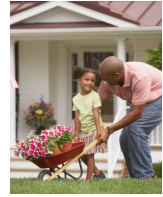


Curb Appeal Counts



Putting your best face forward

In real estate, as in other things, you don't get a second chance to make a good first impression. That first impression could mean the difference

I always suggest to home sellers that their first step should be to dress up the front door area. In most cases, a fresh coat of paint on the door, freshly washed windows on the front of the house, and new or polished door hardware and lighting are musts. A wreath on the door and flowers in season in front of the house provide the "icing on the cake".

"Some homes need more attention than others," says Jim Albrecht, ABR®, a broker in Waukesha, Wis. Tammy Fadler, CRS®, GRI, broker in Festus, Mo., agrees: "I look at what the owners can spend and then recommend improvements accordingly."

"People cost themselves a lot of money by not paying attention to the exterior appearance of their house," Albrecht says. Industry experts say new landscaping can add two to three times its cost to the home's sales price.

The basics

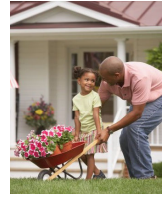
At a minimum, everything a potential buyer might notice about a home's exterior and lot should be in working order and well maintained. For the most part, homeowners can take care of this work themselves with very little money and a lot of elbow grease.

Items such as burned-out light bulbs, broken doorbells and fountains, cracked panes of glass, and damaged trim should be repaired or replaced. Windows and siding should be clean, and any metal objects, such as doorknobs, mailboxes, and kick plates, should be polished. "If the house shines like a pretty penny, it will sell more quickly," says Ed Huck, ABR®, CRS®, an associate broker in Westlake, Ohio.

Keep sidewalks and driveways clean and passable. Lawns should be cut, edged, and green. A bag of fertilizer from the local hardware store or garden center and regular watering will perk up grass in a week or two. In addition, all bushes and trees should be trimmed, and flower beds should be weeded and covered with fresh mulch.

"If the yard is overgrown and weedy, it's a turnoff," says Steve Griggs, president of Land Design Studio Inc. in Blauvelt, N.Y. If bushes are beyond trimming, the homeowner should remove them unless they're covering up an unattractive feature. "It's better to have minimal

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landscaping than bad landscaping,” says W. Scott McAdam, president of McAdam Landscaping Inc. in Forest Park, Ill.

After homeowners get the outside in tip-top shape, they must maintain the property, because potential buyers could drive by at any time. Remind sellers to turn on any exterior lighting so that a home’s features can be seen at night. The home has to say buy me” at all times, says Harker.

Must do vs. should do

Once owners have covered the basics, the line between “must do” and “should do” projects becomes blurred, with budget and timing of the sale often determining which tasks to tackle.

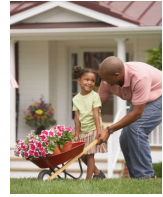
“The roof is a biggie,” says Albrecht. “If the shingles are starting to cup and curl, owners should consider replacing them.” Painting a home’s exterior, replacing damaged gutters and shutters, repairing broken concrete in walks and driveways, and adding exterior lighting should also be high on the list. Fadler adds that the seller can hire someone to power wash the exterior, if painting is not an option “so that it looks nice and fresh.”

Other projects fall into the optional category. Landscaping is a good example of the type of improvement homeowners can pursue, but only if they have the money and time. A yard makeover can have a dramatic effect on a home’s curb appeal, but the cost can easily run into several thousand dollars or more, and the improvements might take weeks to install and several months to mature. This is a project that owners should initiate about 6 months prior to listing their home for sale.

If flowerbeds are scarce or nonexistent, you can fill flowerpots to add splashes of color. “Yellow and red flowers are buyer colors. They really seem to stop people in their tracks,” says Harker. “If there’s room, add a bench to the front porch. If not, try putting it in the yard.”

Another cost-saving suggestion for improving curb appeal is to focus on plants and not worry about projects such as putting in a brick pathway. “Plantings tend not to be the expensive part of the job. It’s usually the hardscape that adds a lot of expense,” says Howard Cohen, vice president of Surrounds Landscape Architecture and Construction in Sterling, Va.

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Planning ahead

A recent survey by Hebert Research for HouseValues Inc., based in Kirkland, Wash., found that the average home sale is about months from the time the owner thinks of selling to the closing date. If that sounds like your schedule, it would be a good idea to start sooner rather than later on maximizing your curb appeal.

"I'm working with two clients now who will be putting their homes on the market next spring," says John Widener, president of Shaded Leaf Landscaping in Columbia, Md. "We're planning now for plants that will be blooming when they put up the For Sale sign." Fadler says about 2 percent of the people contacting her want to sell in a year or more. The added time allows sellers to spread out expenses and consider more elaborate plans, she says.

The bottom line to this conversation is simply "Curb appeal counts!"

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