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NEWS

## Each listing comes with a stager's advice – take it or leave it

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It was the listing that changed everything.

That home belonged to Heidi Wells, and she had hired fellow West Roxbury resident Irene Kerzner to sell it. Both women were on different paths from where they started, and working together would have them forging a new approach to real estate.



FROM LEFT, IRENE KERZNER OF CONCIERGE HOME SALES AND HEIDI WELLS OF SILK PURSE DESIGN. MARGARET LAMPERT (PHOTO)

A year after leaving a position in fashion design when her daughter became ill, Kerzner became a real estate agent.

It was a natural transition, Kerzner said, because of her background and because “My dad had been in real estate [he owned a lot of property], so I always had a fondness for the business.” For 16 years, Kerzner has worked as an agent at Hammond Residential Real Estate in Chestnut Hill.

When Heidi Wells was young, she loved nothing more than playing with the dollhouse her father built for her. “Since I was small, I loved houses and, as I grew up, was steeped in carpentry and renovation,” Wells said.

Wells and her husband were happy in their West Roxbury home, but their family was rapidly outgrowing their little house. When they put it on the market in 2012, they hired Kerzner.

“Heidi painted, cleaned, and styled that house so that we quickly got multiple offers in a down market,” Kerzner recalled. “I had worked with stagers at a couple of properties, but this was different. Sometimes staging is very formulaic, but Heidi develops a personal plan focused on the best way to show a particular house. People walk in, and they don’t know it’s staging.”

That first sale led to a new career for Wells and more collaboration between the two friends.

After 25 years of working as a makeup artist, Wells founded a staging company, Silk Purse Design.

Impressed with their first collaboration, Kerzner soon asked Wells to help with another listing.

“It was an awful house with lovely people. I was a therapist, plumber, electrician, marriage counselor,” Wells recalled.

“Heidi helped the husband clear out stuff he’d been holding on to forever,” Kerzner chimed in. “At first, he resisted, but then he loved the results.”

The home’s lovely owners got an offer the first weekend the property was on the market, and the idea for Concierge Home Sales was born.

Some realty firms offer luxury services that include staging. Some realtors become certified as home stagers, so they can do both. And yet other real estate agents have informal partnerships with home stagers and interior designers, experts they can call when a home needs a lift. Bruce Irving, an agent with Compass Real Estate in Cambridge, often calls on Peggy Morrissey, a former real estate developer who now runs Peggy Morrissey Staging.

“We are all independent contractors responsible for our own business. I know that, these days, staging is very important,” Irving said.

Karen Sexton is sales manager for Compass in Cambridge and Metro West. “We now we have a new service called Compass Concierge, where we cover the upfront costs of preparing a home for sale, then collect the fee when it closes,” Sexton said. “The seller gets to pick which designer, painter, cleaner, etc. they want to work with; we make sure that they are licensed and insured.”

Homes on the West Coast, particularly in California, are always staged, said Kara Woods, the Globe’s former Ask the Stager writer, owner of Stage to Move in Danbury, Conn., and Northeast regional vice president of the Real Estate Staging Association. “On the East Coast, staging is expected in certain areas.”

In a 2017 report by the National Association of Realtors, half of the seller’s agents surveyed said staging boosted the value of their listing: 29 percent reported an increase of 1 percent to 5 percent of the dollar value offered by buyers in comparison to similar homes, and 21 percent reported a jump of 6 percent to 10 percent. A quarter of respondents said home staging had no effect on the value.

“Staging fees depend upon the service received,” Woods said in an e-mail. Staging a vacant home with furniture can run anywhere from \$12,000 to \$18,000 for a three- to six-month period, she said. A consultation is \$200 to \$400, and hourly assistance, project management, and more can run about \$75 to \$200 a property.

The collaboration between Kerzner and Wells is a new approach. They are quick to explain that what Concierge Home Sales does goes far beyond staging. Every listing gets the full team, advice and all, regardless of whether they opt to stage the house or not. The owners pay for any home improvement work (what they suggest is usually only cosmetic), and if they want the home staged, the costs range from \$2,400 to \$4,500. Kerzner said she takes on “the lion’s share” of the cost, paying Wells at the closing.

“We do whatever the house needs to make it attractive to buyers,” Wells said. “That includes pruning or cutting down trees, carpentry, hanging curtains, taking out or bringing in furniture and furnishings, a good cleaning, or rebuilding the front steps. In almost every house, I paint and bring in light fixtures.”

Many items are pulled from her 9,000-square-foot, two-story Newton warehouse, where home furnishings are stacked to the rafters.

As she walks along the warehouse aisles, she picks up items as disparate as antique cameras and throw pillows to demonstrate how interesting and appealing objects can lend an interior just the right balance of serenity and personality.



BEFORE – The living room was large but needed to serve as a foyer, too. — Handout



BEFORE – “The furniture didn’t create a complete conversation area and the individual pieces didn’t really flow together very well,” Heidi Wells said. — Amanda Beattie/Boston Virtual Imaging.



AFTER – Using modular sofas and a console table, Heidi Wells created two separate spaces within one room. “The style direction was upscale but informal, taking into consideration the layout of the rooms and overall style of the property. — Nate Atwater/Boston Virtual Imaging.



AFTER – “We brought in some more contemporary furniture, a more vibrant rug, lamps to provide warmth and accessories/artwork that tied everything together,” Wells said. — Amanda Beattie/Boston Virtual Imaging.

“In the warehouse we have a washer and dryer, a carpet cleaner, a big sink,” Wells explained. “We are very hands-on: We refinish furniture, do upholstery ... if I don’t have it, we can make it.

“Properties that are merely staged by realtors don’t look like home to me,” she continued. “Real homes have things that are old, new, collected from travels, or ordered from IKEA. Things are layered and personal.”

“Realtors tell people, ‘Declutter, paint,’ and then leave,” Kerzner said. “It’s often overwhelming for homeowners, who don’t know where to begin. We have a whole team of craftsmen, painters, and movers, and we make the phone calls and set the schedules — it is such a comprehensive service. We are problem solvers and will do everything from structural work to replacing the knobs on the kitchen cabinets.”

Wells points out that homeowners who put their house on the market often find the experience unexpectedly taxing and that emotional support is an invisible but important element of the services they offer.

When Kerzner and Wells first meet with prospective clients, Wells makes an assessment while Kerzner counsels the homeowners on what is necessary to show their home in the best light.

“Sometimes people feel that they should not have to spend any money to make their house more salable,” Kerzner said. “I try to show them that a house that is well prepared sells for more, faster.”

Since their first project in West Roxbury in 2012, Wells and Kerzner have worked together on 55 properties — 98 percent of which have sold for at least the asking price after the first weekend of open houses. “The average is about 10 percent over the asking price, but it has gone considerably higher at times,” Kerzner said.

In 2016, Concierge Home Sales helped sell a Metro West home that “still had the two-family setup; the second floor had an identical layout to the first floor, and now there was an extra kitchen,” Wells said.

With carefully chosen items, they converted the upstairs kitchen into a crafts room and glamoured up the master bedroom closet. The home, which was listed at \$1,250,000, sold for \$1,378,000.

Another property discouraged buyers with its red lacquer kitchen and adjoining dark brown dining room.

“There, all we did was paint the kitchen bisque, which pulled the colors together,” Wells said. They also furnished the home from top to bottom. “After that, it sold right away for more than the asking price.”

Kerzner is quick to reiterate, however, that Concierge Home Sales is not a staging company:

“Part of what we do is, of course, staging via Silk Purse Design, but what sets us apart is our ‘whole-istic’ approach to preparing a home for market. We oversee and optimize every step of the process, from the editing to the staging to the marketing to the closing,” she said. “We are always mindful in choosing improvements that we feel will give the most significant rate of return.”

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