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10 top real estate tips for 2015

Another year of strong economic growth, improved employment and pent-up housing demand bodes well for most sellers in 2015, particularly in the Farm Belt and in energy-producing states such as Texas, North Dakota, Louisiana, Montana and Wyoming, and urban areas like Seattle, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Denver and Boston.

In fact, the National Association of Home Builders, or NAHB, predicts that the 2015 single-family home sector will outperform a strong 2014. There are cautions: Moody's predicts mortgage rates will rise from about 4 percent now to 6 percent by 2017.

The recovery has yet to arrive in many states, reinforcing the notion that real estate growth is regional. No one can accurately predict when this real estate uptick will end or how hard, or soft, a landing it will make. In the meantime, let proven fundamentals, applied with a few modern wrinkles, rule the day. Here are 10 tips for 2015 to help the real estate process.

1. *Do* sweat the small (cheap) stuff, sellers

Little touches go a long way in the buyer's eye, starting logically with the entry. Trim bushes, wash walkways and change out trampled welcome mats. Inside, de-stink with candles and counter sprays, de-jam closets and de-clutter rooms, focusing keenly on kitchen counters. Hide scrub brushes and other fantasy-killing labor tools. Dust, wax, scrub toilets, wash windows, test and clean lights, put out fresh towels, winnow family mementos, harness or hide that avalanche of toys, remove prescription drugs from medicine cabinets and police the yard for "pet bombs." It's time well-spent.

2. Take note(s), buyers

In a whirlwind house-hunting tour of several properties, buyers benefit by keeping a pro-and-con checklist of each home they visit. Otherwise, the features of several homes tend to blend together in a tired brain by day's end. Creating a rating scale of 1 to 10 also helps, as does carrying a checklist of specific features that you seek in an ideal home.

3. Sell by season

Though spring is optimal, home selling is a year-round sport. Use seasonal accents to make buyers linger longer.

Winter: Unfurl throw rugs and spotlight functional fireplaces. Near holidays, add touches like wreaths and pine-cone centerpieces. Display photos of your home a season ahead, particularly in winter, so buyers can see the house ensconced by greenery.

Spring: Fresh-cut flowers and candles bring spring scents indoors. For that new-start look, do extra spring cleaning and use brightly colored linens, spreads and pillows. Add little pops of color to the entry and landscape.

Summer: Highlight patios and other outdoor areas. Swap out dark towels and curtains for light colors. Put out a seasonal fruit basket or add hanging flowers. Keep the house cool but not cold.

Fall: Display pumpkins by the door and vases of fall foliage or tricolored corn inside. Use seasonal scents such as baked apple. Keep those leaves at bay.

4. Drill deeply

Buyers are regularly advised to scope out the block at varying hours, but why not drill down further to see if your potential new neighborhood is fading or flourishing?

- Bad signs: A major local employer is struggling or moving away; adjacent neighborhoods are progressively turning into rentals; and a few too many for-sale homes are lingering on the market. Nearby commercial spaces remain persistently vacant.
- Good signs: Schools are in high demand and well-rated. Young families and artsy types are moving in. Older couples are "aging in place" and nearby commercial properties are getting redeveloped and quickly leased. For-sale homes are generating multiple offers.

5. 'Big data' is everywhere, so tap in

While local knowledge and old-school networking will always be valuable, the latest technology lets agents offer much more. Some agencies offer "livability" ratings by ranking and contrasting neighborhoods by air quality, traffic choke points and specific data on a home's energy efficiency. In 2013, the National Association of Realtors introduced its Predictive Analytics group. Banks already use "big data" to gauge the worth of foreclosures and short sales, and mobile apps now offer it for consumer and agent use. Ask agents if they offer this and other edgy technology such as high-definition aerial footage shot by drones. Should your grandiose home merit that, go big!

6. Transparency equals trust

Buyers will certainly enlist inspectors to twice-over your home, Mr. Seller. So instead of inviting disappointment, delay and distrust, go transparent with your own presale inspection. It's far better to know now about issues with the plumbing, HVAC (heating,

ventilating and air conditioning), foundation, electrical systems and roof. Provide the buyer a copy of the inspection along with repair receipts, and explain if or how you've adjusted your price accordingly. Buyers appreciate candor.

7. Math versus ego

Too often, buyers get caught up in win-at-all-costs negotiation. They'll stubbornly let as little as a few grand lock them out of the right house. At an interest rate of 4.5 percent, the difference between paying \$200,000 and \$195,000 -- assuming 1.25 percent property tax and 15 percent down -- is only about \$25 per month on a 30-year mortgage, or about the cost of lunch for two at a fast-casual eatery, before the tip. Don't let that ruin your chances at your dream home.

8. Retain mineral rights

With so many giant natural-gas fields (shales) in play across the U.S. and new ones pending, homeowners should exercise "seller's market" clout to retain mineral rights. While that intent needn't even be mentioned in the sales contract in some states, it's always safest to note it, provided the buyer doesn't protest. Avoid that scenario by conveying those rights to a trustworthy relative or to an energy company buying them *before* putting the house on the block. "Mineral rights? Oh, so sorry, I no longer own them."

9. Buying? Then cool it for a while

Refrain from making big capital purchases like a new car, opening new credit cards or amassing big chunks of other new debt before buying a home. These raise your debt-to-income ratio, which lenders examine to determine the mortgage amount you can afford. Also avoid moving large sums of money around, changing banks, changing jobs and becoming self-employed before buying a home.

10. The price is right

Trite, you say? Perhaps. But accurate home pricing from the outset never goes out of style because *it sells homes*. Some agents advise sellers to overprice because inventory is low. Others say go below market to spur a bidding war. Don't get caught up in pricing games.

Activity in the first month of a listing is always the best, so don't risk wasting it. Price too high, and scare off many buyers and agents. Price too low, and risk leaving dollars on the table. Hiring the right agent based on recommendations, response time, in-person interviews, track record and data support will yield that pricing expert you need.