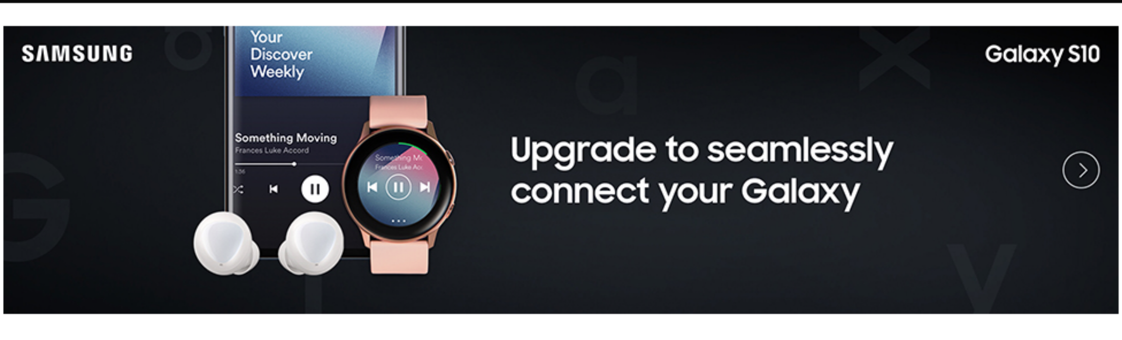

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Business • Perspective

This no-nonsense consultant rules at turning homes into irresistible must-haves

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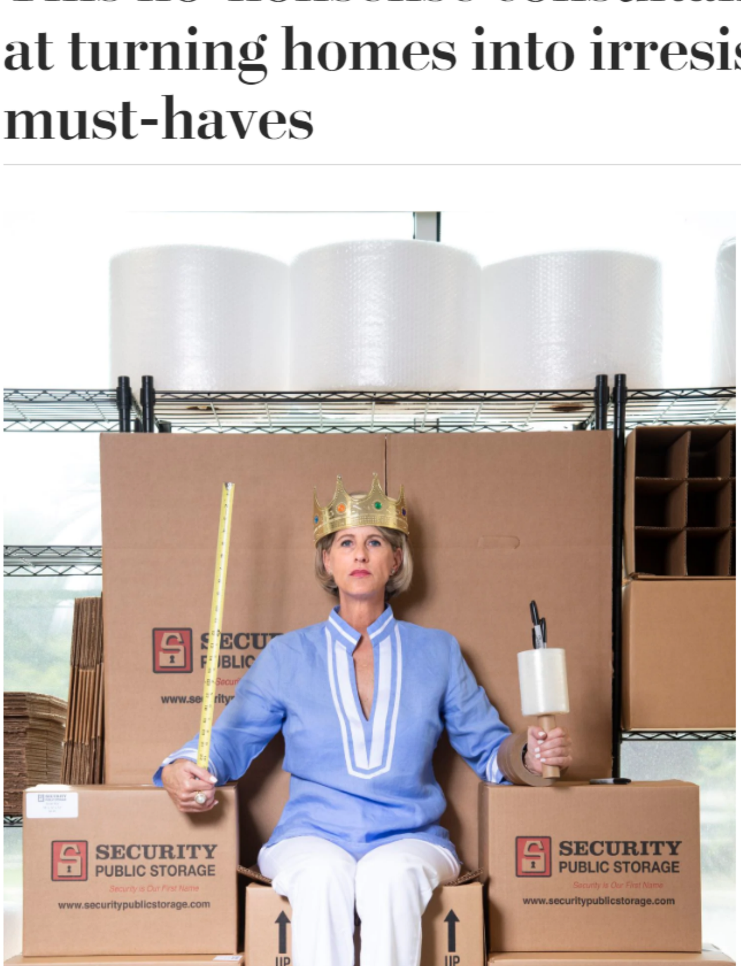

Caroline Carter, CEO of Done in a Day, diagnoses what homeowners must cosmetically do to turn their properties into neat and spacious places that are appealing to buyers. She also ships home contents and settles her sellers into their new digs. (Marvin Joseph/The Washington Post)

By Thomas Heath
Reporter
May 31

It's all about the photos.

We're talking about the online pictures that will sell your house.

So get rid of the I-love-me wall that displays your distinctive personality. Shell out for stainless steel appliances. Fix anything broken. Empty the basement, attic and garage. Wash the windows. Organize the closets so they could pass a West Point inspection. Paint. Paint. Paint. Clean. Clean. Clean. And make sure each room looks orderly, neat and spacious, like the kind of place you'd want to live.

Such was the to-do list when my wife, Polly, and I sold our home four years ago and moved into a cooperative apartment on Embassy Row in the District. (There was no 'I Love You' wall in my house, unless you include my framed hate mail from a now-deceased governor.)

We fortunately had a snappy real estate agent who walked us through the process and reimagined our home for our target buyer: the 30-something couple with children.

Our agent coached us to think only of online photos and first impressions that would seal a sale at the open house. We followed her instructions to the letter.

Or you can hire home-transition consultant Caroline Carter. The resourceful, no-nonsense (she rivals my wife for efficiency) entrepreneur over the last 14 years has built a successful business called Done in a Day that removes emotion from putting your home up for sale.

Carter diagnoses what homeowners must do cosmetically to turn their properties into the irresistible must-haves for a target buyer. That's the staging part. She also ships home contents and settles her sellers into their new digs. That's the "transition expert" side of the business.

[Knight Kiplinger's 25-year plan: Build a town from scratch on the Florida coast]

Her job includes purging the hundreds of books piled in the basement, junking the '70s lime-green dishwasher, throwing out the useless family heirlooms, coordinating the rugs in the living room or making sure the flowers peeking out of the copper pot in the foyer look "just so."

The average home contains 300,000 items, which paralyzes most would-be sellers. That's where Carter comes in. She cleans out the house without any emotional attachment.

"I create order out of chaos," said the 55-year-old mother of three. "That means putting all furniture, lighting, rugs, artwork and accents in final placement based on color and proportion."

It can mean packing and shipping a walk-in closet full of princess ball gowns, protecting the $20,000 in the bank bag left in a file cabinet or seeing that the loaded handgun in the night table drawer is delivered to its owner.

She has even written a self-published book on home transition called "Smart Moves."

About 50 percent of her customers are real estate agents, who pay Carter a $400 consultation fee to create a list of the cosmetic changes needed to sell the house.

Another 30 percent are from referrals — neighbors, friends, family members — from past clients.

[Why you, too, should be 'a saver . . . and a buy-and-hold investor']

The rest come through her website, from Google search or direct phone calls.

Carter averages more than 250 home stagings a year, which comes to about five a week. The average home staging costs about $3,400 and takes one to three days. If she stays on to help customers move to their next house, the entire project — including packing, sorting, purging, dumping and delivering new furniture and extras — can take anywhere from one to three weeks.

"The length of the staging depends on the size of the home and what is needed to complete the overall design: lamps, area rugs, artwork, white bedding for bedrooms, white bath towels, live floral to accent interior rooms and exterior front stoops, decks, patios, pool decks etcetera," Carter said. "Once all the items necessary to complete the design are sourced and delivered — even the largest home will not take more than two days to stage."

A major project including the move to the new residence can run $25,000. The business, which draws on anywhere from 15 to 25 hourly contractors, can gross nearly $1 million in a good year, leaving Carter, the sole owner, with a $300,000 pretax income.

She charges $165 per hour. She pays her team anywhere from $38 to $125, depending on their assignment.

[Are you a Boglehead or an IPO thrill-seeker?]

Her one big stumble came early. She went into debt as a classic stager, buying furniture on her own and storing it in a warehouse, then shipping it to her clients' homes for the photographs and open houses. The overhead and costs were killing her, so she sold the furniture. She also dumped the 6,000-square-foot warehouse, which cost $40,000 a year, and the panel van, which saved her another $2,000 a year. If her client doesn't have furniture in the house, Carter will hire a stager and pass the cost through to the seller.

If they need to add some soft touches to the staging such as pillows, bedding, shower curtains, they fill an Amazon shopping cart and email the link to the seller.

"The seller reviews it and enters the credit card info and clicks to make the purchase," Carter said. "Then we install it."

Unloading the overhead and devoting herself to the consulting and moving end has made the business far more profitable. Think of Hilton or Marriott dumping the real estate in favor of hotel management.

The National Association of Realtors suggests that home staging can increase a sales price by up to 15 percent.

[Pet project: Dog devotee Steve Cohen is investing in what he knows and loves]

Carter has carved out a high-end, niche clientele that includes billionaires, actors, industrialists, financial industry bigwigs, a past president, a judge and a royal monarch.

She sees everything, so her contracts include endless "nondisclosure" clauses. That means she can't talk about anything. Carter recalls one New York billionaire who wanted to sell his $15 million Georgetown home.

"When he was sent the $20,000 proposal that outlined the scope, schedule and services he would need to sell the home and move, he scheduled a 6:30 a.m. call with me to go over the contract," Carter recalled. "When I walked him through it, he said, 'I'm going to need this put into a spreadsheet to review.' I just laughed, put it in a spreadsheet, sent it off and got a one word answer: Go."

Carter grew up in New Jersey, the daughter of a financial planner and a mother who was an opera singer and music educator. Her dad died recently and her mom lives in Georgetown.

"I have always been focused and responsible," she said. "I had $400 in the bank when I was 12 and worked as a waitress from my teens through college."

After graduating from Rutgers University, where she studied sociology and French, she bounced around from Wall Street to a job as an administrator for Berlitz language schools.

[Saving for retirement is hard. Knowing how to spend it down is harder.]

Carter married at 31 and spent the next dozen years raising her three children. She and her husband parted ways in 2005.

After selling the family's $2 million home and splitting the proceeds, Carter ended up with the three children and child support. She bought a split-level home in Bethesda and went about making a living.

Her "aha moment" came from a family friend who had lost her 43-year-old husband.

"She had two little kids and was living in San Francisco and had just bought a house, sight unseen, in D.C.," Carter recalled. "She said, 'I need you to help me. I have to move back. Can you assess what needs to be done and then meet our moving trucks?' "

Carter gathered a painter, electrician, carpet installer, landscaper and contractors and got to work. She coordinated the unpacking from a 53-foot moving truck. When her friend and family arrived four days later, the house, located in Hillendale just north of Georgetown, was ready.

Her friend put her in touch with a home stager in San Francisco, and Carter's new career was born.

"He spent 45 minutes on the phone with me and basically changed my life," she said.

She started off slowly, meeting with every real estate company that would take a meeting with her. Staging was new to the area, so she patiently explained that staging would sell homes faster and for more money.

The business has blossomed enough that she hopes to turn it into a national gig with television appearances, speaking engagements and book sales. Carter has sold her home in Bethesda and will rent an apartment in Palm Beach, Fla. She is keeping her Done in a Day business here and travels back and forth to Florida.

She purged and staged her home over the past few months before putting it on the market May 2. It sold in eight days.

"I was completely unemotional about it," she said, deadpanning. "I practiced what I have learned."

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Thomas Heath
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Motto of story "There are money suckers every where".
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Home buyers are bizarrely bad at mentally subtracting any minor negatives or discounting glitz. This kind of staging really does make a huge difference especially when every single person interacts with the house online first and foremost. The photos need to pop - well lit, uncluttered, clean, impersonal but warm like a good hotel. And texture - plants, an artfully draped throw, baskets.
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> She purged and staged her home over the past few months before putting it on the market May 2. It sold in eight days.

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So basically clean the place up and paint the walls.
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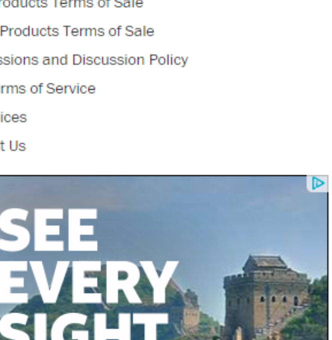
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