

## COVER STORY

# Wanna sell it? Stage it!

By BILL CRESENZO

Everyone knows that there's no place like New York at Christmas, and there is no place like home for Christmas — but for brokers who are trying to sell a New York home at Christmas, this time of year can create a quandary.

Staging is an imperative part of closing a deal any time of the year, but it can get particularly tricky during the holidays.

"We have had people who have over-decorated in the past, and we found that it was very distracting for the buyers," said Max Dobens, a broker with Prudential Douglas Elliman. "Whether it's a 40-inch Menorah or a massive Christmas tree, it takes away from the apartment. About this time last year, we had feedback specifically from buyers saying [a client] had gone overboard. It was really over the top. It's okay to put a wreath on the door, but you don't want tinsel and glitter all over the bloody apartment."

Deanna Kory of Corcoran Group says that sellers should certainly decorate their homes if they want to, but they should keep it simple. Christmas trees should be the right scale for the room — if the ceilings are tall, then show them off with a tall tree, but don't block the only light coming in from a great window.

Cookies are a nice touch, and "subtle" holiday smells like pine will work, but she said to beware of over-sweet smells. "It's not advisable to have a house

that is completely packed out with Christmas," said Robert Doernberg, a senior vice presi-

JILL VEGAS ... her pet peeve is dirty windows.



dent with Warburg Realty.

Being such an international city, New York sellers need to be sensitive to their buyers' cultural and religious sensibilities, said Jill Vegas, owner of her eponymous New York staging company.

"Last week, I looked at a \$50 million apartment, so that's going to attract an international buyer," she said. "You have to make sure that whatever the holiday décor is, it's not going to offend a potential buyer's religious beliefs."

Michael Moran of the Corcoran Group is taking a more secular tack. He has a new listing at 315 E. 70<sup>th</sup> St. that has 900 s/f of outside space. "It has been on the market for a while and it wasn't marketed properly," he said. "So we are reintroducing it to the market."

How? He and the seller turned the outside into a "winter wonderland."

"It has a fountain, fake snow, the works," he said.

After the wreaths and trees are thrown out, sellers still have to be mindful of how their places look. Interior designer Jeannine Williams, owner of the interior design firm Jeannine Williams Design, works with brokers to stage apartments and said that fresh flowers can never be underestimated. But skip the dyed deli flowers. She recommends white lilies, which last a long time.

Rhona Delman, a broker with Stribling, has this advice: "accessorize, accessorize, accessorize."

Shana Bowes, who stages apartments for Apartments and Lofts, agreed.

"I tend to add a lot of accessories in order to make it look lived in," she said. "Books, magazines, candles. I want a buyer to walk into the apartment and truly feel like they are at home."

"Simple things, like adding colorful throw pillows, houseplants and wall pictures make a big difference," Delman said. "Also, if an owner has pets, make sure litter box is always clean and that there are no odors. Cleanliness is imperative, and don't forget the power of light. If the place is dark, add lamps and have them on. Toilet seats should be down. If the seller and selling broker cannot do (all of) this, then a stager should be hired."

That's where Vegas comes in. Five years ago, she was selling her own apartment and her broker was so impressed with her staging that she suggested she open her own business. So she did.

Vegas said that stagers can be the "bad cop" while the broker is the "good cop" when dealing with sellers who think that their homes are just perfect.

When dealing with those types, "you have to be very sensitive about what the owner is willing to accept," Doernberg said.

"Most people are very house proud, but the most important thing the seller needs to remember is that small things may be perceived as big things," he said. "Stupid little things, like peeling paint, a broken blind, stained carpets." His biggest pet peeve? "People who will not spend the money to wash their windows," he said.

Caroline Bass of Citi Habitats was frustrated because her exclusive at 200 E. 74th St. sat on the market for several



months without any offers. The apartment was an estate sale and was completely empty.

"It gave buyers an uninviting feeling and they were inaccurately judging the space," she said.

So she took matters into her own hands.

"After a few months of no offers, I decided that we had to stage the apartment," she said. She rented some furniture, but furnished most of the apartment with her own things.

"Furniture, plants, pillows, photographs, artwork, books, kitchen accessories, and even patio furniture,"

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she said. "I also went to Bed Bath and Beyond three different times to make sure I had all the linens, bedding, curtains and bath accessories just right."

Besides cats and their litter boxes, other pets can pose a problem in staging as well.

"I went into one apartment and I couldn't understand what the smell was," Vegas said. "We were sitting there talking, and all of a sudden these birds come flying through the apartment and landed on the owner's shoulders. I am like 'Oh my God.' They were her birds and they had free rein of the apartment. I said, 'I am sorry, but who is going to put up with this? You are not going to sell this apartment unless the birds live somewhere else.' She was really quite upset about it."

MAX DOBENS

