

# How to sell your home this spring

A detailed floor plan, dazzling pictures, tidy garden and realistic asking price will all help secure a sale, says Jayne Dowle

If you want to sell, spring is an excellent time to present your property in its best light, especially as estate agents are reporting a shortage of fresh stock in many parts of the UK.

However, don't get carried away by the first daffodils to wave their heads in the sunshine and assume that by Easter the deal will be done. Elizabeth Weintraub, a US real estate agency, says "yellow flowers stimulate buying urges, as they induce feelings of happiness", but it takes more than a pot of daffs by the front door to convince buyers.

What a successful spring sale really calls for is a battle plan that gets the basics right — from the price to the floor plan to legal preparation.

## Set a proper price

When you've had valuations from three different estate agents — ideally including a local independent who will know the market — and done your own research on neighbourhood sales, you should achieve a realistic asking price. "Go for sanity not vanity," says property search expert Edward Heaton, of Heaton and Partners. "Set a sensible initial guide price, to generate interest from the start."

If offers come through within the first week, Sally Fraser, of Stacks Property Search, warns that your asking price might be on the low side. "Expect to achieve at least the guide price," she says, "or continue with viewings for a couple of weeks then invite best and final offers. There's nothing like a bit of competition."

## Put it in the picture

"The best time to take the perfect photograph in spring is on a late afternoon," says James Taylor, the group sales and marketing director of Hadley Property Group. "This will provide the right amount of light, with a softer touch. Ask to approve the photography and don't be scared to ask for it to be reshoot if it is not good enough."

Taylor advises selecting three "hero shots", to capture the elements that make your property stand out — be it the architecture, the garden or designer kitchen. Viki Lander, the creative director of Ensoul Interior Architecture, says you should ensure that your brochure cover photo is the "killer selling shot", so if your kitchen is the main attraction, make that the primary image. "You don't have to follow the masses who use an exterior shot," she says.

"We recently switched the lead photograph on a brochure to one that looked out to the garden from a living room," says Jo-Anne Neighbour, of Savills, Islington. "We instantly had four viewings booked and the property is now under offer at asking price."

Make the details do their job. Your agent might spend hours writing up a description of your house, but many



Corston House, near Bath, has five bedrooms and a three-bedroom cottage, and is for sale at £4.25 million with Savills

property experts admit that they don't bother reading these. "I never read any of the text in an agent's particulars, except for the summary of accommodation and the postcode, so that I can see exactly where the house is," Heaton says. "All the guff is generally a waste of time. Photos, floor plans and minimal text are the order of the day."

That said, you want any description to be correct, so stick to the facts, preferably as bullet points. As Lander says, detail is key: "Kitchen appliances should be named for keen cooks; high-speed IP network for home-workers; and 4k television content and surround-sound for those of us who enjoy a cinema experience at home; plus any smart home devices and apps, from door entry to smoke detection, heating and so on."

If your home requires a complete makeover, say so, says Matthew Kaye, of Kaye & Carey, the estate agency in Belgravia. "Buyers often respond better to houses described as 'unmodernised' even if the condition is just rather tired."

## Have a foolproof floor plan

Once seen as a must-have for only the grandest houses, a floor plan is now considered essential across the market as buyers look for ways to maximise space. Fraser says: "A clear floor plan with room sizes and overall space is a must, with compass points and an easy understanding of the aspect of all rooms. It allows an interested party to see if alterations might be viable to make the house work for them."

Furnished floor plans, with possible configurations, are an even better way of demonstrating the property's potential, says Taylor. "Don't be afraid to shake it up. For example, if your dining room can

take a table for ten and you only have a table for four, show a table for ten. If you have a single bed in a double bedroom, let the floor plan show a double bed."

## Prepare the paperwork

"Before a buyer is found, my advice is to have all the paperwork in place, with the fixtures-and-fittings forms and property questionnaires completed, but most importantly a local authority search," says Harry Wigram, a partner at Strutt & Parker, Chelsea. "Once a buyer is ascertained you are then in a strong position to put them under pressure to perform. Your buyer can purchase the search back from you. Doing this, there won't be a two to three-week delay because a search is still outstanding."

Paul Cadge, a partner at Myddelton & Major estate agency, says with country properties especially it's essential to get organised with legal details relating to "easements", rights of way, boundaries and so on. "Local searches can take six

**'It's not enough to declutter and light some Jo Malone candles'**



Above and on the cover: The Old Vicarage, a five-bedroom house set in five acres in Hilmarton, Wiltshire, is £2 million (Strutt & Parker)



Five-bedroom Lodge House, in Smeeth, near Canterbury, Kent, comes with stables and 23 acres. It is £2.8 million (Strutt & Parker)

weeks or more," he says, "so applying for your own will assist the buyer to exchange sooner rather than later."

## Get to grips with the garden

Showing off the garden is a good reason to sell in spring — if it is presentable. "Make an effort to give the lawn a cut and tidy borders and paths so buyers don't feel they are inheriting a burden," says Mark Parkinson, a managing partner at the property search company Middleton Advisers.

Don't overwhelm buyers with too many photographs. Concentrate on key features such as a pond, fountain or gazebo, and stunning views. Use foliage inside too. "Herb pots in the kitchen give off amazing aromas," says Lander.

## Put effort into presentation

It's not enough to declutter and light some Jo Malone candles, says Simon Ashwell, the head of Savills in Weybridge. Potential owners want to see how your home can fit what they are looking for. "Showing buyers how and where they can create additional space demonstrates how your property might work for them, without the expense of

carrying out any structural work," he says. "We've known sellers to create an additional brochure with CGI and proposed floor plans."

Make the most of natural spring light by opening window blinds, curtains and shutters — remembering to clean the glass inside and out. "Often people think neutral colours and beige lessen the chance of offending a buyer, but we find that purchasers respond well to colour," says Jake Russell, of Russell Simpson, an estate agency in Chelsea.

## Maximise viewings

In Cirencester, Sam Trounson, the head of Strutt & Parker, says his top tip for viewings is always to have an open fire lit, especially at this time of year. "It sounds obvious, but put the heating on," agrees Jo Eccles, the founder of Sourcing Property. "It amazes me how many cold properties I've shown clients; a warm and inviting property gives a lot of subtle positive vibes to a buyer." Eccles also advises letting your agent do the job you are paying them for. "Try to be out of the property," she says. "Most buyers don't relax when the seller is there. At a Notting Hill viewing that coincided with the sellers' children's tea time, the estate agent took the entire family out for a pizza so that we could view in peace."

## Get across online activity

Which property portals are the most effective remains a matter of debate. "I would suggest being on Rightmove, Zoopla and PrimeLocation. Most of our clients aren't even aware of OnTheMarket," Eccles says.

There's nowhere to hide on the internet, so homes "sticking" on the market are clear for everyone to see. What can you do to revive a flagging profile? "Country houses often have to wait for the right buyer as they are so individual, so it is important that your agent has a better strategy than 'drop the price'," says Rachel Johnston, of Stacks Property Search. "Ask if your agent — and the portal itself — is sending 'enticing' emails to prospective buyers, rather than just downloaded links."

## How long is long enough?

Once your house is on the market, don't let it languish. In general, agents agree that if there have been few viewings and no offers after four weeks, action is required. "Ask: is the property being seen by as many people as possible? Is there a floor plan and plenty of good photos?" says Adam Day, the managing director of online agent Hatched. "Then we would recommend looking at the price and how it fits within the market."

For some prime London properties, Taylor says, you could be looking at months rather than weeks. "Family houses and properties above a million pounds can take a lot longer to sell," he says. "A large family house in Barnes, for example, which would go on the market in the region of £5 million to £6 million, could take at least six months, as families quite often have property to sell and need to talk to schools and so on."

Christopher Bartlett, based in the West Country for Stacks Property Search, says: "In the country-house market in Devon, even if you are correctly priced it can take time, up to a year. Be patient, and pick the correct agent at the start. Changing agents can cost you money."

Strolling through a neighbourhood and peering into estate agency windows was once the only way to find a new home. These days, more than 90 per cent of prospective buyers start their property search online — and the thing they are most concerned about is price.

Here we outline some of the more high-tech ways in which you can search for a new home, and make sure you pay a fair market price.

## Pricing history

The website Propcision aims to lift the lid on what a property is really worth — and for investors, what a rental property will yield. Its advanced search engine allows buyers to track prices and view a warts-and-all picture of a property's pricing history.

Michelle Ricci, the cofounder of Propcision, says: "The search stops estate agents trying to mask price reductions as well as any overpriced property they're holding on their books."

The site launched late last year but some new features will appear this month. For example, the price of a property will be ranked on a scale of one to ten in relation to others in the same location, which will highlight any that have been priced over the odds.

There will also be traffic light-style coding to indicate if the property price warrants caution or is so overpriced that a consumer should stop to ask more detailed questions.

As part of its conclusion, it will offer the average price range for an area, a suggested asking price and the price per sq ft. "By breaking a property down into a price per square foot, we hope that it provides a comparable unit of measurement against another property," Ricci says. "It is then up to the consumer to decide if one property offers more than another to justify any price difference. There will always be intangible qualities of a property that Propcision cannot capture, such as a large garden, quiet location, fabulous internal layout or just that something special that makes someone pay a bit more to secure it," she says. "These features help consumers find bargains, however the goal is to facilitate the thought process that goes into a property purchase, and to help consumers rationalise."

For buy-to-let investors, where yield is most important, Propcision offers a calculation of the potential weekly and monthly rent and rental yield of a property, as well as the purchaser's cost of stamp duty. A separate function identifies properties offering the sharpest discounts on that day.



Holtwood Farmhouse, near Yeovil, is £1.85 million (Strutt & Parker). Inset: a flat in Bedwell Park is £935,000 (Savills)



The Old Rectory, in Ludlow, Shropshire, is for sale for £795,000 (Strutt & Parker)

## Go house-hunting the high-tech way

### Property portals

The property market websites Zoopla and Rightmove feature hundreds of thousands of listings. Zoopla holds about 450,000 UK properties for sale, with another 400,000 international properties. The number of UK estate agencies on Zoopla, as of September 2015, was almost 13,000, swelling to 16,400 with those overseas.

Zoopla reports that 64 per cent of those searching their site online do so on a mobile device, evidence that people expect instant property results while on the move.

There are a number of popular tools on Zoopla, including SmartMaps, which allows you to search in precise areas by editing boundaries, or drawing your own directly on the map.

Travel Time is another tool that allows you to find homes based on the time it takes to reach points of interest, such as your workplace, a school or a family member's house. And you can narrow down the search criteria to specifics, such as the type of property you're looking for, or if it has a garage, parking or garden.

Rightmove offers a range of homes for sale from more than 19,500 agents and developers. In 2000 it featured less than 10,000 properties. Today there are about a million properties on the site, split between sales and rentals. The busiest day on Rightmove was Sunday, February 22, 2015, when the site registered 59 million page hits.

Last year a group of estate agencies — Savills, Knight Frank, Strutt & Parker, Chesterton Humberts, Douglas & Gordon and Glenree Estates — set up OnTheMarket, a controversial portal to rival Zoopla and Rightmove.

## Buyers' tips

- Research the local market with every tool available.
- Search for properties slightly above your price category to see what a little more will buy you.
- Don't rely on what a vendor or agent tells you about the neighbours and noise in general. Do your own research. Visit the property during the day, at weekends and even late at night.
- If you are a cash buyer, say so, and have the proof.
- Be chain-free. Not only does it benefit you as a buyer, it means you can sell your own home as chain-free, which is attractive to other buyers.

OnTheMarket bans agencies from signing up to more than one site, so clients have had to choose whether to withdraw from Rightmove or Zoopla in order to be eligible. About 70 per cent of its members are located outside of London and 30 per cent within, while about 90 per cent of its members have between one and three offices.

### Online estate agents

If you are disheartened by high-street estate agency fees or poor service, there are other options such as websites that offer people a more direct route to selling and buying a home. However, not all online estate agencies work in the same way, so you might find yourself dealing with a representative after all. In the case of House Network, buyers deal directly with the seller, who will also do the viewings. Purplebricks, on the other hand, uses a hybrid model, employing a network of local agents to provide face-to-face services. Although the advance of online agencies has been slow — they comprise less than 5 per cent of the market — it is expected that they will grow because of their competitive pricing for sellers. Holly Thomas

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