houses on the market have lights that are burnt out.

Dark rooms simply don't show well. Even worse, non-functioning bulbs can cast a negative light on the owners (pun intended). In other words, buyers might think, "Well if the owners don't take care of the basics like lightbulbs, what else are they neglecting?"

Sometimes it isn't a matter of having bulbs *out*...it's a matter of having the *wrong* bulbs. Bulbs are not a one-size-fits-all type of thing. Sometimes people will have bulbs that are way too bright or just cast the wrong feel in a room.

Some rooms deserve a crisp, clean, bright light. (Like in a kitchen.) Some are better off with softer, warmer lighting. (Like in a den.) So make sure to give some thought to how the lighting in the room makes you feel. Is it appropriate? If not, try to find the perfect bulbs for the room.

Also, make sure that when your house is on the market, the lights are easy to turn on for the agent showing the house. If a light switch that controls certain lighting isn't easy to find, make sure that you leave it on before a showing or leave a note letting people know where the switch is.

In fact, if you know there's going to be a showing, it's not a bad idea for you to turn on the lights before the buyer comes. It's simple enough to just ask that the agent turn off the lights once they finish showing the house. That way they can just walk in and get the full effect without having to look for the light switches.

## 7. Fix It Or Forget It?

It's easy to learn how to live with certain little issues around the house. Many people don't even view certain things *as an issue* until they're selling their house.

Like that gurgling noise that comes from the sink, for example. It might have bothered you at first, but then it just faded into the background once it became familiar. Or the drippy faucet. It's not like it doesn't work, it just likes to not stop working entirely when you turn it off. No big deal. As a homeowner, things like that aren't always bothersome enough to justify hiring someone or fixing it yourself.

It doesn't just have to be plumbing, of course. It could be the chipping paint on the ceiling...which happens to be caused by a small leak in the roof when it rains hard. Or a loose cabinet door that doesn't close quite right.

Whatever it is, there's probably something around your house that could stand to be fixed.

But here's the question: *Should* you fix these little issues before putting your house on the market?

The popular and most standard answer in the real estate industry is, "Yes." And let's just say that it can't hurt to fix the little issues around the house. It's like we talked about with the light bulbs that are burnt out — if buyers see smaller issues around the house, they might also wonder about what else you haven't taken care of.

But, on the other hand, you may be able to ignore the minor fixes and just see if the buyer brings them up during home inspection requests. It may be less costly and easier to negotiate a credit or agree to repair something only when a buyer actually asks for it to be repaired.

The same goes for more serious issues like an HVAC system that's not working properly. You should probably fix that sort of thing prior to putting your house on the market, but it could make sense to just wait and see how buyers react.

There's no absolute answer to this. So the best thing to do is make a list of all of the issues around your house and ask your agent for their advice.

You may even want to hire a home inspector to perform a pre-listing home inspection so you won't get caught off guard by what your buyer's inspector will likely find. Doing this is never a bad idea.

## 8. Reservations About Major Renovations

As an agent, I get asked a lot about renovations and, more specifically, whether they'll increase a home's value (or if they're even necessary to do before selling).

It's a good thing to ask about because many people don't ask and then end up regretting the work they did.

Quite often, a renovation project ends up costing the homeowner more than it actually increases the value of the house. Sure, it might increase the value, but there's a good chance it won't increase it enough to justify the time and cost of having done it.

That's not to say that it never makes sense to do a renovation project before selling. Some certainly do improve the value beyond the cost of doing it. And sometimes doing a renovation can make the difference between getting a house sold more quickly versus sitting on the market forever or simply not selling.

Renovations like a new kitchen or bathroom are often cited as being a great return on investment. They *can* be. But they might not be for you and your particular house and situation. So make sure to think twice before doing any major renovation to your house prior to putting it on the market. Make sure to run any project you are considering by your real estate agent.

**Pro tip:** While we're on the topic, make sure you have permits for all work you've done on your house over the years. If you do, have them handy. Buyers and their representatives will request copies most likely. If you do not, make sure to get them. Also, gather up all receipts, guarantees, and warranties for the work done.

## 9. Enthusiasm For Your Curb

A buyer's enthusiasm for your house starts at the curb.

First impressions count — not only on dates and job interviews but also when you're selling a house. If you want to be appealing to buyers, you have to make sure your house has "curb appeal."

Curb appeal isn't just about the outside of your *house* looking attractive, it's about everything that leads up to it — your landscaping, walkways, driveway, decks, patios, fencing...basically anything you can see from the curb.

And it matters *way* before the buyer even drives up to your house to see it. It's usually the first image they see when they're searching for houses online, which is where most buyers are looking. The last thing you want is a buyer *scrolling* past your house, let alone *rolling* past it in a car because it lacks curb appeal.

Here are some things you should consider:

- ▶ Does the roof look good? Or does it need to be power-washed or even replaced?
- ▶ Are the gutters clean?
- ▶ Are the windows clean?
- ▶ Does the exterior need power-washing, a paint job, or new siding?
- ▶ Is the lawn well kept? Are there bare spots?
- ▶ Are shrubs and trees trimmed?
- ▶ Are flower beds weeded?
- ▶ Are the walkways, driveway, and any patios or decks clean and in good shape?

As with interior repairs and renovations, you shouldn't necessarily go overboard to enhance the curb appeal. There's a fine line you don't want to cross. So make sure to consult with a real estate agent for advice on what you should and shouldn't do to

spruce up the outside of your house prior to hitting the market.



## 10. Prepping With Pets

If you don't have any pets, you can skip this section. But if you do have pets, this section might be a hard pill to swallow. Let's just get down to it: *It might be a good idea to consider removing your pet from the house while you're selling it.*

I get it, though. Pets are part of the family for many people. Sending Fido or Fifi off for an extended vacation isn't something many pet-owning homeowners want to hear, let alone consider.

However, if you own any pets, you need to consider and plan for what you will do with them when there are showings. Well, at least ones that roam around the house. Fish in a tank or hamsters in a cage...not much to worry about. But a large dog or a quick cat that'll bolt out the door when someone walks in...that's another story.

It's especially important if your pet is aggressive, loud, or distracting. For example, a barking dog may not be dangerous, but it can keep a buyer from feeling at ease while looking at your house.

Most people with pets simply require advance notice for any showings so they can arrange to either secure or remove their pet from the house. This is fine, but it can get in the way of buyers coming to see the house, especially if it's difficult to get an appointment. So make sure to be ready to jump whenever someone asks to come see the house.

Your best, most motivated buyer may want to see your house on the spur of the moment. And if they can't see yours easily, they may buy another one they were able to go see. So if it's going to be too difficult for you to accommodate showings on the fly, you may want to consider arranging to have your pet stay somewhere else.

## 11. Where To When...

Where are you moving once your house is sold?

This is probably not the first time you've heard that question. In fact, you've probably already asked yourself that question. Because if you're like most people planning on selling their house, it's a huge concern.

In fact, many people who are planning on selling their house are often more concerned with where they're going than on preparing their house for sale. Unfortunately, this often leads to them making mistakes and losing money.

For instance, they find a home they want to buy and then just throw their current house on the market with little or no preparation. Or they accept a weak offer because they don't have a choice. And there are others who won't even accept the best offer they'll ever get because they're worried about finding their next home before accepting an offer...only to never see as good of an offer come around again.

The reality is, most people can't buy a new home without first selling the house they own. And that can make people nervous. People often ask, "What if I sell my house and then I can't find something to buy?"

Ideally you'll be able to find something you love once your house is [under contract / in escrow]. Or perhaps you'll be able to negotiate terms that will give you ample time to look for a new home.

But have a backup plan just in case. Have a plan for where you'll live for a while if you get a great offer but can't find a home you want to buy right away. This could mean living with family for a while, or maybe you'd prefer finding a short-term rental or hotel.

Again, this isn't to say that you'll need to do this, but planning on the "what if" will put

you in a better, stronger position as a seller. Being able to say yes to an offer, when other competing sellers may hesitate, can increase your odds of getting your house sold before others — and for the best possible price and terms.

## 12. Funding Your Future

Many people don't realize that it's important to get pre-approved for a mortgage on their next home *before* they even begin to sell their current house.

If you have enough cash to buy whatever you want outright, there's no need to do this. (Nor is there as much concern about trying to time the sale of your house with the purchase of another one.) But most people need the proceeds of the house they will sell in order to qualify for a mortgage and buy another one.

You shouldn't wait until your house is [under contract / in escrow] to make sure you can qualify for another mortgage. That's a mistake many people make. They think they have to wait and see how much their house sells for first, or they simply presume they'll qualify for a mortgage in the amount they want or need.

The last thing you want to do is put your house on the market and accept an offer, only to learn you don't qualify for the amount you want or need. So make sure you speak with a lender or two prior to putting your house on the market.

They'll want to know how much your house will probably sell for, and you'll need to give them an idea of how much you owe on it. They'll be able to pre-qualify you or even give you a conditional pre-approval.

**(Note:** pre-approvals carry more weight than pre-qualifications, but that's another booklet).

## 13. Unthink

So, how much do you think your house will sell for?

Most people have a number in their head. Some people just pluck it out of thin air. Others look online at Zillow. Some take how much they owe, add the amount of money they've put into the house in upgrades, then add how much commissions will be, and then add how much they want or need to be able to buy their next house.

Unfortunately, none of those methods are accurate. You'd be better off buying one of those magic eight balls and giving it a shake. Or better yet, put a bunch of home prices on a dartboard and throw darts until you hit the one you like best.

The most accurate way to know how much your house is worth is to get a thorough market analysis from a local real estate agent — one who knows his or her stuff inside and out.

Problem is, many homeowners do have a number in their head, and that number is often unrealistic. They tend to get defensive or angry when they hear the truth, insisting on listing their house for more than it's worth. Then they'll shop around for an agent who says what they want to hear (just to get the listing).

Listing your house for more than you should is one of the most deadly sins of selling your house. You could prep your house in every way possible and make it look better than anything else on the market, but if it isn't priced correctly it'll never sell. And over time, you'll lose leverage (and money) because buyers take note of how long a house has been sitting on the market.

You're better off pricing your house accurately from day one. This doesn't mean you're "giving your house away" or are "losing money." Yet many people feel that way because they had an inflated value in their head. But that value and that money never actually

existed.

So, the best thing you can do is to unthink whatever value you have in your head. Do whatever it takes. Meditate. Go away to a spa for a weekend and get massages. Live with Tibetan monks for a few days.

Once you unthink the values in your head, get a thorough “comparative market analysis” (CMA) by a thoughtful, knowledgeable real estate agent whom you trust...and then trust what he or she says. Base your hopes and next moves on that number, not any other number you may have already thought.

## 14. Line Up Your Listing Agent

Throughout this booklet, I've mentioned that you should speak to a real estate agent for further insight and advice in regard to many of the things we've covered.

While all of this is good advice, no house, area, market, or moment is the same. It's easy to do more than you need to — or less than you should — if you're not in the market day in and day out like a real estate agent.

It's a good idea to actually line up the agent you will use to list your property before you even start prepping your house for sale.

Beyond just getting his or her valuable input, which can save you time and money on your preparations, having your agent involved as early on as possible can benefit you (and the agent) in many ways:

- ▶ The agent will get to know your house and property better, which will help them formulate their marketing, sales strategy, and talking points.
- ▶ The agent will get to know you and your situation better, so you can get the best, most thoughtful advice possible.
- ▶ You will form a better working relationship and build trust that will benefit you during the sale of your house.
- ▶ Your agent can “prime” the market by talking up your house to other agents and potential buyers before your house even hits the market.
- ▶ There's a lot that an agent needs to do in order to present your house in the best possible light. (Paperwork, photography, sales copy, marketing materials...) And the more time he or she has to work on these things, the more accurate, stunning, and effective they will be.

Too often, homeowners do whatever prepping they're going to do on their own, and once they're ready to list their house, they call in several agents to compete for their

business. But when they do that, they lose a lot of value they could've received from their agent by interviewing and making their decision ahead of time.

So, before you do any of the preparations recommended in this booklet, make sure you've lined up the agent you'll be listing your house with so he or she can be involved with your entire process.



## 15. This Might Also Be Helpful

Whether you're preparing to sell your house in the next couple of weeks, months, or years, I hope you've found this booklet useful (and enjoyable)!

If you found this booklet about *prepping* your house for sale helpful, then you'll also want to read my booklet, "*The Ultimate Home Seller's Guide.*"

While this booklet helps you get your house prepared, my seller's guide delves into what you should expect from start to finish, and it'll help you sell your house for as much (and as quickly) as possible.

Of course, just like this booklet, it's free and there's no obligation. All you have to do is ask and I'll get one to you. (You can either email or call me.)

Otherwise, I hope you're also receiving and reading the series of emails I'm sending in conjunction with this booklet. There are a few more tips in those emails to help you as you prepare your house for sale.

Finally, I'd love the chance to work with you. Just give me a call *before* you're ready to sell so I can help you prepare your house for sale...not just get it sold for you!

Thanks again for requesting a copy of this booklet, and I hope to hear from you soon!

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Rest assured, this Atlanta Native with over 25 years of successful real estate sales experience will work tirelessly for your best interests. Jana Seneker Hufham has witnessed the tremendous change and growth that's transformed the area into one of the most desirable places to live in the country. Returning to Atlanta after attending college, she has taken her knowledge learned in public relations and marketing into real estate. Her extensive knowledge of the market from Buckhead to Braselton, coupled with her seasoned insider's expertise in market trends, contracts and construction materials, allows her to bring a vast knowledge of real estate expertise to the transaction. Jana is a proven Top Producer and has been featured as one of the Top Real Estate Agents in Atlanta Magazine.