

Home front: Selling fast when the market is slow

St. Louis County houses stay on market 104 days

BY MATT SORRELL

Nationwide, homes stayed on the market last year for an average of eight to nine weeks before selling, according to the National Association of Realtors.

In the St. Louis market, it's taking a little longer. Through the second quarter of this year, the average number of days on the market for homes in St. Louis County was 104 days, according to the Mid-America Regional Information Systems. In the city of St. Louis, the average was 91 days. The average for St. Charles County was 104 days and 117 days for Jefferson County.

"Most of us are taking six months listings again, like we did in the old days," said Dennis Hayden, broker/manager with RE/MAX Results. "During the boom we were doing it for three months. We just know that it's highly probable it's not going to sell in six months."

Margo Begley, agent with Prudential Alliance Realtors, said buyers who are relocating are dominating the market right now. "They're willing to consider a much broader area of homes," she said.

But there are steps homeowners can take to get their properties sold more quickly.

"In better markets, they used to list properties as they were," said Kevan Barnard, real estate consultant with Coldwell Banker Gundaker. "In this market, you need to put your best foot forward initially as far as price and condition. The biggest thing is to do all the work up front before you list, get the details hammered out and have it looking its best. It's the small things

that count in this market, and it doesn't take a lot of money, just a few weekends up front to get it properly staged and marketed."

And getting a home into shape means looking at it as objectively as possible.

"A seller just has to look at their home with the fresh eyes of a buyer walking into it and not focusing on what they already know," Begley said. "One thing that's helpful is for sellers to go out and look at the competition with the listing agent, then walk into their home and ask themselves which one they'd like to buy."

"Sometimes a homeowner can't see the house the way a buyer would see it," said Melinda Christman, professional home stager with Intuitive Home Staging. "That's usually the biggest problem."

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Christman's company specializes in occupied home staging, and does everything from consulting with sellers on their needs to full staging and re-design services for homes that aren't selling. She said there are many quick fixes she can recommend to sellers that are inexpensive and go a long way toward getting their house sold.

"The up front consultation is probably the best bang for people's buck," Christman said. For a \$250 fee, her company will go through the entire home, including closets, and even go outside to look at garages, decks and backyards to identify ways to make it more attractive to potential buyers.

"The buyers may be looking at 10 different homes that day," she said. "You need to do things to make your house stand out so they remember it."



Christman doesn't recommend expensive renovations to make the house more marketable. Often it can be as simple as just cleaning up.

"If you're going to do nothing else, clean the house thoroughly and declutter," she said, adding it's common for people to have too much furniture. Up to a third of the furniture in a home may need to be moved to storage in or out of the home. Painting cabinets and switching outdated hardware and fixtures can give kitchens and bathrooms a more modern look quickly and inexpensively.

"A lot of times, people have too much stuff for the buyer to see what the room's function is," she said. "A lot of people don't use formal dining rooms, so they'll turn it into an office or a playroom. You need to revert rooms back to their original function, so you're not confusing the buyer. If you have a lot of bedrooms, and your house is in a family neighborhood, make one or two look like kids rooms."

Christman said another easy fix is to move furniture around to change the look and feel of the home.

"Sometimes you already have everything you need to make your house look awesome, you just have pieces that need to be put in different rooms," she said. And as always, curb appeal is paramount.

"At this time of year, raking leaves is important, and trimming back shrubs and keeping the grass looking good," Christman said. "You can pick up some mums for \$10 and just put them on the porch. These things make a huge difference, and they cost hardly anything."

Hayden said that having quality photographs of the home also helps move houses, since so many buyers shop online and many first showings are now virtual. He said he recently had a listing active for more than 400 days. The sellers had balked at staging and making some minor upgrades and tried photographing the home themselves. Hayden said he finally got the seller to have the home professionally staged and photographed, and it was under contract within three weeks.

Once the home is in shape, it's time to determine if the price works.

"There's nothing that's going to tell us more than the days your home is on the market, how many showings we get and do we get a contract offer," Begley said.

"If you have the condition correct, you'll know pretty soon if it's priced right, because it'll sell. No matter if you're in a good market or a bad one, that's what it boils down to," Barnard said. He said he usually reviews the price with the seller after the first month.

"If you're getting showings, then you're priced within 5 percent. If you're not getting any showings, then you need to at least reduce it 5 percent," he said.

Hayden said he gauges his listings based on nine showings a month.

"If we're not getting any showings, the price is too high or the condition isn't good," he said. "A lot of times it's a combination of both. If we're getting the nine showings and no offers, we at least know we're close to the right price."

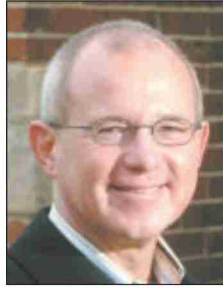
MATT SORRELL is a St. Louis freelance writer.

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Dennis Hayden | RE/MAX Results

STAGING FOR A QUICK SALE

- Look at your house as a potential buyer, not as a seller. Think about hiring a professional to give an objective opinion about what needs to be done.
- Clean the entire home thoroughly.
- Consider storing excess furniture or belongings offsite so as not to clutter up closets or spare rooms.
- Focus on small updates like hardware and fixtures, instead of large-scale renovations.
- Have professional photos taken of your home for the online listing.
- Assess the whole property, including decks, patios and garages.
- Look at the competition and what's going on currently, what are the prices, what's selling and how quickly. Don't go by what was happening last year or even last month.



DENNIS HAYDEN

Appropriately priced homes should get at least nine showings a month



KEVAN BARNARD

'In this market, you need to put your best foot forward'



BRIAN CASSIDY

Professional home stager Melinda Christman said decluttering a house for a quick sell may mean removing up to a third of the home's furniture.