

You're a *what?*

Home stager

by Drew Liming

The hottest trend in real estate also happens to be one of the oldest. People have always tidied up houses before trying to sell them, but only recently have professionals turned what was once a do-it-yourself job into a popular occupation.

Home stager Becky Fimbres says she first saw the need for professional home staging when she worked as a real estate agent. She had to sell homes that, she says, “looked just dreadful but had the potential for so much more.” Now, using a combination of practical advice and artistic talent, she helps clients give homes a wider appeal.

Home stagers believe that buyers decide how much they like a property by picturing their own possessions in the house. But homeowners don't always make that easy to imagine. For starters, owners usually arrange furniture to fit their needs, not those of buyers. And homes usually contain years' worth of clutter, which makes it difficult for potential buyers to imagine their belongings in the same space.

This is where home stagers like Becky step in. “My job is all about using space,” says Becky. “I try to emphasize the room, not the accessories, to highlight the best qualities of the property itself.” She tours the house and writes suggestions for improving the appearance of each room. Then she gives homeowners a detailed plan that shows how to make the house impressive to potential buyers.

It's up to the owners to implement Becky's ideas. For an hourly fee, however, she will make the changes for them. Becky offers this service to her clients because she recognizes that “some have more time than money, and others have more money than time.”

But successful staging doesn't require vast amounts of either. In fact, the core principle of home staging can be counterintuitive: The simplest changes bring the largest returns. Becky says that adding common items, such as greenery or unlit candles, can subtly alter buyers' perspectives and create a positive ambiance. It's what she calls the “wow factor.”

Professional home stagers can also identify potential problems that home sellers may never consider. For example, Becky once staged a house that had a garage filled with junk that covered useful workbenches along the walls. Becky directed her client to clear out the clutter and focus attention on the workbenches. That kind of change could make the difference between a quick, profitable sale and months of waiting.

Becky's job extends beyond recommending that someone clean a messy room, though. Other changes are more dramatic, like making a decision about what a space should be used for. Sometimes, it's obvious what a room is created for—it's hard to convert, say, a kitchen to serve many other purposes. But in other cases, a room's function may be open to interpretation. By emptying a crowded space and adding a simple desk,

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When Becky Fimbres finishes her work, home is where the money is.

for example, Becky can make buyers see a study where there was once a bedroom.

Stagers also occasionally work to make vacant houses seem more livable by adding items such as furniture, throw rugs, and lamps. On these jobs, Becky works closely with a rental company to get exactly what she needs. Other stagers keep their own inventory of supplies and furniture.

Becky first got involved in home staging after working as a real estate agent, and many other home stagers come from a similar background. She, like others, received her initial training through a program that combined seminars with hands-on work. In most programs, students stage a room and receive feedback from instructors.

There are no formal requirements to work as a home stager. Many certification programs exist, but their duration and teaching methods vary. Experience, says Becky, is the best teacher.

Achieving success as a home stager requires a balance of artistic and customer-service skills. The stager needs to see beyond what is present and into what is possible. Usually, the job is accomplished by removing unnecessary items from a room, a task that comes naturally to Becky. “Staging is about minimalism,” she says, “which has always been an interest of mine.”

But just seeing improvements isn’t enough: A good stager must be able to convey this vision to clients in clear, simple steps. Tactful communication is essential. “If someone is struggling speaking to clients,” Becky says, “this probably isn’t the best career choice.” Although Becky says she is naturally shy, her enthusiasm for home staging makes it easy for her to communicate with customers.

Becky’s chief frustration is with people who seek her advice but don’t understand that home staging is not a one-size-fits-all assessment. She knows many universally helpful tips, but much of Becky’s work must be tailored to a specific home. “Sometimes I’m asked for advice or a consultation over the phone, but it doesn’t work like that,” she says. “I need to be able to see and absorb the place.”

Most home stagers are self-employed, so they must also be adept at managing their own business. Their success requires having some knowledge of market-

ing and finance. Home stagers must also build strong relationships with real estate agents, whom they rely on for referrals. Some real estate agents supplement their business by working as home stagers.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics does not collect data on home stagers, but anecdotal information suggests that earnings vary significantly, depending on location and expertise. Home stagers set the fees for their service in different ways. They might charge by the hour, by the room, or by the size of the overall structure; fees may range from \$75 for an initial consultation to \$500 for an entire house. Any additional expenses, such as renting furniture, are usually passed on to the client.

The length of time required for each job also varies, but experienced home stagers can usually complete a house consultation in several hours. Many home stagers begin their careers working part time, but successes and satisfied customers can easily increase their workload. The need to meet on clients’ schedules may require home stagers to work odd hours or on weekends. Although some home stagers dislike sporadic scheduling, Becky enjoys the flexibility of setting her own appointments.

The hard work of running a business is rewarded by an opportunity to be creative and address people’s challenges every day. “After making a suggestion,” Becky says, “you can see the light bulb go on in people’s heads, and they say, ‘I never thought of that!’ It’s such a fantastic feeling.”

