

# BUSINESS

## In home selling, stagers say looks are everything

**Local designers spruce up houses to help speed sales, increase value**

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**HOLMDEL** — Ask any Realtor, and they'll probably tell you that selling a home in today's competitive market requires more than simple curb appeal. With the tremendous increase in available homes over the past three years, what was considered a "boom" seems to have gone bust, and together with all-time low interest rates, today's saturated market has put buyers in control at the negotiating table.

Where there's a need, the market develops a niche. Enter Staged Homes New Jersey, the Holmdel-based branch of a national home design phenomenon that specializes in creating a lasting first impression on home-browsers and buyers.

"The real estate industry today is tough," said Gail Meyer, of Holmdel, vice president and treasurer of Staged Homes New Jersey. "You need marketing tools to help you. We don't just put a vase of flowers on a table. We take a critical look at the house from the exterior, from curb appeal to the interior of the home. We focus on maximizing the highlights of the home."

Meyer, an interior designer and Realtor who has spent years traveling and studying art and architecture, said the term "home staging" was coined nearly 20 years ago by the West Coast founder of Staged Homes, Barb Schwarz. She said that the company now offers full accreditation for stagers who complete an extensive course of study available nationwide and that roughly 75 percent of the homes on the West Coast market are now staged.

"Our company here in the Northeast has been in existence for about a year," she said. "My sister, Debra Solinsky, is the president, and Shara Cohen is our senior staging associate."

"Debra and I are Realtors with RE/MAX, and last year with the market conditions changing so much, we got into a situation where we heard that people were caught in the middle of this market. There was just so much inventory. Things weren't moving. That's when we heard about Staged Homes. We found out they had a training program, and we went through it and got our accreditation, which teaches you how to market, as well."

Meyer said that according to the company's corporate Web site, [www.stagedhomes.com](http://www.stagedhomes.com), staged homes sell 6.9 percent higher than unstaged homes, and in a shorter amount of time.

"I can tell you that since December, we have staged six homes in this area, and three of them have already sold in December," she said. "They were all in different price ranges, so staging is applicable to all homes, the lower and the higher end."

Meyer, a graduate of Parsons School of Design, New York



PHOTOS BY TAMMY MCKILLIP

At left: Shara Cohen (l-r), Gail Meyer and Debra Solinsky are designers with Staged Homes New Jersey. With so many empty homes on the saturated market, Gail Meyer and her associates often work with furniture rental companies to help provide a space with warmth and character. This Matawan bedroom (below) and living room (above) were completely empty before her team came in.



City, said that designer Cohen recently joined the company because of the increased demand for their services and that they are now staging offices as well as homes.

"Our best clients are Realtors," she said. "Staging is a great marketing tool. It helps their listings stand out among the others. If you look anywhere in Monmouth County, there are so many more listings now than there were two years ago. In Manalapan, for example, you have about 30 listings, whereas two years ago, there were maybe 10, so if you don't look great from the get-go, you're not going to stand out."

Meyer said she also works a lot with investors who are taking advantage of the current market. She said that because she and her co-workers have extensive backgrounds in design, her company offers more than the average staging company, and she suggests sellers who are look-

ing for stagers seek professional references and take a look at the company's portfolio before hiring anyone.

"This is really about taking your home and turning it into a product and marketing it," she said.

She said that many people who were feeling optimistic by the balloon market a couple of years ago overextended themselves and bought properties before they sold their existing homes.

"I can't tell you how many people are desperate right now," she said. "There's a very human and emotional element to what we do. People have two homes, and they can't close this chapter of their lives and move on. I'd like to think that a part of what we do is to help them to move to the next stage of their lives. It's part of who we are."

She said her company charges a fee, which ranges from \$125 for a simple walk-through and verbal advice to \$250 to \$300 a room for a detailed written report, plus accessory fees.

"So many homes are vacant now that we work with a number of furniture rental companies," she said. "We rent furniture for just the prime rooms because a buyer has a hard time mentally moving in unless they see a room set up."

She recommends people whose homes are on the market "depersonalize" their space as much as possible, since buyers tend to get caught up in looking at photos and artwork and will not form a lasting impression of the home when they're distracted by such things.

"If your house is cluttered, start packing," she said. "Rent a portable on-demand storage unit, or move everything into the garage."

If they can't afford to do anything else, she tells sellers to focus on the outside of their house, since it is the first point of interest, and buyers shopping via the Internet will be looking through many photographs of homes and will only look more closely at the ones that grab their attention.

"If you do nothing else, just paint the outside, and put in new shutters or flower boxes," she said. "Staging is by no means a deception, but it is presenting the illusion of what a home can be. It's such a complicated market, but what you're really dealing with is H-O-M-E. It's such an important aspect of all of our lives. We try to make every home look great, so that people will have the opportunity to move on."

For more information visit [www.stagedhomesnj.com](http://www.stagedhomesnj.com), or call Staged Homes New Jersey at (732) 513-2643.

