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Ten tips on preparing a lake home for sale

Now that the great recession is loosening its grip, you may be considering putting your lake house on the market this spring. The good news is that there should be a healthy crop of buyers when the weather starts to warm. The bad news is that there will also be a boatload of new listings to choose from at that time. So, how can you prepare your home to stand out and compete with all the other lake homes on the market? Here are ten easy and inexpensive steps you can take that will make a big difference in the salability and sales price potential of your lake home.

1 De-clutter! When you move, you are going to have to pack up your stuff anyway. Before you put out that For Sale sign, try to pack away at least half of the items in your house – especially nick-knacks, photos, seldom-used kitchen appliances, throws, ottomans, off-season clothes, magazine holders, books and other decorative items. Then, store them somewhere out of sight. If your decorative items catch the buyer's eye, then it takes his eye off of the lake and architecture of your home.

2 Landscaping. Freshen up all the surfaces of your landscaping. That means fresh pine straw and mulch, leaves raked, shrubs trimmed...the works. If your shrubs have grown as high as your exterior windows, trim them back. If trees or plants on your property are blocking the lake view, trim them. If you have limbs hanging over your house, inspectors will note that. They're going to ask you to trim them. Plus buyers will worry about the leaves they drop in the fall and potential problems in ice storms. Go ahead and take care of those limbs. If it's warm enough, put out some flowers to add to the charm factor.

3 Smell. Most agents will tell you that an unpleasant odor is one of the biggest turn-offs for buyers. If your house smells like your pet, it will not sell – period. Air sprays do not help. The most effective way to get rid of those odors is to get your carpets/sofas cleaned and keep litter boxes away from the main part of the house. Sometimes a plug-in air freshener will help, but it has to be a subtle fresh smell, not an overwhelming flowery one.

4 No shiny brass. There was a building boom on Lake Lanier in the '80s, and everyone chose shiny brass fixtures for that new construction. Unfortunately, brass is no longer in style. So, if you have shiny gold fixtures, replace them with oil-rubbed or antique bronze. That includes drawer pulls, lights, vent covers, door knobs, kick plates, doorbells – anything that is gold and shiny. The reason bronze is a good choice is that it looks okay next to the dull brass hinges and other elements that you probably will not replace.

Here's a great trick if you have a crafty family member. The home improvement stores have a spray paint in bronze that can be used on shiny brass. Sand the brass so the paint will adhere, and spray it bronze according to the instructions. That will save a lot of money and allow you to get more use out of your expensive fixtures. Most of the time, you can't even tell it's not the original color.

5 Neutral colored paint. A fresh coat of paint goes a long way toward making a home feel new and fresh. All homeowners choose paint colors to match their personalities and furniture. Chances are your buyer will not have the same personality or furniture as you, so choose neutral colors. That way, they will be able to picture their furniture in your house. By the same token, wallpaper is even more taste-specific. No matter how much you love your wallpaper, take it down. Buyers will see it as a big project, and that may take your house off their list. For an afternoon's work and just a few dollars for the solution, you can completely remove that negative.

6 Don't block the lake view! Remove or rearrange any furniture or items that block your lake view. Most people put tables and lamps in front of the window. It's also common to have deck furniture outside the window blocking some of the view. Rearrange it so nothing whatsoever blocks the lake view, especially from the family room. Every iota of view will make your house more appealing. It will also pay to clean your windows to maximize the light and improve the view.

7 Clean, clean, clean! The #1 way a buyer will decide if a home has been well-cared-for is by how clean it is when they go to see it. If it's dirty on the surface, they assume the home's unseen systems (HVAC, electrical, plumbing) have also been neglected. Get the exterior and driveway pressure washed. Make sure the leaves have been cleaned out of the gutters. Scrub the bathrooms and kitchens, and clean the cob webs from all corners and fixtures. If the grout in your tile is dingy or discolored, re-grout. It's easy and inexpensive. If the corners of your doorways have dings and nicks, touch them up with paint. Anything you do to make your home look newer will help it sell quicker and for a higher price.

8 Docks matter. Check the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers web site for specific rules, but you are allowed to clean up your path to the dock according to their guidelines. Not only does a freshly strawed or mulched path look more appealing, it helps people who are afraid of snakes feel comfortable walking to the dock. You might be surprised how much of an issue that is for some people. As for the dock itself, you're probably not going to completely rehab your dock. But, there are some inexpensive ways to spruce it up. If your boards are discolored from the sun, try removing them and flipping them over so the fresher side is up. A fresh coat of rust-proof paint on the supports and dock poles will go a long way. You also want to make sure you have encapsulated floats in place. Styrofoam is no longer allowed by the Corps, and buyers who use lake agents will know that.

9 Leaks are a deal-killer. If you have any leaks in your house, fix them. Buyers are scared to death of roof leaks and even more wary of foundation problems. If you've had

a leak and fixed it, be sure to paint over any sign of that leak. You will have to disclose the leak, but you don't want the stain screaming at the buyer as he walks through the house.

10 Generational or dated décor. It's a strange phenomenon in real estate that a home full of items over twenty years old is considered "dated" even if the architecture and finishes are completely up to date. Clearly, you will not be able update every item in your house in your staging; but, there are certain items that seem to carry more weight in people's minds than any others. If you can remove these items, that will help eliminate the perception of age. Here are some of the items to consider removing: lace curtains and table cloths, dusty silk flowers or plants, couches/chairs in '80s flowered fabrics, window treatments with bold patterns, any furniture other than antiques older than 20 years, and basically anything that's really fussy or busy. The trend now is simple, uncluttered elegance. Less is more in 2014.

Overall, anything you can do to make your house look bigger will benefit your sale. Remove items from your counters, and your kitchen will look bigger. Move some of your unneeded furniture into storage so more floor space shows, and your square footage will seem higher. Simplify the colors and patterns in your house, and the buyer will be able to focus on the beautiful features of your home. A little preparation goes a long way toward helping you sell your home quickly and for top dollar.

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