

'tis the Selling Season

Unwrap the secrets for marketing homes during the holidays.

BY MARY ELLEN COLLINS

Does it make sense to deck the halls while you're trying to sell them? Most agents agree that it's OK to embrace the holiday spirit when you're listing a home during the holidays, but it can be tough to convince clients that they need to show some restraint when it comes to holiday-themed décor.

For example, Lynn Fallat, CRS, ABR, with RE/MAX Classic Group in Branchburg, N.J., recalls a seller whose decorating scheme included a cherished collection of Norman Rockwell holiday-themed plates that were gifts from her aunt.

"She had about 25 plates sitting on easels all over the house, and I had to say, 'This may not be the year for the plates.'" When the seller protested, "But I love them!" Fallat's answer hit home: "And that's exactly the reason we're not going to put them out. What if buyers come in and their kid breaks a plate? You would be *devastated*."

The holiday season presents many challenges and opportunities for REALTORS® who are trying to sell properties. NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF REALTORS® research shows that, from 2005 through 2007, 66 percent fewer properties sold in January and February (which reflects home-shopping during the holidays) compared with the traditionally strong months of July and August. Against this backdrop of seasonal slowdown, it's critical for CRSs to make their listings stand out — in a good way. The trick is to do it with minimal stress, maximum tact and the ability to tread lightly around traditions.

Gifts of the Season

Although fewer people hunt for houses during November and December than at other times of the year, those who do aren't just window-shopping.

"Only serious buyers are looking at this time of year," says Rosanne Wells, CRS, ABR, with RE/MAX Town and Country in Canton, Ga. "They're not tire-kickers." Corporate relocations often take place before Jan. 1, providing sellers with a pool of very motivated potential customers. And the fact that fewer people list their homes during this time creates a significantly less competitive environment for those who do.

Some REALTORS®, like Jason Penrose, CRS, GRI, with RE/MAX Achievers in Phoenix, tailor their marketing strategies to take advantage of the season.

Ned Frisk Photography/Jupiter Images



"I work with a lot of first-time buyers, and if they're looking in late October or early November, they're thinking about celebrating the holidays in their first home. I might change a listing to say, 'Buy now, and you can close in time for the holidays.' I would also use pictures of the house *with* decorations if possible — to make them stand out from other listings."

Judy Niemeyer, CRS, ABR, with RE/MAX By the Bay in Fairhope, Ala., once decided that a $1.85 million bayfront listing that was vacant except for a beautifully decorated tree provided the perfect setting for a broker's open house.

"It was a custom house, but it only had two bedrooms, so it was hard to sell. We sent invitations that showed the house with open doors, wreaths on the windows, and the magnificent tree, and asked people to bring a donation for Toys for Tots." She made hors d'oeuvres, sponsors donated beverages, and her husband tended bar for more than 100 attendees. Although the event didn't result in a sale, the house did sell eventually, and Niemeyer says she wouldn't hesitate to do another holiday open house if she had a listing that wasn't selling.

> Motivated buyers who are on the hunt during this season don't have time for a leisurely search.

"You *have* to do something different. It was absolutely worth it to get people into the house. A lot of agents would have seen that it was a two-bedroom and wouldn't have gone in. And we raised about $1,500 for Toys for Tots."

Less Is More

"People have a good feeling when they see a house that's decorated," Wells says. "And people buy on emotion." Taste, however, is in the eye of the beholder. If a client's outdoor lighting display resembles the Griswolds' extravaganza in *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation*, an agent might suggest a more toned-down light level that says "Welcome," rather than "Hey! Look at us!" Penrose suggests keeping decorations off the roof and steering clear of inflatable outdoor figures. Greenery on the door, however, lends the right note of festive curb appeal.

Setting a warm holiday tone inside the house doesn't mean forgetting to depersonalize. If a family usually puts up a living room tree filled with "Baby's First Christmas" and kids' handmade ornaments, Wells suggests packing away the personal items or relocating the tree to a less central location.

Fallat advises sellers to "Do what makes you happy, but scale it back a notch. If you have a three-bedroom ranch, and you usually have to take a piece of furniture out of the room to get the tree in, get a smaller tree." She once had a client who had 11 stockings crowded next to each other — five for the children, two for the parents and four for the pets.

"Never tell an animal lover not to love the animals," she says, laughing. "I said, 'These are *great*, but I'd like to spread the family ones out a little bit. Do you mind if we don't put the pet ones up this year?'" The animal stockings came down, giving a less cluttered look to the family tradition without eliminating it.

Religious items play an important role for many families during the holidays, and most REALTORS® agree there's no need to skip them. If a client collects multiple menorahs or manger sets, however, suggest choosing just one favorite for display.

"There's nothing wrong with a show of faith, and there's no better time to keep the faith than when you're trying to sell a house," Fallat says.

Life Goes On

The weeks between Thanksgiving and New Year's often bring a steady stream of visitors, and it can be hard to keep a house show-worthy when you're working around luggage, pullout couches and half a dozen extra bodies.

Fallat tries to persuade sellers to manage the chaos by enlisting their guests' support. She tells her clients: "If you have the option of celebrating at someone else's house, this is the time to do it, but if not, gently let guests know you need them to make their beds, keep clothes in a free closet or drawer and stash the suitcases out of sight."

Adding showings to a schedule that's jammed with socializing, shopping and school activities can frazzle the most committed seller, but those motivated buyers who are on the hunt during this season don't have time for a leisurely search. "People need to be very accommodating for showings, especially for people who are relocating," Wells says. "Someone from Kansas isn't going to be able to turn around and come back in two days. If you need to sell, you need to be available."

Penrose doesn't mind if clients place some restrictions on when they will and won't show the house, as long as it is within reason. "Selling is always inconvenient, so it's a judgment call. If you don't want to have showings on the actual holiday and the day before or the day after, that's fine. If you don't want to have any showings for a week, that's pushing it."

For sellers, the process of moving from a longtime family home always causes a bit of stress, and doing it during a family-oriented time of year can really heighten the anxiety. But Fallat's glass-half-full approach reminds her clients to keep their eyes on the prize.

"This is the *best* time of year to sell a house. It's the law of numbers. You have less competition and more visibility, and that's what's most important — to have the best odds possible." And if you add that advantage to an enticing backdrop of holiday spirit, the result can be a very happy new year for everyone.

Mary Ellen Collins is a freelance writer based in Boca Raton, Fla.