

8 Reasons Your Home Hasn't Sold Yet - Advice for Frustrated Clients

RISMEDIA, August 18, 2008-(MCT)-In October 2005, David Raimondi put his 100-year-old Allendale, N.J., house and barn on the market, asking \$525,000. It's been almost three years, and the property has still not sold.

Raimondi, a housepainter who wants to move to a less expensive area, is one of the growing ranks of frustrated sellers whose homes have been on the market for more than a year. Though most sellers don't stay on the market for years, Realtors say the average time between listing and sale has stretched out during the housing slump.

These sellers' experiences show just how tough the market is. Still, real estate agents say, there are buyers out there, and it's possible to sell a property if you take the right steps. **Interviews with real estate experts, along with a closer look at Raimondi's story, offer these lessons for sellers:**

1. The First Offer is Often the Best Offer. There's a reason this is a real estate cliché. Within a week or two after Raimondi first listed his house in October 2005, he got an offer for \$495,000—\$30,000 less than his asking price. He turned it down, convinced he could do better. But the real estate market began to slide in late 2005 and has not recovered yet.

"Back then, things were selling quickly; who knew we were going to come into a slump like this?" Raimondi said.

The lesson: "If you get an offer in today's market, you'd better try to make the best of it and live with it if you can, because there isn't another one waiting in the wings," said Jay Bouton of Coldwell Banker in Allendale, who was Raimondi's first agent.

2. Be Realistic About Price. "Probably half of the houses on the market are overpriced for what people are willing to pay for them," Bouton said. Pricing was Raimondi's key error, according to another of his former agents, Kristin Gildea of Marron & Gildea in Ridgewood, N.J.

"He priced it way too high from the get-go," she said. "Even though he was adjusting his price and coming down, he was doing it too late, and chasing the market down."

Even today, Raimondi insists his house is worth \$450,000—after all, it is in Allendale, an upscale town with fine schools. In addition, the property is 200 feet deep and includes the barn.

"The real estate agents wanted me to give my house away so they could make a sale; that's how I looked at it," said Raimondi, who paid \$230,000 for the property in 1999. "I wanted to make a sale, too, but at the right price, not a giveaway."

Recently, he's gotten several offers around \$350,000. That's a sign, Gildea said.

"If you've gotten two or three offers at the same number, that's where the market is," she said.

Bouton agreed: "If it was worth \$450,000, it would be selling for that."

3. Listen to the Experts. Raimondi has worked with six real estate agents since 2005.

"He picked everybody's brain, and we were more than willing to give him advice, if he would listen to it," Bouton said.

He didn't always listen.

"They told me if you want to sell this house, you've got to take the carpet up," Raimondi recalled. Many buyers prefer hardwood floors, but Raimondi didn't want to pull up wall-to-wall carpet that was less than 10 years old and still in pretty good shape.

"You're paying agents for their advice, and then you're disregarding that advice," said Elizabeth Razzi, author of "The Fearless Home Seller" (Stewart, Tabori & Chang, \$16.95).

Now Raimondi's pulling up the carpet.

4. Beware of Getting Stale. The longer a house is on the market, the less attractive it appears. Razzi said buyers think, "If nobody else has snapped up this house in 12 months or longer, what's going to make me want it?"

Homeowners sometimes try to get around this problem by allowing a listing to lapse, then relisting the house to start the clock again. The multiple listing service's computer will classify it as a new listing-but real estate agents who know the area will usually recognize that it's the same old house, warned Randy Douglass of ERA Douglass Realtors in Montvale, N.J.

"You're not going to fool a lot of people," Douglass said. Better to avoid getting stale in the first place. To do that, you have to-guessed it-price it right. "It's all about the price," Douglass said.

5. Go For the Pottery Barn Look. Raimondi thinks potential buyers of starter homes expect too much.

"They want perfection in an old house, and that's not going to happen," Raimondi said. His home has six small rooms. Though the kitchen was updated in the 1990s, it has vinyl floors instead of ceramic tile, and laminate counters instead of granite.

"An older home at a start-up price is not going to be modern like those home design shows," he said.

Fair enough. But even people who don't watch HGTV get Pottery Barn catalogs in the mail, Razzi pointed out. That shapes their expectations.

That doesn't necessarily mean you have to put in granite countertops, though that's not a bad idea, she said. But you've got to clear the clutter and make the place spiffy.

"Smart sellers are painting their walls that taupe-y color and putting bowls around and taking other stuff out," Razzi said. "Get the old drain board off the kitchen counter and put out a bowl of oranges."

6. Understand Buyer Psychology. “A lot of sellers right now think buyers are being greedy,” Razzi said. But she believes something else is going on.

“Buyers are very frightened,” she said. “They’re afraid they’re going to buy a house and have its value decline after they move in. They’re afraid they’re going to get stuck in that neighborhood.

“They’re not going to have the courage to buy that house unless it’s better than the other competition on the market and it’s irresistible to them,” she continued.

7. Don’t Expect Buyers to Renovate. Yes, there are do-it-yourselfers who love to spend their weekends painting walls, building decks and laying tile. But most buyers want to move in and not face any task more challenging than unpacking their boxes.

“Even in a good market, fixer-uppers attract only limited offers because people just don’t have the time,” Razzi said. “And people who do have the time expect a really low price.”

8. Play to Your Home’s Strengths. Raimondi’s house is on busy Franklin Turnpike, and another busy road, Crescent Avenue, runs along the rear of the property. Some agents say that’s a turnoff.

Maybe so, said Razzi. But there’s an upside.

“If you’re on a busy street, you get a lot of attention from passers-by,” she said. That means Raimondi should focus on his home’s landscaping, wraparound front porch, and overall curb appeal.

Similarly, the age of the house can be turned to a seller’s advantage.

“You can’t make an old house a brand new house without a massive infusion of money,” Razzi said. But you can make it as “charming and quaint and appealing” as possible.

If it’s small, she added, “decorate it so it looks cozy.”

For now, Raimondi's house is off the market again. He can afford to wait because he hasn't found another house. He hopes that by 2009, buyers will begin returning to the market, and he'll put the house up for sale again then.

"I'm not going to give it away," he said. "I've waited a long time. I'll wait a little more."

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