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Secrets of Stagers

13 Ways to Make Your Home Look Like a Million Bucks

By Leah Hennen, special to HGTV.com

Ever walk into a Sunday open house or a model home and notice how...well, inhumanly perfect it looks? If so, chances are the property is "staged"—in real estate parlance, dressed with paint, furniture arrangements, art and accessories that are all carefully designed to highlight the home's strengths, downplay its weaknesses, and appeal to the greatest possible pool of prospective buyers. Whether you're designing to sell or designing to *dwell*, here's how the home-staging pros get that "I have to have it!" look—and how their tips and tricks can make your own humble abode look like a million bucks.

1. Make an Entrance

You know the saying: You never have a second chance to make a first impression. "The outside of your home is the first thing guests see," points out Christopher Breining, owner of HomeStagers, Inc., (www.HomeStagersInc.com) in San Francisco. And like it or not, it speaks volumes about what's inside—and about its owner. A quart of glossy paint in a bold, cheerful color for the front door, new hardware (or a little elbow grease applied to clean and polish the existing knocker, lockset, porch light, house numbers, and mailbox), a fresh coir or seagrass mat, and a trio of seasonal potted plants on the landing will dramatically brighten and refresh your home's entry and



make visitors feel welcome, Breining says. Bonus: This small investment pays personal dividends, too, giving you an emotional boost and a dose of house-pride with each homecoming.

A welcoming entry, such as this one designed by Pamela Berstler, helps to set the tone for the rest of the house.



2. Conquer Clutter

Admit it: You have too much stuff. "The most important thing most people can do to improve their home is to clear out, clean up, and get rid of clutter," says Lisa LaPorta, cast designer on HGTV's hit *Designed to Sell* and owner of Lisa LaPorta Design in Los Angeles. Be ruthless as you go about purging your belongings. If you haven't used it in three months, stagers say, box it up and store it away; if you haven't used it in a year, get rid of it. And make a house rule that for every new item that comes in, an old one has to leave. Any mixed feelings you have about tossing life's accumulated detritus

will quickly be replaced with a sense of relief and appreciation of your Zen-like new surroundings.

Sound daunting? Take it one room at a time. If your bookshelves are bursting at the seams, for instance, "clear them off and start over," suggests Michelle Yackel, owner of Divine Redesigns in Atlanta. "It's okay to have empty space around your books and knickknacks." Inexpensive baskets make great hiding places for unsightly paperbacks, and add texture and visual interest. Books stacked vertically serve as pedestals to show off prized pottery or other objects d'art. You can even remove the dust covers from hardbacks and group them by color, turning a busy jumble into a decorative addition to the room.

If you simply can't part with your collection of *Architectural Digest* or your kids won't let you anywhere near their 300 carefully assembled Lego creations, it's time to get creative about storage and organization. Retailers like the Container Store and Target sell handy rolling bins designed to slip under a bed and house everything from household supplies to kids' toys. And if you can't get rid of it and can't hide it, flaunt it with style: "Places like IKEA sell colorful and inexpensive fabric, cardboard, or melamine magazine holders. Lined up on a shelf, they look a lot cleaner than stacks of magazines everywhere and add a unified visual element to the room," says Michael Friedes, owner of Nest Home Design in Oakland, California.

3. Make "Less is More" Your Mantra

Don't forget, too, that a cluttered look can also come from too much furniture. "People tend to line their walls with furniture—one piece after another," laments Christopher Breining. When professional fluffers descend on a home being prepped for market, they often whisk away as much as half of the owner's furnishings—and the house looks miles better (not to mention bigger) for it. You don't have to whittle that drastically, but take a hard look at what you have and ask yourself what you can live without. "You really only need two pieces of furniture per wall: A bed and a nightstand, say, or a dresser and a chair," Breining advises. Another rule of thumb: If you don't use it regularly, lose it. While you're doing this sometimes-painful pruning, remind yourself that every square foot you free up is prime real estate.





4. Float Furniture

If your couches are clinging to your walls, you're not alone—it's a typical decorating mistake, stagers say. "There's a common belief that rooms will feel larger and be easier to use if all the furniture is pushed up against the walls, but it's simply not true," says Lisa LaPorta. Instead, furnish your space: Float furniture away from walls, reposition it into cozy conversational groups, and place pieces so that the traffic flow in the room is obvious—in most cases, this means keeping the perimeters clear. "When you place

furniture in a room, envision a figure-eight or the letter H in the middle, with clear pathways around it," LaPorta suggests. Not only will this make the space more user-friendly, it will open up the room and make it seem larger.

If you're nervous about doing something that can seem a bit radical, "Try an area rug on an angle first, then move the couch and see how it looks. But just try it," Christopher Breining implores. If the new arrangement doesn't strike your fancy, you can always put things back the way they were. But chances are, you won't want to.

5. Mix It Up

You'd never consider donning the same clothes for days on end, would you? So why force your home to endure the same tired decor year after year? "We get used to our surroundings, but they can become stale and stagnant. If a chair has been in the same spot for five years, move it!" admonishes Barb Schwarz, owner of StagedHomes in Seattle, Washington, and Concord, California, and coauthor of *Home Staging: The Winning Way to Sell Your House for More Money* (John Wiley & Sons). Think of your digs as a nesting superstore, with the added bonus that everything in it is free. Give yourself permission to move furniture, artwork and accessories between rooms on a whim. Just because you bought

that armchair for the living room, for instance, doesn't mean it won't look great anchoring a sitting area in your bedroom. Or try perching that little-used dining room table in front of a pretty window, top it with buffet lamps and other accessories, and press it into service as a beautiful writing desk or library table. And as for that now-empty dining room? Flank an ottoman or cocktail table with a loveseat and comfy chairs for an instant conversation nook. "When you move things to new spots, you appreciate them again—and give your house a whole new look for nothing," Schwarz says.



6. Rediscover "Lost" Spaces

"A big part of what stagers do is create fantasy spaces: An exercise room, a meditation space, an art studio, a family game room," says Linda Russell, owner of HouseDressing in Montclair, New Jersey. "We take that unused space on the

third floor or in the basement and turn it into something you've always dreamed about having." So if you have a room that currently serves only to gather junk, repurpose it into something that will add to the value—and your enjoyment—of your home. Move those boxes to a rented storage space (or better yet, have a yard sale or donate their contents to charity) and get to work creating the space you yearn for. The simple addition of a comfortable armchair, a small table, and a lamp in a stairwell nook will transform it into a cozy reading spot, Russell suggests. Or drape fabric on the walls of your basement, lay inexpensive rubber padding or a carpet remnant on the floor, and toss in a few cushy pillows. Voila! Your new meditation room or yoga studio.

7. Let the Sun Shine In

"We almost always take off old, heavy drapery and put something light, airy, and gauzy in its place," says Russell. This ushers in natural light and makes a previously closed-in space seem larger. Simple sheers on a tension rod are great for screening an unattractive view and providing a bit of privacy but still letting in lots of light and visually enlarging a room. If you have lovely vistas from a set of windows, try doing away with treatments altogether. If privacy is paramount, top-down, bottom-up Roman shades will block the neighbors' view of your bathtub but still let you gaze at the sky while you soak. Lisa LaPorta favors bamboo or parchment shades and simple curtain panels made from fine cotton twill or translucent linen – all of which let light stream in during the day, provide privacy at night, and add touchable texture to a room. Or consider investing in Christopher Breining's favorite window treatments: Sheer fabric shades with built-in blinds (Hunter Douglas offers several options). "They look great and offer so much versatility," he says.



Other window-treatment tips: If windows are narrow, extend curtain rods a foot or so on each side to suggest width. If your ceilings are low, hang rods right at the ceiling line and consider window treatments with vertical stripes to create the illusion of height.



8. Light the Way

One of the things that make staged homes look so warm and welcoming is great lighting design. As it turns out, many of our own homes are improperly lit—either we have too few fixtures, or our lighting is too dim or too harsh (or all of the above). To remedy the problem and make your home more inviting, increase the wattage in your lamps and fixtures (aim for a total of 100 watts for every 50 square feet). Then install dimmers so you can vary light levels according to your mood and the time of day. This is a relatively simple project for a do-it-yourselfer, or you can hire an

electrician for a couple of hours to do several at once. (And while you're at it, be sure to replace those dingy, almond-colored light-switch covers with crisp white ones. New covers cost less than a buck apiece and are a quick, easy update.)

Don't depend on just one or two fixtures per room, either. It's just as important to layer lighting as it is to have sufficient wattage, Breining points out. So go for ambient (general or overhead), task

(pendant, undercabinet, or reading), and accent (table and wall) lighting. "A combination of overhead, floor, table, and accent lighting creates great ambience," the San Francisco stager says. "Having lights on different planes provides good illumination and makes the room interesting." One thing that's always in Breining's bag of tricks: uplights. "You can buy one for as little as \$5 at home-improvement stores and hide it behind a potted plant—it creates incredible drama." Another hint: Place mirrors, silver or glass bowls, or other reflective objects near lamps to bounce light around the room and make it glow even more.

9. Make a Splash with Color

"Painting is the cheapest, easiest way to give your home a new look," says *Designed to Sell's* Lisa LaPorta. Even if you were weaned on off-white walls, take a chance and test out a quart of paint in a warm, neutral hue (you can always paint over it if you don't like the effect). These days, the definition of "neutral" extends way beyond beige— from warm tans and honeys to soft blue-greens.



Even deeper shades—long verboten for interiors—are enjoying a renaissance. "Don't shy away from dark colors in a powder room, dining room, or bedroom," says Oakland stager Michael Friedes. "A deep tone on the walls can make the space more intimate, dramatic, and cozy—and surprisingly, it can even make a small room seem bigger because there's no delineation of the corners."

How to start? With a pillow, textile, or piece of art you love, LaPorta suggests. "The background color is often great for walls, and you can pull out the other colors for accents around the room." You could also try painting an accent wall to draw attention to a dramatic fireplace or a lovely set of windows. Either paint the wall a contrasting—but still complementary—color (such as a rich red flanked by taupe walls) or a more intense version of the paint used in the rest of the room (say, a deep butterscotch that will play off the soft camel walls surrounding it). If you have built-in bookcases or niches, experiment with painting the insides a color that will make them pop—a soft sage green to set off the white pottery displayed within, perhaps.

If you're too timid to whip out the paintbrushes, add punch with richly colored accessories, pillows, and throws, LaPorta says. Bonus: When seasons change or you're ready for something new, these couldn't be simpler to switch out. Designer Lori Dennis used calming blue punctuated with crisp white in this restful bedroom.



10. Paint It Black

Using white-painted furniture is a tried-and-true tactic for freshening a room, but don't forget its opposite: A coat of satiny black paint can revive tired furnishings and lend a chic, dramatic flair to just about any space. "Painting an old piece black immediately updates it," says Michael Friedes. "We use black in staging all the time. It's a great punctuation—it has a graphic quality, provides contrast, and makes a real impact." And not only

does black work with every other hue, it makes the colors surrounding it pop and melds with most any décor, from vintage to ethnic to modern. The key, as always, is moderation: Use black as an accent in picture frames, lampshades, accessories, and small pieces of furniture. "The big black leather couch of the '80s is black gone awry," Friedes warns.

Designer Andreas Charalambous uses a black table and frames to add sophistication to this corridor.

11. Make Your Art Sing

If your home is like most, art is hung in a high line encircling each room. Big mistake: Placing your pictures, paintings, and prints in such stereotypical spots can render them almost invisible. "Art displayed creatively makes the art stand out more and shows off your space," Friedes says.

So break up that line and vary the patterning and grouping by hanging a row of art diagonally—with each piece staggered a bit higher or lower than the next (great for directing the eye toward an architectural feature like a window or arched doorway), triangularly—with one picture above, one below, and one beside (a nice accent for a table-and-chair vignette), or in a vertical line (perfect for accentuating a high ceiling). "Hang pictures on different planes so that your eye goes up and down as it travels around the room—it creates interest on your walls," says Friedes. Try hanging things a bit lower than you're used to, as well, so that wall art relates to furniture groupings rather than floating (and getting lost) in its own space. Display your art creatively, as seen in this bedroom designed by Robert Noble.



12. Accessorize with Flair

Now that you have your furniture placed, your rooms dappled with color, and your art hung, it's time to layer in accessories for the finishing touch. When it comes to eye-pleasing accessorizing, three is the magic number—though one and five work well, too. And rather than setting your trio of accessories out in a row, imagine a triangle and place one object at each point. Scale is important, too, so in your group of three, be sure to vary items by height and width, with the largest at the back and the smallest in front. "On a side table, for instance, you might have a lamp, a plant or flower arrangement, and a book or a small box," Barb Schwarz explains. For impact, group accessories by color, shape, texture, or some other unifying element, stagers suggest. Another hint, courtesy of Monclair stager Linda Russell: The eye naturally "reads"



the room from left to right, so putting a striking object in the far right corner will automatically draw your gaze there and make the room seem bigger.

Mixing the right accessories, as designer Phyllis Harbinger does here, can make a room all the more inviting.

13. Bring the Outdoors In

Staged homes are almost always graced with bountiful fresh flowers and pricey orchid arrangements, but you can get a similar effect simply by raiding your yard. "Take clippings of branches or twigs and put them in a large vase in the corner of a room to add height— it's a great structural piece that doesn't cost anything," says Michelle Yackel, the Atlanta stager. It's also an easy way to incorporate seasonal greenery. Budding magnolia clippings or unfurling fern fronds herald the arrival of spring, summer blooms add splashes of cheerful color, blazing fall foliage warms up your decor on chilly autumn days, holly branches heavy with berries look smashing in winter, and airy feather-grass plumes add elegance and texture any time of year.



Above all, "Get creative! Don't be scared to try something different," Yackel says. Indeed, just about every stager has tales of home sellers who, upon seeing their once-tired abodes transformed, were so blown away by the results that they decided to stay put. Who knows—you, too, may just find that you love your "new" home so much you'll never want to give it up. Designer Ann Morris adds color and style with a well-placed floral arrangement.