

## HOME BUYERS NEED TO GO IN WITH EYES WIDE OPEN

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**Created on:** 2005-04-22

### **Because of some vendors' craftiness, shoppers should develop a feel for tricks**

At this weekend's frenzy of open houses, some properties will have an edge.

They will be the ones with an urn full of daffodils on the front porch, the scent of warm vanilla inside, and a feeling of serenity throughout.

They will have been carefully scrutinized and ruthlessly stripped of all their clutter, often by one of the many home-styling mavens who "stage" showings. In some cases, carpets had to be ripped up, mouldy patches covered and tired furniture replaced with tasteful rented pieces.

Walking into a home that has received such treatment can give a potential buyer the opportunity to see through the fresh eyes of a designer rather than the sentimental lens of the homeowner. But buyers should be careful that sellers are not using a few artfully arranged objects or cosmetic changes to hide more serious shortcomings.

Eileen Stewart of Tweak Home Staging says she aims to help buyers picture themselves living in the house. And she notes that owners who have lived in a house for years sometimes don't realize how much clutter they have accumulated. "Some people just need a fresh approach. It generally does make a house sell more quickly."

She adds that bringing in a home staging service is a tactful way for real estate agents to encourage sellers to fix up a dated-looking home without losing the listing.

Ms. Stewart tries to emphasize the positive features of a home, such as good light or nice architecture. "You want the potential buyer to emotionally move in."

Rozetta Stolp and Denyse Johnson of Toronto Home Staging often bring in lots of lamps to make the home look brighter, or items such as new bedspreads to make it look more kid-friendly. They add colour and personality with accent pieces and sparkle with mirrors.

"It's all about show time," Ms. Stolp says. "The whole intent is to have someone walk in the house and say, 'I want to live here.' "

She also makes sure that the living room looks like a living room and not, say, a pool hall or a playroom.

In one house that recently sold in the Beaches, Ms. Stolp could barely see the living room floor under the children's toys when she first walked in. "We got rid of it all because you don't want to know that your house is going to be like that in the end."

The home staging services say they do not attempt to disguise a house's bigger problems: If a windowpane is cracked, they recommend repairing it. The same goes for damaged countertops, mildewy basements and broken doorknobs.

"If those things are visible," Ms. Stolp says, "what are the things you don't see?"

Graham Clarke, vice-president of engineering for the home inspection company, Carson Dunlop and Associates Ltd., says sellers often freshen up the way their home looks and smells by repainting, for example, or by dabbing a little vanilla on the stove burners.

He says most homeowners try to make their homes look as appealing as possible, and there's no reason to believe they are hiding major flaws. Prospective buyers can, however, be on the lookout for signs of disguised problems. He recommends five things to look for:

Newly painted spaces, because paint is often used to disguise water damage. Mr. Clarke recommends inspecting out-of-the-way places such as the ceilings of closets to see whether the home has been well-maintained. "People typically only fix up what can be easily seen."

A strong scent of fruits or flowers, which may mean the homeowners are trying to cover up mustiness, especially in a damp basement. "Investing in a lot of Glade air freshener is not something people typically do in a basement."

An unusual amount of storage in one area. A lot of shelving crammed together against one wall of the basement, for example, may be hiding some damage on the wall.

Oddly placed furniture or rugs that may be covering damage to the floors or walls.

Freshly laid broadloom. Homeowners just may have decided to replace tired carpeting, but in some cases they may be trying to cover damaged hardwood or sloping and sagging floors.