

Virtual staging furnishes new look for home sellers

Computer-driven changes offer up a cheaper alternative

By [Mary Umberger](#)

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In the beginning, which wasn't too long ago, really, there was home staging. And now we have *virtual* home staging.

Home staging, for those of you who haven't sat through thousands of hours of HGTV reruns, is the practice of adding marketing pizzazz to a house or condo by rethinking how its furnishings make an impression on potential buyers.

The term encompasses everything from rearranging and editing the existing furniture to completely re-outfitting the place, from sumptuous sofas down to the scented soaps in the powder room. The costs can range from a few hundred dollars to many thousands.

Lately, a few entrepreneurs have begun offering a lower-cost alternative to totally restyling a room. Just don't expect to smell any soap. Or to sit on that sofa.

That's because virtual stagers have begun "furnishing" online listings of empty rooms to help would-be buyers envision themselves living there. The idea is to catch the eye of home buyers as they surf through an online sea of vacant homes for sale, of which there were at least 2 million at the end of March, according to U.S. Census data.

"Every darned room looks the same unless the room is hot pink," said Jay Bell, proprietor of Virtually Staging Properties in Atlanta. "We help buyers get through the morass of vacant home after vacant home. They all run together."

Bell, as well as a handful of competing firms, embellishes empty-room photos submitted by

agents and owners with scaled-to-fit images of sofas, dining tables, area rugs, draperies, artwork, etc.

“It’s a way for buyers to better visualize the space,” said Eugene Gershman, a Bellevue, Wash., developer who recently rolled out an online staging company, GIS Virtual.

“Being a real estate developer, I know a lot of buyers can’t visualize what they could do with [a room],” Gershman said. “That’s why staging is so popular.”

The realism of the images varies from company to company, and if you linger over even the most credible-looking photos, you’re probably going to realize the furnishings aren’t actually in the room.

But if your goal is to capture an online shopper’s imagination, these services might well be worth the cost. GIS Virtual charges a flat \$99 for three rooms; Virtually Staging Properties, which has applied for a patent for its technology, charges from \$225 for three rooms to \$525 for five.

Bell’s wife, Krisztina, runs a traditional staging company that last year did top-to-bottom staging of rooms in 120 Atlanta-area homes. Though prices can vary regionally, three fully-staged rooms would have cost \$2,200 to \$2,400 for a three-month rental, said Bell.

Beware, though, of the fine line between virtually staging photos and doctoring them. Real estate agents have complained in online forums of technological liberties being taken with listing photos, like adding lush landscaping or deleting overhead power lines.

Brad Tertell, general manager of Chicago’s MRED multiple-listing service, said that virtual staging doesn’t violate MRED rules, but that the organization had checked out a few complaints about photo editing (not connected with the two companies mentioned here) that had gone too far and misrepresented a property.

Bell said his company won’t change the appearance of a room or home beyond the furnishings.

“We require that our customers be responsible for telling buyers and other agents that the rooms are virtually staged,” he said. “We’ve had people ask us to [virtually] add appliances and mini bars. We won’t do that. It’s a slippery slope.”

Hear Mary Umberger at 12:49 and 11:15 p.m. Tuesday and Thursday and at 10:30 a.m. Saturday and Sunday on WGN-AM 720. Write to her at Money & Real Estate, Chicago Tribune, 435 N. Michigan Ave., 4th Floor, Chicago, IL 60611 or send e-mail to housingnews@comcast.net.



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