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Home Improvements to Help You Sell-the Dos and Don'ts

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As a homeowner, the day will come that you will want or need to make improvements, updates or renovations. The beauty of owning your own home is that you can make changes specific to your tastes. You can turn your suburban tract home into a Mediterranean villa or an English cottage if you'd like. You can model your kitchen after the Jetsons' or turn your master bedroom into Graceland's Jungle Room. But what happens when it comes time to sell? Will all of your renovations be considered improvements or will they hurt you in the end?

Like any expensive and timely project, you want to make sure you are getting the most for your money when you remodel. You also want to make sure the changes you like now, you won't regret later. So, before you start remodeling, here are a few things to keep in mind that could help get you top dollar when it's time to sell.

- Kitchens - According to the Remodeling Cost vs. Value Report conducted by Remodeling Online and distributed by the National Association of Realtors(r), minor kitchen remodeling provided the largest return on investment, at 103.5%, for Bay Area homeowners in 2007. That included replacing and updating cabinet doors and drawers, adding new hardware, installing mid-priced sinks and faucets, replacing appliances with energy-efficient models and replacing laminate countertops and resilient flooring. Kitchens tend to be the nerve-center of a home, so expect this to be one of the first rooms at which buyers look.

- Bathrooms - If there is one room that dates a house more than any other, this is it. Buyers always take a close look at bathrooms because, even though they aren't the most visible rooms in the house, they are one of the most used. The good thing about remodeling bathrooms is that some projects can be do-it-yourselfers. Create a budget and pick and choose what to replace first. Toilets should be at the top of the list because buyers will appreciate them being brand

new.

- Replace windows - The Remodeling Cost vs. Value Report says window replacement is the second highest return-on-investment improvement you can make. The survey said replacing old windows with insulated, wood windows recouped Bay Area homeowners an average of 102.9% of their investment and vinyl windows recouped an average of 98.5%. Not only do new windows update the look of your home from the outside, but they regulate temperatures on the inside and save money on heating and cooling costs.

- Spiff up the exterior - You've heard the term time and time again: "curb appeal." That's because it is one of the most important aspect buyers consider. Take a walk in your neighbor's shoes and look at your home from across the street. Can you see your walk way and front door? If not, grab a lawn mower. Just by mowing your lawn, raking leaves, trimming trees and planting a few flowers, you can be well on your way to making your home look sharp.

- Sweat the small stuff - Just because it's cheap, doesn't mean it can't help get you the most for your home. Don't underestimate the little improvements that can make a big impression. Consider adding a fresh coat of a neutral colored paint on the interior walls, trim and ceiling of your home. Invest in some good elbow grease for a thorough cleaning of every room. Buyers will notice dirt, grim, dust, soap scum and bad odors, and they will leave less than impressed. Take the time to clean out or organize closets, cabinets and storage spaces to highlight the extra space buyers are looking for.

Now for the don'ts:

- Don't go overboard - Keep in mind what you are selling and the neighborhood in which you live. Very few buyers are going to want to buy the Taj Majal in a sea of classic ranch style homes. The last thing you want to do is stick out like a sore thumb or even worse-become the highest priced home in the neighborhood. Before renovating, tour other homes in your area to get ideas for appropriate levels of appliances and finishes.

- Don't expect the new owner to do everything - Just the opposite of going overboard, is doing nothing at all. If you only have a small budget allotted for improvements, talk to your real estate agent about what features are in the most need of replacing or updating. In the end, not investing anything into your home may lose you the most money.

- Don't do it yourself if it should be done by a professional - Keep in mind that buyers will be going over your home with a fine-toothed comb and they will easily be able to spot poor craftsmanship. The money you save by installing appliances, painting, laying tile or hanging cabinetry, could cost you in aesthetics if you don't do it correctly.

- Don't decorate - There's no need to spend additional money to decorate or redesign your home before listing it. The trick is for buyers to be able to walk in and picture themselves living there. To do that, the house needs to be removed of personal collections and photographs. Artwork should not be distracting and wallpaper should be taken down and replaced with neutral-painted walls. Remember too that furniture and artwork should add to the beautiful features of your home, not distract from them.

- Don't change the function of rooms - It may have been convenient for you to use your dining room as an office while living in your home, but buyers will no doubt wonder where on earth you eat dinner. If you have changed the function of rooms, consider changing them back before putting your house on the market. Buyers need to be able to spatially judge how their furniture will fit into each room. That will be difficult if you've left your second bedroom as a billiards hall.

Purchasing your home was one of the best investments you've ever made and you should enjoy it, feel comfortable and be surrounded by the features and amenities that you love. But once it comes time to sell, your house becomes a product and should be as attractive to potential buyers as possible. The best possible scenario when creating the home of your dreams is that it turns out to be the dream home for future owners. If can do that, you should have no trouble getting the most out of your investment.

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