

Small defects become big turnoff for home buyers

10 must-fix areas of your home

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One of the biggest mistakes home sellers make is listing a home with obvious, although small, problems. Any house—even a brand-new house—needs fixing from time to time. It's just that buyers don't want to be reminded of this obvious truth when it comes time to plunk down their cash. Most buyers would rather believe that their home is going to be fine, and for the money they're paying, they'd prefer to have a problem-free house. As a seller, your top priority is to overcome any real or imagined obstacles buyers have. Fixing stuff that's broken and selling a home that looks like it's been impeccably maintained over the years is a good start.

Grab a pen and pad of paper and start by touring your home looking for things that need to be done. Perhaps your walls or trim need touching up with a fresh coat of paint. Or maybe you have a crack in a floor tile. Or, your wall clock needs a fresh set of batteries in order to display the correct time.

Check the bathrooms: cleaning or regrouting bathroom tile and fixtures will help make that room seem fresh and clean. Cracked window panes and ripped shades should be replaced before any agent or buyer walks through the door.

Not fixing broken items—especially those that can be easily fixed—sends a not-so-subtle message to the buyer that you don't care enough to get these things done. Also, when the home inspector comes through (which he or she inevitably will), you know these items will come up in the "need to do before I'll buy your house" list.

What should you fix? Anything that a prospective home buyer will think should be in working order on the day of sale, including:

- All appliances, including air-conditioners, furnace, boiler and hot water heater. They don't have to be new, but everything should be in working order. Clean out lint from the dryer. Make sure the ice maker is working properly. Install new air filters in your heating and air-conditioning systems. Clean out the air-conditioning compressors. Make sure your humidifier is working properly.
- All faucets. If it leaks or doesn't turn on correctly, repair or replace it.
- All windows. If any window panes are cracked or don't open properly, fix or replace. And make sure to repair all screen doors and windows.
- All doors. No creaking, no doors that open only partially, no cabinet doors that don't open at all. If the windows are painted shut, fix them so that they open properly.
- Any exterior problems. Replace missing roof shingles, repair your gutter if it has come apart, and regrade landscaping away from the house if you've been finding puddles or wet walls in your basement. Clean out your gutters and downspouts.
- Cracked or chipped paint. A fresh coat of white or off-white paint can help make your home seem bigger.

- Peeling wallpaper. Get some wallpaper glue and make sure to get the air bubbles out when you press it to the wall.
- Change the light bulbs. Make sure all light bulbs are working and swap out the burned-out bulbs. Houses are often too dark when buyers come through in the late afternoon or evening for a showing. Make sure every light you have has the brightest wattage possible, and that you turn on every light before a showing -- even during the day.
- Carpet. If your wall-to-wall carpet has been pulled up in places, make sure it is tacked down firmly. And while you're at it, you might want to have your carpets cleaned and floors waxed before you sell.
- Kitchen cabinets. Doors should open smoothly; hinges and knobs or pulls should be tightened.

As you're walking around the house, remember that a prospective buyer will be opening up every drawer and door. How well these items work communicates a lot about how you've taken care of the property. Making a good impression here will go a long way toward getting your home sold quickly -- and for more money.

If you can't manage to get your home in selling shape yourself, check the Web for local handyman- or handywoman-type businesses to help you out. Typically, you can hire these folks for an hourly or flat fee to take care of your "to do" list.

While you may spend a couple of hundred dollars having someone install a new light fixture, fixing creaky doors or changing light bulbs, the results should make the expenditure worthwhile.

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