

# Help! My House Isn't Selling

Even in the best markets your house might sit if the price is too high or the place has no charm.

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By Sarah Max, CNN/Money senior writer

**SALEM, Ore. (CNN/Money) – It's supposed to be the hottest housing market in history. But buyers are not exactly kicking down your door.**

Your house has been sitting on the market so long the 'For Sale' sign feels like a permanent part of the landscaping.

"It's usually one of three problems, said Vicki Fazzini, a real estate agent John L. Scott on Bainbridge Island, Wash. "Price, promotion or presentation."

## **The price isn't right**

Houses priced too high are not going to sell in any market. "People get caught up in the frenzy of the marketplace thinking that if everything else selling for a million dollars, there's should sell at a million too," said Heidi Cole, a real estate agent with the Corcoran Group in Palm Beach, Florida. "It's easy to overestimate what your house is worth in these hotter markets."

A good real estate agent should give you a realistic range for what you can expect. But, that does you no good if you insist on going higher. Before you set your heart on a price, take a look at where similar houses have actually been selling (not just what sellers are asking) and adjust for your own home's features or flaws.

"Price is always pivotal," said Ron Phipps, with Phipps Realty in Warwick R.I., adding that this is true if you price too high and sometimes even if you go too low. "If a house is under priced, people sometimes assume that there is something wrong with it," he said.

## **You think the house will sell itself**

In this market, you reason, selling your house should be as easy as posting a 'For Sale' sign and waiting for the phone to ring.

You could be waiting a long time.

Even in the best markets, you need to make sure your house gets exposed to the right buyers, said John Beutler of Beutler & Associates in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, where more than half of all buyers are coming from out of state

These days, the online listing may be as important as the sign in the front yard. "Years ago people would show up you get in the car and start driving around," said Beutler, who was Century 21's top-selling agent in the world in 2003 and runner up last year. "Now they start their search looking at properties on the Web."

The more pictures you have of your house, both inside and out, the better. Other information, such as maps, neighborhood info and details about your home's best features also bring in buyers.

## **The place is too lived in**

Buyers might be rational about price, location and layout, but the decision to make an offer or keep looking is often emotional.

"People want a house to feel like a haven," said Fazzini, who works with a decorator to "stage" houses before they go on the market. Doing so, she said, can fetch an additional \$15,000 to \$20,000 on a \$300,000 to \$400,000 house.

The reality might be that the flower gardens need weekly weeding and the dark wood floors require daily mopping, but there's no need to draw attention to these details.

Landscape the yard, clean the windows, touch up paint and take care of anything else that buyers might add to their mental "to do" list. Then put away garden hoses, cleaning products and other items that remind buyers that houses require maintenance.

Close your eyes, walk in your front door and think about how your house smells. Pet odor, cigarette smoke, mildew, cooking oil and other unpleasant smells make a lasting impression on buyers, say agents. Deal with the source of the stink, rather than try to cover it up with overpowering candles or air fresheners.

Clutter is a problem buyers have trouble looking past. "Everything should be crisp, clean and very minimal," said Fazzini, who recommends removing excess furniture, packing up knickknacks, clearing off kitchen and bathroom counters, and putting away family pictures. "Walk through a model home and use that as your model."

Fresh paint – in warm earth tones rather than stark white – and new linens on the beds and in the bathrooms can also make the difference between a house that sits and a house that sells -- assuming you still want to sell.

"There have been times when staging has backfired," said Fazzini. "People like it so much they don't want to move."