
10 must-do repairs before selling

Tackling these basic, inexpensive improvements will help your home stand out from the crowd in a difficult market.

By Marilyn Lewis, MSN Real Estate



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When you put a home up for sale these days, you're facing stiff competition. In most parts of the country, buyers are faced with huge numbers of homes for sale. Before asking strangers to trade hundreds of thousands of their hard-earned dollars for your little palace, make all the little repairs you've always meant to do but never had the time for.

These 10 basic repairs will help prepare your house for a buyer's white-glove inspection:

1. Repair sagging screen doors and other entry red flags.

The entrance to your home is the key to first impressions. Carolyn Brake, a home-staging expert in Aurora, Colo., near Denver, prepares about 10 to 12 homes a week for market and she stresses the importance of creating a great impression right off the bat. "We're not so much selling the house as we're selling the experience of living in this house," Brake says. Buyers will be alert to signs of neglect or deferred maintenance, since they want to avoid expensive hidden problems down the road.

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Make sure everything at the entrance is in working order. If the screen door is sagging, you'll probably have to install a new one, as aging aluminum parts often become too bent or broken to repair, says Charlie Hudson, a remodeling professional and owner of Hudson Remodeling, in Lynden, Wash. But first, try replacing any missing or corroded hinge screws and tightening the rest.

Patrol the perimeter of your home, inspecting it with the critical eye of a stranger, advises Katherine Carroll, agent with Century 21 Mountain Lifestyles in Weaverville, N.C. Clear dead plants from flower beds, clip dead blossoms and stems, rake and haul the yard waste far away.

A fresh coat of paint on the front door goes miles toward establishing a great first impression. What color? Drive around for some inspiration and to see what colors prevail in your community. In some towns, a bright red door, or a deep plum, looks great. In others, it'll seem over the top. Forest green, navy blue and black can be great door colors. The front door need not match the exterior colors of your house and trim, only look good alongside them.

2. Spiff up the roof.

Missing shingles and hanging gutters broadcast a loud, scary signal to potential buyers. "You want the house to look as presentable and nonproblematic as possible," says Cathy Cowan, an agent with Windermere Real Estate Co. in Seattle. "There's a great deal of fear when people go out to look at property. You want them to be able to focus on 'Where does my bed go?' and 'Can we live here?' rather than, 'Oh my God, there's a problem with the roof.'"

Get a roofer to replace any missing or broken shingles or roofing tiles. Moss growing on the roof signals neglect, so it's important to get it cleaned off. Ask a roofing expert to remove moss or to recommend someone who can. Roofing professionals may suggest treating the surface of your roof with a chemical to kill moss or they may recommend installing zinc strips on the roof ridge. Water running over the zinc washes minute amounts of zinc carbonate over the roof, killing algae and moss, according to Z-Stop, which manufactures the strips. When hiring someone to work on your roof, it's crucial to check their recommendations. Amateurs can damage your roof with the careless use of a high-pressure power washer.

3. Clear and caulk gutters.

On a dry day, climb up on a ladder and clear all the debris out of the gutters so water can flow freely. While you're up there, recaulk the gutter end caps, advises Hudson. Seamless gutters are finished at the ends with a cap that's crimped and caulked. Aging caulk allows leaks to drain water down your home's siding.

Get started by drying the clean gutter; the drier the aluminum, the better caulk will bond to its surface, says Hudson. He recommends using flexible butyl caulk made for outdoor conditions. Its color doesn't matter, since you're caulking inside the gutter. Squeeze out a generous amount and

use your finger to smear the stuff around inside the gutter cap seams. Don't worry about appearances, since no one will see your work.

4. Patch nail holes and repaint.

Moving inside the house, you'll want to patch up nail holes in the walls. Ask at a hardware store for lightweight putty. Apply it with a putty knife and fill in each hole, scraping the excess off the wall. Following directions on the package, wait for it to dry. Then sand the putty until it's smooth and flush with the wall. Paint the repaired spots with primer. Call a handyman for anything bigger than a nail hole, as it's not easy to blend bigger repairs into the wall and obvious patches telegraph the message, "I'm hiding something," says Hudson. Repaint the entire wall -- you're unlikely to be able to hide a touched-up patch, otherwise -- from one corner to the next.

5. Divorce your smoker and ship kitty to Siberia.

All right, just kidding. Sort of. The thing is, smells are a serious deal killer. When strangers enter a home, the first thing they notice is the smell. Don't even try hiding behind scented candles, potpourri and plug-in room fragrances. Buyers, ever suspicious to problems, catch a whiff of those and conclude that you're hiding something.

In the kitchen and bathrooms, deep clean with bleach, then regrout tiles and recaulk cracks between sinks, tubs, toilets, counters and floors to seal out the moisture that encourages the growth of smelly mold, mildew and bacteria.

If you've had smokers in the house, you've got extra work to do. To rid walls of smoke and nicotine film, some experts suggest washing the walls with cleaners using an alkaline builder, such as ammonia, and a glycol solvent (found at paint stores). Brake recommends painting an undercoat of Kilz primer onto clean, dry walls to seal in nicotine smells. Finish the job with a fresh coat of paint and change the furnace filter to further freshen the air in the house.

Then, "send smokers down the street," says Brake. She's not kidding: Ban smoking, even in the garden, because the smell clings to porches, decks and clothing. Gardens lose their appeal when littered with cigarette butts. If possible, board your cat off-premises while you're showing your home; at minimum, clean the litter box daily.

6. Replace damaged vinyl flooring.

Inspect the vinyl flooring in your bathrooms. If it has discolored spots or is loose, moisture may be damaging the floor. You'll probably want a professional to lay the actual flooring, which could cost \$400 or more. But you can save as much as half of the cost by preparing the floor yourself.

Remove the baseboards by pulling them away from the walls with a small pry bar. Next, pull up the flooring using a larger pry bar -- it will be glued and nailed or stapled. Also remove the next layer, called the underlayment, made of particleboard or layered plywood.

While your new floor is being installed, you can sand and repaint the baseboards so the whole job will look terrific when it's finished. Another good choice for flooring material is linoleum, a green product made from linseed oil, pine resin, sawdust and other natural binders. It can add 30% or 40% to the cost of a \$400 job.

7. Reseal the toilet.

Not all flooring installers will remove and reinstall the toilet, something that must be done to replace the floor. Pulling the toilet yourself can save you money. With plumbers' fees running about \$85 an hour (with a minimum hour and a half charge for a house call), you could save yourself \$200 or more (for two trips) by pulling the toilet yourself.

Even if you aren't replacing flooring, the seals may need replacing. How to tell? If the toilet rocks when someone sits down, or if the floor at the base is moist or discolored, the seal could be broken. Corroded nuts that hold the toilet to the floor are another sign that the toilet needs to be reinstalled. Before you begin, shut off the water supply at the faucet behind the toilet. Flush the toilet, holding down the handle to drain as much water as possible. Use a wrench to unscrew the bolts holding the toilet to the floor.

Don't move the toilet alone. Get a friend to help, because toilets are heavy and cumbersome, and the tanks are easily cracked. Prepare a bed of old cushions or towels in the bathtub and set the toilet there gently so any drips drain into the tub. At a hardware store, find two wax toilet seals (also called gaskets, about \$3 apiece). One seal is conformed to fit into the sewer pipe; the second is a plain wax circle that you'll stack directly on top of the first. (Also at the store, purchase two new bolts -- about \$1.50 each.) Back home, remove the old gaskets. Fit the new shaped gasket into the mouth of the sewer pipe first; put the second seal directly over it so the toilet fits into the space with no gaps. Lower the toilet over the seals. Screw in the new bolts, tighten them, reconnect the water supply and caulk the base of the toilet.

8. Stop faucet drips.

A dripping faucet calls attention to itself, and it's not hard to fix. Shut off the water supply to the faucets by turning the valves under the sink to the right. Then, test the faucet to make sure you've shut the water off completely. While you're looking under the sink, check for moisture on the wall around the valves and on the floor of the sink cabinet. Also check the supply lines leading to the dishwasher and disposal. If those areas are wet, get a plumber.

If you've got a newer, rotating, single-arm faucet (through which both hot and cold water run), note the brand and purchase a faucet rebuild kit (roughly \$50) at the hardware store. Inside the faucet arm is a metal ball on a stem that lets the handle swivel while allowing water to flow in any direction. The kit contains the six to 12 parts most likely to fail, including that metal ball, O rings, springs and gaskets. The idea is to replace them all rather than trying to diagnose the exact source of the problem. Dismantle the faucet, laying the parts out in order on a paper towel. Snap a photo or draw a sketch to help you with reassembly. Replace the old parts, put the faucet back together and turn the water back on.

For older faucets with independent hot and cold water faucets, shut off the water under the sink as before then dismantle each of the sink's faucets separately. Remove the washers (rings made of rubber, plastic or brass), put them in a plastic sandwich bag and bring them to the hardware store to find replacements. Reassemble the faucets and turn the water back on.

If this seems like more trouble than you're willing to tackle, call a plumber. With no complications, a plumber can install the new parts in an hour, though most will bill you for an hour and a half minimum.

9. Renew dinged baseboards.

Beat-up baseboards detract greatly from the appearance of your home, and they're easy to spiff up. "All those little things tend to stand out," says Carroll. First, clean them to remove scrapes and smudges left by clawing pets and toddlers on wheels. Brake says a [Mr. Clean Magic Eraser](#) sponge works great on painted surfaces. Fill in dents with spackle, sand the baseboards smooth and repaint them. If you've lost the name of the original paint color, chip off a coin-sized bit, slip it into an envelope and bring it to the paint store where you can have the color computer matched.

Use primer before painting. Don't just retouch small areas; paint the entire piece of baseboard, from one end to the other. Choose a washable eggshell finish. White is a great choice for making baseboards and trim look crisp and clean.

10. Repair cabinet scratches.

You can quickly improve the look of unpainted woodwork and worn cabinets with an application of products that even out the surface color. Brake covers scratches on woodwork and cabinets with Old English Scratch Cover or a [Tibet Almond Stick](#), a tight roll of cotton saturated in chemicals that the manufacturer, Zenith Chemical Works, says is a 100-year-old family formula. (You can find these at hardware and home-improvement stores.)

The almond stick goes on clear but covers scratches. "It's amazing," Brake says. Zenith owner Kim MacInnes says the almond stick works best with shallow surface scratches on dark finishes. It doesn't work in every case, he says, and even a good result may fade with time and need to be reapplied periodically.

Old English makes separate formulations for light or dark wood. These are oily stains, so use them carefully. Try out any products first in a corner where results will not be noticed. Do not use the dark stain on light wood. Finally, polish wood cabinets to a glow with lemon oil.

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