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It's been a sluggish year for Toronto real estate — so why have these home stagers never done better?

'We've added 20 per cent to our bottom line,' says Carmen Wageman, as home staging thrives while sales have plummeted.

Dec. 14, 2024  



Carmen Wageman (left), owner of Stage Right Home and Stage Right Rentals, with daughter and partner Jessica Steinman in their 50,000-square-foot warehouse in East York.

R.J. Johnston Toronto Star

By Diana Zlomislic Housing Reporter

When Carmen Wageman started a home staging business out of her Richmond Hill garage 22 years ago, she had a hard time convincing sellers she could make their properties look bigger, brighter and newer — leading to faster and more profitable sales.

“I was escorted out of houses a couple of times in the beginning because I told them to paint out their gum wood,” Wageman says. “Now, when I go in, one of the first things people say is, ‘You can tell me anything. Tell me to get rid of anything. Just make me some money.’”

It’s been a turbulent year in Toronto’s real estate market with housing prices going down and the number of new listings going way up. Despite the downturn — or some say because of it — realtors have relied more than ever on a highly specialized but growing segment of the industry to compete and clinch sales. Staging has never been more popular or lucrative.

“This is our best year yet,” says Wageman. “We’ve added more than 20 per cent to our bottom line.”

Wageman recently expanded her operation into a 50,000-square-foot warehouse in East York to accommodate a growing inventory: more than 100 neutral sofas and sectionals in many shapes and sizes, large-scale original artwork, and tens of thousands of chairs, coffee tables, linens and toss cushions. With her daughter Jessica Steinman, Wageman this year launched a rental arm to her Stage Right Home business, making all of their inventory available to realtors and home sellers who don’t have the budget for full-service staging. So far this year, Wageman’s team has supplied furniture or services to 467 properties across Greater Toronto, up from 359 in 2023.

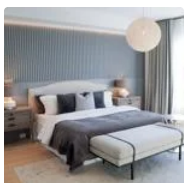


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There is no scientific data that home staging actually nets sellers more money. But there is a growing body of academic research that shows buyers experience a “cognitive deficit” in their hunt for a home. Their ability to make rational decisions is hampered by high emotions. A sparkling clean home, with high-end furniture and counters cleared of any sign of bill payments, is powerful bait for picky buyers, especially in a sluggish market.

“We’ve never invested more in staging than in the last year,” says Christina Pinelli, a real estate agent with Heaps Estrin. “There are actually still a lot of buyers out there. It’s just that buyers are taking longer to make a decision and in general they prefer a turnkey home. So if you can provide as close the image of that as possible, it’s easier for them to visualize their life there.”



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Green plants and big art: How the powerful psychology of home staging lures in buyers

**REAL ESTATE****Do you think you have the eye to be a home stager? Take our quiz**

In late September, Pinelli hired a team to transform her client Julie Tyas's Leaside home.

Over just a few days, the traditional two-storey brick house that Tyas, a lawyer, her husband and their three kids called home for 15 years was ripped apart and reset to get it ready for sale. Some of the furniture and most of the bedding was a rented prop brought in by a professional stager, including 13 pillows for Tyas's bed and comforters piled so high her Jack Russell terrier could barely spring up to his usual spot.



Heaps Estrin real estate agent Christina Pinelli arranged for a contractor, home stager and professional organizer to glow up this Leaside home before it went to market in the fall. The property sold in a few days for \$2.64 million, nearly \$150,000 over its asking price.

Heaps Estrin

“It’s hard to not take it personally when your own items have been replaced with items not to your taste but I trusted Christina (the agent) and knew it was being done for a reason,” Tyas says.

Alyssa Douglas was part of the small army that Pinelli called up to Tyas’s home. Until last year, organizing and decluttering was a side hustle to her full-time corporate job.

But when the number of calls to organize homes for sale grew exponentially, Douglas took a leap into her “dream job,” starting Tidy Rabbit Organizing.

“This spring was very, very busy,” says Douglas, who generally charges between \$75 **and** \$100 hourly, depending on scope. “We were working seven days a week to fit clients in.”

Helping people get organized to leave their homes, not live in them, is a high-pressure process that involves working on a tight deadline with the buyer to make quick decisions on what items stay and what needs to go.

“It requires a different mindset,” Douglas says. She works room by room, starting with the basement, which typically has the most “stuff,” and goes through every closet and drawer, paring back clothes to a limited wardrobe that matches the season as “buyers want to see a lot of storage space.” Douglas budgets to spend one day on each floor.

In Tyas’s home, piles of paperwork and clutter vanished into storage boxes. The tchotchkes that were on display shelves were carefully boxed and replaced with seagrass baskets, leather-bound books and a few objets d’art. A couch the kids like to play on went into storage. Ditto the chairs in their living room, which were swapped for more modern, Scandinavian-style ones. A new coffee table arrived along with spotless area rugs.

When she saw the listing photos, Tyas says, “I got it. It was pleasing for the masses.”

The first offer landed the same day the house was listed. By the weekend, five buyers sparked a bidding war.

Less than a week after hitting the market, the house sold for \$2.64 million, \$145,000 over asking.

Staged room: before and after

Greenery and cushions add colour to this living space staged by Stage Right Home.



SOURCE: STAGE RIGHT HOME
TORONTO STAR GRAPHIC

Staging a residential property in Toronto can cost anywhere from \$3,000 to \$18,000 for the first month, depending on the size of the space and how much furniture is required, Wageman says. That amount includes service fees. The standard average cost runs between \$5,000 and \$8,000. The cost for a second or third month is reduced, reflecting rental fees on the borrowed items.

When she started out, homeowners would generally cover the bill for staging. But as competition for lucrative listings increased, many realtors began offering to foot or split the cost.

It's tricky to quantify staging's impact on sales because there are so many variables but Wageman says she's confident the work she does increases the home's appeal to buyers and its ultimate value.

"If you pay \$7,000 for staging, you know you're going to get more than \$7,000 back. You know, you're probably going to get more than \$14,000, which is doubling your money. You know, you're probably going to get more than \$21,000. Where in investment can you put in a dollar and get three? Staging is probably the last area of investment where you can make a ton of money like that."

Patrick Rocca, a broker with Bosley Real Estate, has tapped Wageman to stage his listings for the past 15 years and credits her with houses routinely selling \$150,000 to \$300,000 over asking.

Rocca will occasionally cover the cost of staging if he's charging full commission, but more often his clients pay Wageman directly.

A few years ago, Rocca took over a stale listing on Bessborough Road near Sunnybrook Hospital that had sat for three months with no bites. He told the clients they needed Wageman to work her magic.

Staged room: before and after

Adding furniture can actually make a room look larger, says the duo behind Stage Right Home.



SOURCE: STAGE RIGHT HOME
TORONTO STAR GRAPHIC

“So I come in and I’m the bad cop,” she says. Wageman’s to-do list for the clients was extensive and expensive.

“There was a leak in the bedroom from the Juliet balcony so the carpet was all stained,” she says. “It had been fixed but sent red flags everywhere. The colour of the house was all wrong. It was too dark. The colours of the interior were so rich and vibrant but it’s not a mass appeal. As a matter of fact, it was a little oppressive. They needed to paint the entire house, kitchen cabinets included, change the knobs, change all the lighting, get rid of their furniture. And they did it.”

While these sellers were highly motivated to co-operate, Wageman says they encounter those who invite them in but then push back. It happens often enough across the industry that Wageman says the average “shelf life” of a home stager is three to five years until burnout. The pandemic didn’t help. “Some sellers have become angrier, they have no filter. They say whatever they want and apologize later.”

The Bessborough property owners’ support, though, resulted in a record payday. The house sold for \$1 million over asking, a figure Rocca calls a “once in a lifetime” event.

The most important part of staging any property, Wageman says, is getting the “money room” right — the first space a buyer sees when walking in the house.

There are different statistics on how quickly a potential buyer decides whether or not to make an offer on a home. “Some say 30 seconds, I think it’s more like five,” Wageman says. “If somebody is not wowed within the first five seconds they’re in the house, it’s really hard to get their attention back.”

Not everyone agrees staging is worth the cost.

Barry Cohen, who is currently listing the most expensive residential property in Toronto — a \$34.5 million manse near Casa Loma with its own indoor parking lot complete with built-in turntable and car wash — uses stagers sparingly.

While he says “good staging can move buyers across the finish line,” the Re/Max broker generally works with the seller’s furniture.

“It costs money,” he says. “Every once in a while I have a seller who says ‘I want to physically stage.’ That seller quickly doesn’t want to pay for the second or third month.”

Wageman is mindful that many in the industry are trying to cut costs.

In late October, she and Steinman went on a major buying trip to High Point Market in North Carolina. They’re expanding their stock to accommodate the growing rental business. They’re also widening their sales business so realtors and homeowners can purchase furniture, lighting packages, linens and art directly from them through another arm of their business called Hive Society. It’s the first trade store for real estate agents and their clients.

In the new year, they’re launching a staging school for realtors who want to learn how to do it properly themselves.



Stage Right Home is expanding to teach classes on home staging for realtors who want to save money by doing it themselves.

R.J. Johnston Toronto Star

One of the lessons Wageman is eager to teach is that Benjamin Moore's Chantilly Lace is not everyone's answer for walls.

"My God, if I see this colour one more time," Wageman says. "We'll teach them how to choose paint colours and provide them with the selections we choose over and over and over that seem to be successful across the board no matter what."

Cohen predicts the future of staging is virtual.

One of his clients recently toured a three-dimensional rendering of his new 7,000-square-foot home at an architect's office using a virtual reality mask.

"He walked into the living room, went to sit on the sofa and fell on the floor," Cohen says with a laugh.

"It's only a matter of time before the technology is part of every real estate office," Cohen says. "People won't need to leave the office."

Wageman isn't convinced.

“In a buyer’s market, people really have to convince themselves to buy,” she says. “A picture isn’t going to do that. Real stuff is going to do that. Walking in and touching and feeling and sitting down and looking around and going, ‘I can see myself here.’”



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