

REAL ESTATE

# Staging Your Home for Sale

Ask Real Estate

By RONDA KAYSEN OCT. 31, 2015

*Ask Real Estate is a weekly column that answers questions from across the New York region. Submit yours to [realestateqa@nytimes.com](mailto:realestateqa@nytimes.com).*

## **Personal Touches When Staging**

*We plan to put our home in a rapidly gentrifying area of Brooklyn on the market. We have done some renovations, and the space is tastefully and simply furnished. We are an African-American family and have been told that the family photos, art pieces and books displayed in our home might deter some potential buyers. Should we remove these markers of our identity?*

*Crown Heights, Brooklyn*

Preparing to sell your home can be an overwhelming and emotionally taxing process. Our homes have meaning far beyond the dollar value we allot them; they house our memories. You should not have to add to your burdens by worrying about potential prejudices some buyers might harbor.

I can understand why you would recoil at the suggestion that you strip any part of your identity from your home. But nearly any broker will tell you that staging your home is not about safeguarding against bias. Your primary goal should be to find the highest bidder, not to remind buyers that someone else lives there. Soon, someone else's art, books and family portraits will replace yours. To prepare for that, you need to make your property appeal to a wide audience with all kinds of tastes and styles.

“Once it's on the market, it's really no longer your home,” said Donna Dazzo, the president of **Designed to Appeal**, a staging company. “You have to envision it as a product.”

A staged home could fetch a substantially higher price than one that is loaded with personal effects. Remove as much clutter as possible. Bookshelves should be sparsely stacked. Rooms should be properly lit and stripped of excessive furnishings. Art and photographs should be kept to a minimum. If nothing else, clear out the closets.

“The goal is to make a buyer feel like this could be their home,” Ms. Dazzo said. “If there are too many family photos, trophies, plaques on the wall, they just feel like they're in somebody else's space.”

At the same time, you need not erase all vestiges of your identity. Instead, stage your home with your best artwork. Clear the mantel and night stands of all but one or two of your nicest framed family photographs. Box up the paperbacks, but display a few coffee table books. Make your home look its best.

“Family pictures add to the homelike feel,” said Ban Leow, an agent for Halstead Property. “People see the legacy: ‘Oh, the grandmother lives here!’ It adds to the warmth.”

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## **Shopping for a Managing Agent**

*I sit on a congenial co-op board in a relatively low-key building. We aren't given to drama and have had the same management company for at least a decade. Unfortunately, that company has become less and less responsive to our needs and concerns. The board has decided to try to find a new one, but we aren't sure where to begin. Could you advise us on how to proceed? We'd like to interview several potential candidates. Do you have any suggestions for questions we should ask?*

*Washington Heights, Manhattan*

Before you start your search, figure out what you want in a managing agent. You mentioned that your current management company is unresponsive to your needs. The board should spend some time discussing what its needs actually are. Do you hope to save money? Or do you need a property manager who can shepherd the building through upcoming capital projects? Once you are in agreement, begin to look for companies to interview.

“Boards need to be on the same page, so when they start to review management companies they're asking the same questions,” said Dan Wurtzel, the president of FirstService Residential New York, which manages about 500 properties.

Narrow down potential candidates. Ask the building's lawyer or the accountant for suggestions. Read industry trade publications like **Habitat** magazine or **The Cooperator** for information and advice. Attend **The Cooperator's Co-Op, Condo and Apartment Expo** (the next one is scheduled for April 2016). “This is an excellent opportunity to meet many management companies displaying their services,” said Steven W. Birbach, the president of **Vanderbilt Property Management**. There is no industry ranking system, so you will ultimately have to rely on the strength of your interview and the quality of the references. “It is a very challenging task for a board of a small building to research and find reputable management firms,” said Daniel A. Dermer, the

president of Dermer Management.

Prepare your questions ahead of time and visit the company's offices to see how it operates — a field trip to the back office can go a long way. Look for a managing agent that works with several smaller buildings. Above all else, make sure you meet and interview the person who will manage your account, as whoever he or she is will color your experience.

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### **A Shareholder with Power**

*If I own three units of a five-unit co-op and more than 50 percent of the shares, can I change the house rules and bylaws as I see fit?*

*Glen Cove, New York*

Owning a majority stake in your co-op certainly gives you leverage and power, but whether it gives you absolute power depends on your co-op's rules. To find out if you can change the bylaws, you should probably read them.

In some co-ops, you need only a majority vote by the board of directors to amend the bylaws. But that is not usually the case. Frequently, changing the bylaws requires a supermajority vote of 66 $\frac{2}{3}$  percent or 75 percent of the shareholders, held at a shareholder meeting, said Matthew J. Zangwill, a Long Island real estate lawyer. If the bylaws are silent on the matter, check the certificate of incorporation, as it may address the issue.

As for the house rules, you may have more power there. Frequently, boards have the authority to change house rules by a simple majority vote of board members. This can be done at a board meeting.

Keep in mind that although you own a majority of the shares, two other units in your building are still owned by other people. Despite your power, you might want to tread lightly, as your decisions will affect the lives and

investments of those other shareholders.

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