



January 27, 2006  
MORNING EDITION  
Jim Zarroli, Reporter

## Home Sellers Turn to Real Estate "Stagers"

RENEE MONTAGNE, host: On Friday's, our business report focuses on your money. Today, how to get a better selling price for your home. Interest rates are rising and the housing market is finally beginning to show signs of strain. In once red-hot markets like New York and San Diego, prices are coming down a bit and homes are sitting on the market longer. To sell their homes, a lot of people are turning to what are known as 'stagers'. NPR's Jim Zarroli explains.

MS. JILL VEGAS (Stager, New York City): What about this light fixture? What's going on with that psychedelic glow?

JIM ZARROLI reporting: Jill Vegas is moving slowly through a small apartment in Manhattan's Chelsea neighborhood, looking around and criticizing much of what she sees. The owners of this place want to sell it and move to California. They've hired Vegas, who is a professional stager, to tell them how to make it more salable. And she does.

MS. VEGAS: I think as far as overall style in here, for appealing to the largest target audience, I'm concerned a little bit about this rug.

ZARROLI: In her own nice, Midwestern way, Vegas is somewhat of a ruthless autocrat. She doesn't like the lighting, or the living room sofa, or the paint color in the bedroom. She hates clutter, so the bathroom shelves crammed with shampoo and shaving materials have to go.

MS. VEGAS: To me, it feels like...

MR. STEVEN SPRARIGAN:(Homeowner): It cuts off the space.

Ms. VEGAS: ...it cuts off the space, exactly. And it also feels like it's all going to fall on my head. And, I don't want to see toilet paper like that. I know, I, it's like I don't want to see that. I want the fantasy. Like, show me the classic Chelsea fantasy.

ZARROLI: The owners of the apartment follow Vegas around, taking notes and recoding her. But it isn't easy to hear that your prize possessions might detract from your home's value. And owner Steven Sprarigan is a little deflated.

Mr. SPRARIGAN: For me, the apartment works the way it is, because I like, we set it up this way because, you know, we made some very specific choices for very specific reasons. So I have to sort of get past the emotional hurdle of, all right, give it up and just strip it down and do something else with it. You know, just because it was right for you doesn't make it the right answer.

ZARROLI: Vegas has heard all this before. People, she says, have trouble seeing their homes through the eyes of prospective buyers.

Ms. VEGAS: The bottom line is, you're still marketing a product. People think of it as their home but it's really not their home anymore, it's product. And, it's just like buying a pair of shoes. It's, like, are you going to go to Payless, or are you going to go to Gucci, or are you going to Mark Jacobs? People will buy where they see the most perceived value.

ZARROLI: Vegas got into the staging business by fixing up her own apartment. The property fetched such a high price that a broker suggested she go into the business full time. Since then, she's had more work than she can handle. In a way, staging is not new. Brokers have always advised their clients about how to make their homes more presentable. But there's a growing recognition that good staging is an art. Unlike decorators, who design a home to fit an individual's taste, stagers try

to make properties look more neutral. That often means stripping a home of the quirks and idiosyncrasies that may distract prospective buyers. The leopard-print shower curtain, the antique gun collection, and anything too overtly religious. Wendy Maitland is a broker at New York's Corcoran Group.

Ms. WENDY MAITLAND (Real Estate Broker, New York City): When you're marketing something, you want to make it as easy as possible for potential buyers to envision themselves in the space. It needs to be less personal.

ZARROLI: Maitland says nearly every property in New York City is now staged, though sometimes brokers do it themselves. And she says when it's done right, it can add thousands of dollars to a home's value. She cites one rundown apartment she handled that sat on the market for four months. It was staged, and sold within days. And she says, as the real estate market slows, good staging becomes more important than ever.

Ms. MAITLAND: We need every tool we can get. And it's a great tool.

Ms. VEGAS: This isn't bad. What do you think? Is this, can we use it?

ZARROLI: These days Jill Vegas is working on a former factory in Brooklyn that's been converted into lofts. The apartments haven't been selling and the developers hired her to design a model unit. But all she has to work with is some tired looking furniture from a warehouse, and this morning she's struggling to find something that works.

Ms. VEGAS: I think we could possibly use this chair. Maybe. Ugh. Maybe not. It looks really cheap.

ZARROLI: Vegas, who used to work in advertising, says an apartment is like a TV commercial. It has a very short window in which to grab its audience.

Ms. VEGAS: You've got 30 seconds to make a first impression. That's when a buyer is going to make a decision to buy or not to buy. So, that first impression may mean the difference between having a quick sale or having it sit on the market.

ZARROLI: Vegas says that making a good first impression doesn't necessarily take a lot of money. It can be about having nice flowers on the dining room table or scouring the kitchen well. The point is that the days are over when New York apartments sold themselves, and people who want their homes to sell may have to give them a little help.

Jim Zarroli, NPR News, New York. Copyright © 2006 National Public Radio®