

Plan objectively if you're going to sell your home

Are you thinking of selling your home this fall or winter? If you're one of the many homeowners who choose this time of year to move — whether you're trading up or down, or simply relocating — you're probably starting to prepare your home for the sale.

But before you become overwhelmed by the task, it's a good idea to sit down and try to look at your home objectively. An attractive, well-kept home generally has a better chance of selling more quickly. And the old adage "first impressions are lasting ones" is true.

However, if you haven't made any big improvements or changes over the years, it's not a good idea to try to take on major renovation projects simply to sell your home. This can be an expensive and lengthy procedure and there are no guarantees that you'll be able to recover all of your costs.

Instead, try to determine what types of minor cosmetic improvements can be made, like general cleaning, painting, floor refinishing and so on. These projects generally don't require a lot of capital and your home can be greatly improved by

them. Consult with your realtor to see what types of improvements make the most sense.

Start With the Outside

An inviting exterior insures that prospective buyers will inspect the interior, so it's important to keep your lawn and hedges trimmed and edged, the flower beds cultivated and your yard free and clear of clutter and refuse.

If you have any loose siding or pavement, it's a good idea to get these items repaired. And if you have any cracked or broken windows, get them fixed as well.

If your driveway is somewhat unsightly, consider applying a coat of driveway sealer. This will improve its appearance.

Missing shingles or eavestroughs should also be replaced and loose shutters or awnings should be secured. You may also want to consider painting the exterior of your home to spruce it up. And if you have aluminum siding or trim that's really dirty, hire someone to clean it with a power washer, or wash it yourself.

If you have a garage, make sure the door is clean, attractive and in good working order. Also make sure the inside of your garage doesn't look too jumbled or cluttered.

Also keep patios, walkways and decks free of debris and clutter, and trim any branches that look unsightly or detract from your home.

Inside

You can do a lot on the inside of your home as well, without spending a great deal of money. Two primary areas to keep in mind are the kitchen and bathroom. These two rooms of your home are generally of prime interest to prospective buyers. Make sure they're clutter-free, bright and spotless.

This applies to kitchen appliances as well — especially if you're including them with the sale of your home.

If the carpeting in your home looks dirty or dingy, you may want to rent a steam cleaner, or hire a professional carpet cleaner. Pet odour can become trapped in rugs, and this can repel prospective buyers.

Also give your home a thorough cleaning and airing prior to showing it. Make sure any wood and tile floors look clean and bright, not dull and dingy.

As well, keep in mind that rooms that are too cluttered will give the impression that they're much smaller than their true size. Try to create a feeling of spaciousness when conducting your "spruce-up." If you have too much furniture, consider removing some of it and storing it with a friend or relative.

Checklist

In addition to the information outlined above, here's a brief checklist for you to run over before your house is shown.

- Whenever possible, try to be out of the house while the realtor is conducting a showing. (Prospective purchasers often feel like intruders when homeowners are present.)
- Keep pets well out of the way — preferably out of your house during a showing.
- Make sure your home is tidy and well-aired.
- Keep stairways free of clutter.
- Remove any items (like chandeliers) which won't be included in the sale of the home.

By following these relatively simple tips, you'll feel proud of your home and prospective purchasers are sure to appreciate its beauty.

Don't forget to have your heating system checked out

You can wait until the first frost to have your heating system inspected.

But with this year's unpredictable weather, the safe money's betting winter will be at your door sooner than expected.

Experts at Ontario's Fuels Safety Branch say it's never too early for the annual check to make sure your heating system is operating safely and efficiently.

"Have your heating system serviced soon, by a home-heating contractor registered with our branch," says Michael Philip, director of the branch, part of Ontario's consumer ministry. "You'll be ready for the first cold night."

An annual check of heating system is vital for home safety.

The risk of fire, explosion and carbon monoxide poisoning exist with all types of fuel-burning heating systems, if they aren't cared for properly.

In furnaces fueled by oil or natural gas, heat is produced by combining fuel with the oxygen in the air, then igniting it in the furnace's combustion chamber.

When your heating system is running properly, the exhaust fumes rise up the chimney and present no danger.

But if your furnace isn't burning cleanly, or the chimney is blocked, large amounts of carbon monoxide — a, colourless, odorless gas that causes headaches, nausea and even death — can escape into the house.

Because safety is at stake, it's important to deal with a qualified home-heating contractor.

"An untrained service person who doesn't do the work properly could put lives and property at risk," explains Mr. Philip.

Many consumers deal with the same reputable contractor year after year. But if you need to find someone to do the job, keep these tips in mind.

- Find out if the work is covered by a warranty or maintenance plan before hiring a contractor. If it is, you may be obliged to hire a particular firm, or from a list of contractors recommended by your fuel supplier or furnace manufacturer.
 - Ask your fuel supplier, neighbours and friends for recommendations.
 - Obtain three written estimates of the work to be done and who will do it.
 - Ask for references and check them.
 - Be wary of contractors who show up at your door or call you offering special deals.
 - Make sure the contractor is registered with the Fuels Safety Branch before you sign a contract. If you're not sure, call and check with the branch, at (416) 234-6030.
- If you need a new furnace, experts at the Ministry of Energy suggest you consider a more energy-efficient model. Savings of up

to \$300 per year have been reported for high-efficiency gas furnaces.

The energy ministry also emphasizes the importance of hiring a reputable contractor, because the heating system must be well-designed and carefully installed to yield fuel-cost savings.

To receive a copy of the free brochure Home Heating Safety, call or write the Consumer Information Centre, Ministry of Consumer and Commercial Relations, 555 Yonge St., Toronto, M7A 2H6.

Call (416) 326-8555 in the Toronto area, or toll free 1-800-268-1142.

For a copy of the brochure Home Heating and Cooling, call the Communications Branch, Ministry of Energy, at 327-1298 or 327-1234 in the Toronto area or toll free 1-800-ENERGY1.

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