

Easy does it

Simple methods can dramatically boost a farm's appeal to prospective buyers

BY LIANE CROSSLEY

PREPARED A farm for sale does not have to be an expensive and exhausting undertaking. Often the simplest measures can produce the best impressions. Although keeping the entire property neat and tidy seems obvious, this easy strategy is often overlooked.

"Always remember that the typical buyer is subconsciously looking for reasons to diminish the value of the property in their mind, and, if they see \$1,000 worth of repairs that need to be done, by the time they've thought about it for a while, it's up to \$2,500 or more in their mind," said real estate broker Arnold Kirkpatrick, president of Lexington-based Kirkpatrick & Co. "I frequently hear, 'Oh, I know this doesn't look very good right now, but I just haven't had the time to fix it or the money to have it fixed.'"

Enhancements that cost only a little time can vastly improve a property's appeal.

"A clean, well-kept barn with nice bedding and all the farm implements—as well as tack and feed—well-organized and in place gives an impression that the farm has been under good care for a while," Kirkpatrick said.

Toni Flory, who with her husband, Doug, owns United Country Piedmont Real Estate in Remington, Virginia, recommends removing nonessential items, keeping the barn and surrounding vicinity orderly, and fixing troublesome areas.

"Clean, clean, clean," she said. "Knock down cobwebs, power wash, de-clutter, pack up things you don't need right now, and get rid of things you don't plan to move. Adjust doors so they slide or swing freely, and replace rotten wood. Re-

member paint and/or polyurethane can make a big difference in the appearance of a farm."

First impressions are crucial so sellers should have pastures mowed, fence lines trimmed, and fencing in good repair. Kirkpatrick said this normal maintenance should be done on a year-round basis rather than allowing a farm to fall into disrepair over time.

Sales strategy checklist

- ✓ List property with specialty realtor
- ✓ Market to equine audience
- ✓ Imagine yourself as a prospective buyer
- ✓ Vacate premises when realtor shows property
- ✓ Repair and paint fences as needed
- ✓ Use clean and fresh bedding
- ✓ Rake and sweep barn and surrounding area
- ✓ De-clutter
- ✓ Tidy up tack and feed rooms
- ✓ Remove items not in use
- ✓ Ensure doors and gates work properly
- ✓ Mow pastures
- ✓ Cut weeds at fence lines

"It is much better and less expensive to keep the pastures up on a regular basis than it is to try to catch up on pasture maintenance when you're getting ready to put the farm on the market," he said. "The same for fences. If it is at all possible, do your fence repair on a regular basis and paint 25% to 33% of the fence every year, rather than doing it all at once."

A prospective buyer gains his initial impression as soon as he enters the property, so do not overlook the appeal of the entrance.

"You don't have to have the gate to the Taj Mahal at the front of the farm, but a gate that is falling off its hinges, enhanced by a sign that

is battered and peeling, automatically makes a buyer suspicious and more alert looking for faults in the property," Kirkpatrick said.

Right exposure

Just as home sales tend to drop during the winter, horse farms can be less marketable during the colder months in northern regions. However, that does not mean sellers should put off marketing their property because many buyers prefer looking at land during this time.

"My experience is that farms don't really experience the same buying cycles that traditional residential markets have," Flory said. "Here in the Mid-Atlantic area, the best time to show a farm is in late spring through early summer when things are getting green and in the fall when we have the beautiful fall colors. From a buyer's perspective, winter is the best time to look at a farm. There aren't a lot of leaves and green grass to hide the topography, a poorly drained area, or the neighboring properties. My saying is: In the winter the land is very honest."

Kirkpatrick said farms tend to sell better in the spring in part because of people's sense of rejuvenation.

An empty farm can sell just as well as one with horses because buyers can see the property better, just as if they were looking at a vacant house without furniture that may hide flaws. However, Kirkpatrick believes a property will sell far better with horses present.

"Remember, the people who buy

Potential buyers are looking for reasons for a price reduction so be sure they get a good first impression of a property that has been well maintained by keeping pastures mowed, fences in good repair, and the barn orderly



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horse farms are generally horse people, and they like to have horses around," he said. "Also, even a very pretty, well-tended farm lacks life if it doesn't have horses on it."

Because a horse farm is for horse people, it is important to market the property as such. While added fragrances might make a home more appealing, experts advise to avoid using disinfectants or other aromas to enhance a barn.

"Making sure that the barn is clean with fresh bedding is a must," Flory said. "Horse people like horse smells, so don't try to mask them. For the tack room, clean tack will make it smell like saddle soap, a universally good smell to horse people."

Allow your realtor alone to show the property to interested parties.

"Nothing makes buyers more uneasy than having the owners follow them around blathering on about how wonderful this is and that is," Kirkpatrick said. "The owners can convey what they think is important to their realtor and the realtor

can decide what is important. There is an essential value in letting potential buyers walk around alone, and I always try to let them have a little time to talk or think when we're on a property."

Flory said specialty properties need concentrated exposure beyond the local advertising and real estate system and recommends listing with a company that has a proven record in marketing farm properties. Most equine-related realtors have strong backgrounds with horses and most likely are horse farm owners themselves.

"People need to see themselves living at the farm," she said. "Having a good listing agent who understands your farm and can show it for you is very important." ✦



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