

Eco-savvy selling

The environmental movement has reached a “tipping point,” says Bonnie Cox, ABR®, CRS®, a broker at RE/MAX Masters in Englewood, Colo. “It used to be that when you

saw a hybrid car, you thought, ‘Greenie!’” she recalls. Now, however, Cox is seeing more and more consumers bring environmental wish lists into the homebuying process, “not just because they’ll save on their fuel bills but because they believe it’s better for their family,” she says. That means smart real estate professionals should educate themselves about resource-efficient building materials.

When working with sellers, explain simple actions that can reduce energy and water waste, thus appealing to buyers’ wallets and environmental hearts. With buyers, you can note high-efficiency products in homes they’re considering and point out material enhancements that would make potential purchases more environmentally friendly.

Put homes in the best ‘green’ light

When sellers are considering listing, it’s your job to recommend improvements that may make the home more marketable. Increasingly, that includes ways to boost energy efficiency. The quickest and

easiest upgrades, says Cox, are caulking and weatherstripping windows. “That may seem insignificant,” she says, “but buyers are becoming more aware of energy efficiency, and you can mention those upgrades in your marketing pieces.”

Also important but more expensive are appliance upgrades, says Bill Westel, a practitioner at Eco-Steward Realty in Asheville, N.C. He recommends that sellers look up the brand and model numbers of their appliances at www.energystar.gov to see whether the appliances meet the federal government’s Energy Star efficiency standards. “If they have an energy-hog appliance, it may be to their benefit to replace it,” he says.

Westel also recommends that sellers call their local utility company for an energy audit of home features, including the furnace, the water heater, and major appliances. It typically costs about \$100, but audit results can be used as a marketing tool if the sellers get a positive report or implement recommendations as a result. Private firms offer more comprehensive energy audits for about \$75 per hour in his area, says Westel. “An hour is usually all it takes to walk through the house and tell sellers what they can do to improve the home’s energy efficiency. Do they have enough insulation? Are there leaks in the house frame or envelope, or are there drafts they can seal?” When Westel is working with energy-conscious buyers, he recommends they have the audit done if the sellers haven’t done so already.

Don Shea, a sales associate at Coldwell Banker Residential Brokerage in Evanston, Ill., says owners of older homes often ignore the benefits of insulating their attics. At a recent home inspection, he says, the inspector recommended that the buyers increase the attic insulation to help the home retain heat, something the sellers could easily have done and touted as a sales feature.

Another improvement that boosts energy efficiency, says Shea, is installing dual-zone heating and air-conditioning systems, with separate thermostats for each zone. Such systems allow homeowners to save energy by fully heating

We must make the rescue of our environment the central organizing principle for civilization, and there must be a wrenching transformation to save the planet.”

Former Vice President
Al Gore



SALES SHORTS

only the first floor during the winter—and letting the warm air naturally rise to the second floor—and fully cooling only the upper stories during summer nights. “That’s the type of improvement that pays off for sellers,” says Shea, “because it increases energy savings, and somebody like an inspector will point out to buyers how smart the system is.”

Shea recommends alerting sellers to those ideas early so that they’ll have time to prove they’ve reduced their home’s energy consumption. For instance, if in September, sellers say they’re planning to list in the spring, recommend they make upgrades quickly so that winter heating bills will reflect the improvements. “On one listing, we pulled several years’ utility bills so that the sellers could demonstrate that the insulation they put in the attic helped reduce energy use,” says Shea. “Although energy costs had gone up, their heating bill had stayed the same.”

Help buyers envision a greener home

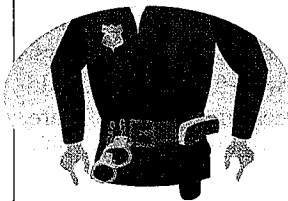
Buyers are also increasingly retrofitting new purchases with materials that are more environmentally friendly. Landscaping is a good example, Cox says. Trees and tall shrubs can shelter a home from wind and sun. “Having planted huge shrubs at my own property,” she says, “I can see that the life of the windows is being extended by being shaded. They aren’t getting the heat of the sun, and the wood isn’t aging as a result.” Drip irrigation systems, which conserve water by using underground trenches to deliver it directly to plant roots, are also growing in popularity.

As for the inside of homes, Westel says he’s seeing more buyers use recycled wood for flooring. In one home, the owners recycled old wood pallets into flooring. Another couple is doing “the mother of all environmental retrofits,” he says. They’re removing their home’s fiberboard insulation ducts, on which dirt can accumulate, and replacing them with metal ducts to improve indoor-air quality. They’re also removing the carpeting, which can release fumes, and replacing it with wood floors. Although they haven’t made a final decision, says Westel, the homeowners are considering re-milling wood from old barns to create the new floors. They’re also putting new siding on the home, using hearty plank, a product made from recycled cement that looks like wood.

Shea says he’s selling units in a green building under construction in his area that’ll feature Energy Star appliances; low-emission carpets, stains, and paints; and hookups for electric cars in each garage space. “As a society, we’re only on the verge of recognizing what’s energy efficient,” he says. “But we’re starting to see builders and architects get into it. The pieces are starting to come together.” **RM**

Julie, get your gun

Despite being called a “worst person in the world” by MSNBC anchor Keith Olbermann, Julie Upton is sticking to her guns. The salesperson with Realty Associates in Houston offers a Glock pistol to police officers who work with her on the purchase or sale of a home costing at least \$150,000.



Upton doesn’t actually give anyone a gun. She buys a gift certificate from a licensed dealer, and officers obtain the weapon themselves.

Why guns? Upton’s husband has been a Houston police officer for 16 years, and she wants to provide a helpful incentive for his co-workers. Since officers must pay for their own on-duty weapon, the Glock made sense. “It has definitely worked,” says Upton. She has closed three sales involving police officers and is working on five more.

As for Olbermann’s tongue-lashing, Upton is frustrated that he didn’t mention the promotion was only for police officers. She asked for a correction but had no luck.

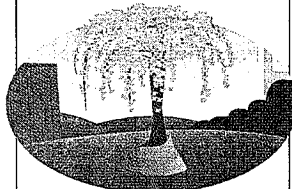
No worries, either. “It’s a creative marketing strategy,” says Upton. “I’ve received calls from brokers wanting to copy the promotion.”

Half price? Buy two!

The fact that Anne Connolly, a broker-associate at RE/MAX 4000 Inc. in Grand Junction, Colo., gives gift certificates to a plant nursery as closing gifts isn’t news. What’s news is that the nursery matches her gift amount.

“My \$50 gift becomes a \$100 gift,” explains Connolly. “Clients love me. I’m happy because they love me, and the nursery’s happy because it has new customers.”

The nursery is generous because most people spend more than the amount of a certificate.



Connolly knows that clients appreciate her gift. After buyers have settled in, “they love to show me what they bought with my gift certificate,” she says. Occasionally, however, she spends full price and gives a gift from another merchant. “When a woman who worked at the nursery bought

through me,” explains Connolly, “I thought she probably didn’t need the gift certificate.”



Road ready

Meticulous planning makes showing properties to families a smooth ride for Jim Pojda, e-PRO®.

The salesperson with Alain Pinel, REALTORS®, in San Jose, Calif., stocks his car to keep kids fed and entertained. He also minimizes the drive time by programming the day’s route into his car’s global positioning system before the family arrives.

“Children’s attention span isn’t very long,” says Pojda. “You can see three to four properties, but if you want to see more, you’ll hear, ‘I’m tired!’ If you can entertain kids by putting in a DVD, you can see six to eight properties with ease.”

Pojda combats the kids’ “I’m hungry” complaint by keeping fresh boxes of crackers in the car, along with a cooler stocked with drinks.

The result is a family at ease and ready to shop for a home. “We’re not as rushed,” he says. “There’s better client rapport, and we’re able to accomplish what we’re trying to do.”

Do you have an innovative, business-boosting selling or marketing tip that you’d like to share? Please e-mail us at greatideas@realtors.org.