

The art of readying a home for sale

Passing the appearance and smell tests can be just as important as the price test

By Paul Gores
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In today’s competitive real estate market, any little edge to help potential buyers envision themselves in the house you’re trying to sell can make a difference. That’s why Milwaukee-area Realtor Beth Jaworski winced recently when she showed a client a house that the owner apparently hadn’t considered depersonalizing when he put it up for sale. “It was clearly a hunter’s house,” she said. “It had the deer heads. And it had guns and camouflage. The average person, if they’re not a hunter, that is not a turn-on. That’s a turnoff.”

But it’s not just the hunting trophies that need to be packed away to make a home more appealing, real estate professionals say. There are key steps, besides putting a realistic, post-housing bubble asking price on the property, that can make a house stand out amid an immense inventory of “for sale” signs. “Keep in mind that the buyer has a lot of choices in today’s market,” said Colleen Sprague, co-owner/broker with Firefly Real Estate in Wauwatosa, Wis. “It’s most likely the shiny apple that’s going to get picked. It’s the same with houses. It’s to a seller’s benefit to make their house shine. It absolutely is.”

Remove wallpaper

How do you make it shine? For starters, take down the wallpaper. Buyers don’t like it, real estate pros say. “Removal of all wallpaper is huge,” said Steve Bergelin, a sales associate with Realty Executives Integrity in Hartland, Wis. Jaworski said wallpaper is too individualized to the current owner’s tastes. “Buyers just do not like wallpaper. It’s so personalized. If you go into a wallpaper store, there are thousands of patterns. Why is that? It’s because people are very particular,” Jaworski said. Still, some buyers are trying to sell houses with a different kind of wallpaper in every room, real estate agents said. That puts them at a disadvantage to a seller who has “neutralized” personal tastes by removing wallpaper and repainting with warmer colors, but not white. “White is not a color,” said Brian Wickert, who is managing broker of Accunet Realty Advisors LLC and president of Accunet Mortgage in Butler, Wis. “And no matter how much you might like that passion-purple bedroom, your house needs a fresh coat of paint in warm, neutral



Depersonalizing your home before listing it for sale is essential. Collections, whether guns or tiny crystal bears, must go.



Wallpaper’s appeal is subjective, and real estate experts recommend removing it before putting a home on the market.

colors to win the real estate beauty contest.” Clutter also has to go. “Decluttering is a real important step that I think a lot of sellers overlook,” Sprague said. “We live in a house differently than we sell it, and packing away things that you don’t use gives the buyer the opportunity to walk through and mentally put their things in the house.” Said Wickert: “People also get blind to the clutter. Ninety-five percent of sellers need an honest but tough assessment of what needs to get put in storage.”

Show wood floors

Carpeting is another issue. Buyers frown on houses that have a different color of carpet in every room. If the carpet would cost too much to replace, but it has hardwood floors underneath, the best option probably is to pull it up and show the floor, Sprague said. But if you can afford to replace it before you put the home on the market, it makes a big difference, Jaworski said. She estimated the cost at \$1,000 to \$3,000, depending on the areas that need to be covered. “It doesn’t need to be real expensive carpet, just midgrade,” said Jaworski, recommending “Realtor beige” as the color: “Realtor beige that flows right through, that will change the house’s appearance like you wouldn’t believe.” Dave Schmidt, of Dave Schmidt Realty in Milwaukee, said evidence the house has been well-maintained is important, right down to the front doorbell. With inventories high in a slower market, buyers expect to be able to move right in and not face neglected maintenance issues, he said. “It sounds corny, but make sure your front doorbell works, because everybody rings it,” Schmidt said. “It’s one of those signs that, ‘Hey, if you’re not willing to have your front doorbell work, what other things don’t work?’ ”

Eliminate odors

A likely sale killer, agents said: pet odors. “Smelly properties don’t sell,” Wickert said. Sprague put it this way: “If I can smell it, I just can’t sell it. That’s typically what agents say.”

Several real estate agents recommended hiring a stager, a professional with an eye for decorating who can tell a seller what needs to be done to make the home more appealing, right down to how to group furniture and what to put on the fireplace mantel. Some real estate agents also act as staggers. Jaworski said an independent stager might cost \$200 to \$400, although actions the stager suggests, such as new carpeting and paint, will cost more. Some said that because most house hunting today starts on the Internet with virtual tours, sellers need to make sure photos of the house that appear on the real estate agent’s website or elsewhere are of high quality. Bergelin said the Internet and social media offer additional ways to present properties that are for sale. Agents also said television shows about home remodeling and selling have made people more aware of the process and trends, even in paint colors. Speaking of color, it can pay to add some outside the house to make it more inviting. That means pots of flowers near the front door: Unlike wallpaper, flowers are liked by almost everybody. In the end, it usually comes down to a house in the best condition at the best price. “Homes that are priced right versus their immediate competitors that are in great condition are the ones that get 30 showings in the first week on the market and three offers. It happens,” Wickert said. He added, “Properties that are in so-so condition and priced the same or higher than other competing listings are going to sit for a really long time and may never sell.”

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BUILDER PROFILE

BAY FOREST AT BETHANY BEACH ENTICES HOMEBUYERS

NEW RESORT
COMMUNITY FEATURES
WORLD-CLASS
AMENITIES

By Gary Hornbacher, Contributing Writer

“It’s beautiful.” There are a lot of adjectives that have been used to describe Bay Forest at Bethany Beach, a truly spectacular planned, year-round community, which backs up to the Eastern Shore’s Indian River Bay, but 5-year-old Tammy Williams, a recent visitor, captures its essence in a way only a child can. For those not familiar with Bay Forest, which is being developed by Natelli Communities, the well-known mid-Atlantic builder/developer, the new resort area community is nestled on 400 acres on the southern edge of Indian River Bay and just minutes away from sun-drenched ocean beaches, shopping, golf and all of the coastal resort area’s many other attractions. More than a third of the way through its planned build-out (there are already over 300 homeowners of a planned 800-plus single-family homes, townhomes and villas), Bay Forest exudes elegance and delights visitors like little Tammy with its lush greenery and eye-catching landscaping, gorgeous detached single-family homes and villas, and an extraordinary blend of world-class amenities.

Amenities galore

Those amenities already in place include a breathtaking 12,000-square-foot clubhouse with club room, seasonal grille and fully-equipped fitness center; two outdoor pools – one a resort style, free-form pool with water slides, a lazy river and a water volleyball court and the second a heated lap pool for adult use – and a tot pool; a state-of-the-art tennis facility with a tennis pavilion featuring a large screened-in porch and four lighted hard-surface courts; playgrounds; and miles of beautiful, meandering paths for walking, hiking and biking. The truly distinctive path system that connects neighborhoods and wanders through open space, wooded areas and even water’s edge is a nature lover’s delight. There’s even a seasonal shuttle to



Bethany Beach for those wanting to avoid busy summer parking hassles. And there’s more to come, including a small private marina for swimming, fishing and crabbing and a small boathouse designed to accommodate community residents who enjoy kayaking and canoeing. Small wonder Bay Forest has been one of the best selling communities on the Eastern Shore and tops in Delaware’s Sussex County for the past four years.

A picture-perfect setting

Even before seeing the spectacular setting for the clubhouse, pools and tennis complex, residents and visitors alike know Bay Forest is something special, a community that has become its own destination for homebuyers who prize living at the beach. Nestled in a picturesque setting on Collins Creek, which links directly to Indian River Bay, Bay Forest blends the serenity of water, mature forest land and inviting open space in an award-winning community design that finds luxurious homes grouped in a series of discrete neighborhoods that fit their settings perfectly. Linking all together, winding roads, miles and miles of quiet walk-

ing paths, and cul-de-sacs framed by mature greenery make Bay Forest ... well, picture-perfect. There’s so much to describe it’s hard knowing where to start. But since the best place to start is usually at the beginning – or, in this case, the entrance to Bay Forest, which is highlighted by a beautiful causeway surrounded by a manmade lake with fountain – that’s easy. Cross the causeway, follow the winding boulevard and it’s obvious why so many are already calling Bay Forest “home” or dreaming of the day they retire and become year-round residents. “Perhaps 40 percent of the people who have bought here are year-round residents,” says Tom Natelli, CEO of Natelli Communities. “Others are planning to make it their full-time home when they retire and for others it’s still a second home – a weekend retreat.” Natelli and his team, who have a long-standing reputation for developing award-winning communities that marry breathtaking settings, luxurious home designs and world-class amenities, have clearly outdone themselves with Bay Forest. Attention to detail is a hallmark of the privately held

Gaithersburg-headquartered private firm and it shows throughout. “It has a private setting, a tremendous amount of open space, and a great location, offering easy access to Route 1, the beaches and more,” says Natelli. “We have two building companies featuring an appealing mix of home designs, and, of course, the community is very well amenitized.”

Two builders maximize luxury homebuying choice

Main Street Homes, a Natelli Communities subsidiary, offers detached single-family cottage homes, while NVHomes is building both single-family detached homes and a villa-styled townhouse with a first-floor master bedroom suite. As an array of models attests, it’s beach living at its finest. The quality single homes present great values, not to mention some great choices incorporating highly sought-after options and upgrades designed to match individual lifestyle needs. “The houses are selling from about \$270,000 to about \$450,000,” says Natelli. “The villas start in the \$270s and the singles start in the low \$300s, but depending on the price of the products, features and where buyers want to be located, prices may extend up into the low-\$400s.”

Lot sizes for the detached single-family homes, incidentally, are generally about 1/4-acre and with provided yard care and lawn maintenance (even painting and exterior maintenance for villa homeowners) it’s just another plus for second homeowners and others seeking the carefree, recreation- and leisure-focused lifestyle Bay Forest offers. Extremely positive homebuyer response to Bay Forest speaks volumes, particularly in today’s real estate marketplace. “One of the reasons Bay Forest has been so successful has to do with our 30-year history and a reputation in the mid-Atlantic area for very high-quality and well-received communities,” says Natelli. “Our brand does attract buyers from Washington, D.C., Baltimore, Philadelphia and Northern Virginia who know us already.” Bay Forest is also attracting many who may be learning about Natelli Communities for the first time. No matter – one visit to this magnificent new community is all it takes for many to fall in love. •

For office hours, travel directions or more information on Bay Forest or builder home offerings, visit <http://bayforestbeach.com>.