



The Manor House in Holybourne, Hampshire, before and after its rejuvenation by tenants Sophie and Richard Rogerson

Set the stage to speed up a sale

Declutter but don't empty the rooms and use neutral decor tones to bring out the best in your home, says **Carol Lewis**

If your property isn't selling your estate agent may suggest dropping the price, but a more cost-effective strategy might be to spend money on staging your home.

Spending money to make a house more desirable to buyers is definitely worth it, according to Ben Bambrough, managing director of bB Design House, a home staging and interior design company. "Staged homes sell faster in slow markets and at higher prices in stronger markets. The cost of staging is very small when compared with the return it will bring."

Home staging is similar to interior design but is aimed at buyers rather than residents. It is about furnishing a house in such a way as to show off the property rather than the furniture. It is not about individual taste or sentimentality. "As soon as people decide to sell they need to detach from the property emotionally," says Bambrough. This is about selling a lifestyle rather than something lived-in.

Bambrough recently staged a property that had an asking price of £3.3 million but wasn't attracting offers, despite being on the market for months and attracting a large number of viewings. He advised the owner to remove poor-quality fitted cupboards, decorate and refurbish, at a cost of about £20,000. Within three weeks three buyers were in a bidding war and the house sold for £240,000 above the asking price.

Staging does not tend to involve major construction or new bathrooms and kitchens; much of it is achievable quickly and simply, and doesn't require massive expenditure compared to the returns possible. Here we look at the key ways in which you could stage your own home and boost the chances of a quick sale.



house crammed full of furniture, books and pictures is likely to distract from what the property has to offer. "Don't overfill cupboards, though, because at the third viewing potential buyers often want to see inside to assess storage space. Don't put all the clutter in one room either; don't sacrifice a room, show off the whole space. Rent out a small storage unit and fill it," Bambrough says. Kitchen surfaces should be free of gadgets and fridge magnets removed; attics should be tidy and well lit.

Plump and prime
Your home is now on show and needs to be dust-free and clean at all times. Beds should be made, sofas straightened and cushions plumped "like a hotel". Bambrough says. Fresh flowers are a good idea but will need regularly replacing, so consider good-quality fakes — orchids work well. A diffuser is a good idea, particularly in the kitchen, but

don't introduce strong scents. Sophie Rogerson, director at RFR, a property search and interior design consultancy, says: "It is all about the little things. New blinds, a clean shower curtain and regrouting the bathroom so it feels fresh and clean."

Neutralise walls

Any overstylised or personalised rooms will need to be redecorated. Walls should not be white but are best painted a pale, neutral tone. Bambrough favours Farrow & Ball's Skimming Stone. Rogerson prefers Farrow & Ball's Elephant's Breath and Hardwick White. She adds: "People think that you should have the lighter colours on the woodwork and darker colours on the wall, but sometimes doing it the other way [round] can make rooms look bigger."

Neutralise furniture

Bambrough furnishes homes with white and cream sofas, using cushions to add accent colours. "You don't want the furniture to take up too much visual space. A cream sofa can be lost into the walls. Neutral colours create an airy roomy feel," he says. Both Bambrough and Rogerson advise clients to remove

Above and right, 8 Royal Avenue, a 3,000 sq ft five-storey Grade II listed home in Chelsea, has been renovated by architects Markam Associates and staged by Ben Bambrough, inset left (£7.5 million, hamptons.co.uk, struttandparker.com); inset below right, Sophie Rogerson



dark furniture, although Rogerson adds that stripping and repainting dark wood to lighten it can be effective.

Don't empty rooms

"The idea that empty rooms look bigger is a myth," says Bambrough, who advises putting furniture into all rooms, including box rooms. "In a small, boxy bedroom I would put a 4ft 6in bed, a couple of side tables with lamps, a console table and a small chair," he says.

Neutralise floors

Replace deep-coloured and patterned carpets with neutral ones. "You can get a decent cream pile carpet for £11 to £12 a metre," Bambrough says. Rogerson suggests replacing mismatched carpets with seagrass, which is neutral, hardwearing and durable.

Shine a light

Bambrough uses mirrors wherever possible to open up spaces and reflect light. This is especially effective at opening up narrow hallways. Lighting is important too: have plenty of lamps in addition to ceiling lights. If possible ask the estate agent to switch on lights ahead of a viewing. The houses Bambrough stages for developers often don't have curtains, meaning lots of light can come into the rooms. Rogerson advises taking down curtains in rooms that are not overlooked and pulling back drapes where they block light.

Artistic licence

The homes Bambrough stages are dotted with paintings and sculptures. "If you have a £7 million home, you can't put cheap prints on the wall," he says. He adds that many people hang pictures to be at their own eye level rather than according to the height of the room —



you might need to move pictures up a little if your ceilings are high. Although a few pieces of well-chosen art are a good idea, large canvases of your wedding and children are not. Keep personal pictures small and discreet.

Bambrough also likes symmetry: two sidetables with matching lamps either side of a sofa or fireplace, pictures either side of a chimney breast and sculptures on shelves.

Make an entrance

Tidy the garden, clean the steps, and paint the front door.

"Dark colours are always the smartest and most sophisticated. Charcoal, slate, midnight blue and black all work on front doors," Bambrough says. You only have a short time to grab the buyer's attention, make a good impression from the start. Set the stage to make a sale. bbdesignhouse.com, rfrproperty.com



Renovate in return for a cut in rent

Painting walls and replacing carpets might seem an unusual preoccupation in a rental property, but estate agents say tenants are negotiating rent reductions in return for a little renovation.

Last year interior designers Sophie and Richard Rogerson decided to move from the city to the country, renting before they bought, but while they found a home they loved — The Manor House in Holybourne, near Alton in Hampshire — they weren't so sold on the decor.

"The house had been on the



market for a while. It was lovely but a bit old-fashioned," Sophie explains. "We saw that we could make it appeal more to a young family quite easily." They negotiated a deal on the rent and, with the landlords' permission, set about freshening it up (see before and after shots, above).

Gordon Hood, of Knight Frank estate agency in Ascot, says: "We are finding landlords amenable to [tenants changing interiors] ... on the proviso that the landlords are consulted along the way. And they will want to see clauses within the tenancy agreement ensuring that the property can be returned to the original condition at the end of the tenancy."

The move to the country hasn't worked for the Rogersons and the six-bedroom Grade II Regency house, with refreshed interiors, is on the market with Knight Frank for £1.75 million.

Carol Lewis