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Remodeling Adviser

By Wendy Cole



Ansie Stokes finds a special thrill in showing aging row houses.

Worn linoleum floors, peeling floral wallpaper, and cramped master bathrooms commonly found in her Washington, D.C., market play to one of her strengths: helping buyers assess a home's remodeling potential.

"A lot of buyers are willing to do renovations. But they need help," says Stokes, GRI, a sales associate with McEneaney Associates. "It's our job to help them set realistic expectations."

As the daughter of a general contractor, Stokes was practically raised to know the difference between drywall and Dryvit. But every real estate professional can benefit from being able to give sound fundamental advice that fits the design goals and budgets of their clients. Having the knowledge to address basic questions about pricing, the potential for disruption, and how to find a reputable contractor is not only helpful to clients but can help build your professional reputation.

Countering clients' mistaken ideas about what a project might entail is crucial, even if the clients don't initially welcome it. "I find that first-time buyers have the rosier view about renovations," Stokes says. "Because they watch the design shows on TV, many think it takes two days to pop in a new kitchen, not two months."

Lonnie Davey, a sales associate with RE/MAX Northwest, REALTORS®, in Seattle, says he often ends up persuading buyers to scrap plans for elaborate remodeling jobs. "When they start talking about adding a bedroom and a half bath, they may not even realize that they're really saying, 'Show me a different house.' People just don't realize the strain that remodeling can put on their relationship and their finances."

Requests for contractor referrals can be an especially tricky matter. Buyers may eagerly seek your recommendations for someone to replace the floors, redo plumbing, or knock out a wall, and you want to help. But what if the contractor you'd heard good things about turns out to be a dud?

Stokes sets up 15-minute meetings with as many subcontractors as she can in the hope of minimizing the chance of problems later.

"I tell them that they need to be super-responsive if they want to stay on my referral list," she says.

When clients tell her of a problem with one of her referrals, she snaps into action, even if it's been months or years since the transaction. "The first thing I do is apologize to the clients since they were the ones trusting me," she says. "Of course, I take the company off my list, but sometimes I call contractors asking that they fix the matter. It's important not to overstate your relationship or familiarity with any contractor. It could come back to haunt you."

Here are additional tips for helping your clients have successful remodeling experiences:

Avoid idea overload. It's fine to volunteer suggestions about a specific project, but throwing out a multitude of options just because it's your passion can be overwhelming to buyers.

Know buyers' remodeling history. Finding out how much experience, if any, they've had with remodeling, and how they felt about it, will help you and them gauge how much they should take on at once. Never push buyers to do work they're not interested in pursuing.

Stay on top of local laws. Share relevant information on zoning, permitting, and historic preservation requirements—even if only to direct buyers to the local governing authorities.

Help anticipate logistics. Buyers may not realize they'll be displaced for weeks or months once major work begins. You might recommend that renters postpone their moving day, if possible, until a major renovation is complete. ■



LINKS

CostvsValue.com

Access Remodeling's Cost vs. Value Report for data on the resale value of 29 remodeling projects