

Staging a sale

A North St. Paul couple apply their real estate experience and design flair to giving homes the right look to attract buyers.

BY GITA SITARAMIAH
Pioneer Press

Sharon Mitchell was a frustrated real estate agent when she discovered home staging a few years ago. "The very first time I heard about staging I was excited about it," she said.

Turns out, her timing was perfect.

Mitchell launched Simply Staged in June 2004 with her husband, Dan, just as the popularity of hiring stagers to prepare homes for sale was rising.

Since the supply of houses for sale has hit a record high in the Twin Cities this year, sellers are eager to find ways to make their homes stand out to buyers. That's been good for Simply Staged's bottom line.

Simple Staged has been hired to work on more homes through June than in all of 2005, with 68 last year and 84 so far in 2006. Revenue through June has nearly hit last year's 12-month total of \$73,000.

A key part of their sales pitch: They say the average days on market of homes they've staged is 35 days, compared with the Twin Cities average of more than 60.

The average cost of a staging consultation is \$175. That includes a few hours of advice from the Mitchells about how to get a home in shape for sale with the seller's own belongings. Furnishing and staging homes costs on average \$1,000 for a first month and \$575 for each month afterward.

Before launching the business, Sharon was a real estate agent who had an interior design degree from the University of Minnesota. Both she and her husband, also an agent, were tired of trying to persuade what she calls "stubborn sell-



Sharon, right, and Dan Mitchell own Simply Staged, a North St. Paul, Minn., business that gives cosmetic enhancements to houses to help them sell. The job is frequently a workout, as when they carried a couch into a St. Paul home June 30. "This is our weight-lifting," Sharon Mitchell said.

JOE ODEN, PIONEER PRESS

ers" not to overprice their homes.

"When you're a stager you're a solution," she said. "When you're a Realtor you're just a salesman."

The work isn't as simple as giving advice. Sharon and Dan huffed, puffed and sweated as they hauled in a sofa, chair and mahogany table to a vacant home on a recent 90-degree afternoon. "This is our weight-lifting," she said.

When they started out, they realized that their income wouldn't be steady so they took out a \$75,000 home equity line of credit and have used \$35,000 so far. They launched their Internet site immediately by swapping staging services for the help of a Web site designer.

Business was slow for the first six months. They spent a lot of time meeting with Realtors. During that time, they began receiving calls about vacant homes in need of furniture. "That was a huge turning point for us," Dan said.

They had started out intending to simply rearrange a homeowner's things. The calls made them realize they needed an inventory of furniture to be successful.

The first furniture set they used was a neutral sofa and chair from their own North St. Paul living room, which then sat

empty for six months. They did a lot of bargain shopping and now own 17 living room sets, 19 dining room sets and 15 bedroom sets as well as a truck and enclosed trailer for hauling all that furniture around. Furniture and accessory rental now accounts for 54 percent of their business.

Another lesson was that they needed signed contracts upfront. An agent hired them to stage a home on Lake Minnetonka and refused to pay until the Mitchells threatened to take him to court. "It was one of those growing pains where you learn that not everybody in business is nice," Dan said.

They're also learning to deal with a cyclical business. Often, they're working 60 hours a week. But in midsummer and during the winter holidays, the work load drops to 30 per week.

Sometimes, they have more jobs than furniture and they have to stretch their budget to buy more. Other times, the homes they've staged sell all at once and they struggle to fit all that furniture into their 500 feet of storage space, sometimes resorting to cramming some into the garage at home.

The perks of being self-employed, such as working from home and not having to have day care for their two children because of their flexible sched-

ules, have far outweighed the negatives, they say. They enjoy counseling home sellers and say they have an advantage because they've shown many homes to buyers and learned from their impressions.

The top three complaints the Mitchells have about homes is that the rooms are too dark, the pictures are hung too high and the clutter needs to be tossed or stored. "It's hard to see your house objectively," she said.

One of their clients is Bill Plummer, who was about to sell the St. Paul home he had been renting out and wanted someone to tell him what to do about the pickle-colored walls and outdated kitchen.

Since then, he's painted the interiors in a subtle gray, installed granite tiles on the kitchen countertops and refinished the wood floors. "The market's tighter now and people want everything perfect," he said.

Simply Staged was the key to the sale of a St. Paul town home on Summit Avenue four months ago, said Realtor Sarah Kinney.

The town home had been for sale a year, vacant six months and had been through a price drop when the Mitchells staged it. The \$500,000 unit sold less than a week later, Kinney said. "It was the staging because it's very difficult to envision what a

FOLLOW-UP

Where are they now?

Name: AllBreed Obedience & Behavioral School for Dogs

Location: Woodbury; 651-704-9785.

Web site: www.allbreedobedience.com

Founded: 1996

Founder: Debra Schneider

2005 revenue: \$150,000

Profiled: February 2005

Challenge then: Staying abreast of changes in the dog world, including training tools and new philosophies.

Today: AllBreed Obedience & Behavioral School for Dogs is undergoing a major expansion, with a new branch opening in Stillwater on July 18.

Founder Debra Schneider said she's partnering in leasing a 10,000-square-foot building in Stillwater with the dog day care she shares space with in Woodbury.

The new space is 2½ times bigger than the one in Woodbury. Schneider will



PIONEER PRESS FILE PHOTO BY SCOTT TAKUSHI

Debra Schneider, works with Phantom, a boxer-Labrador mix, in February 2005.

be hiring more employees and said some current trainers want to take on more classes. Her husband is a dog trainer and he's now going to take on more responsibility, overseeing the Woodbury operation while she supervises the new location. "I can't be in two places at once," she said.

Schneider said she'll run some new classes at the Stillwater location, such as rally, a dog sport combining obedience and agility as well as freestyle, a sport where dog owners do a dance with canines. She wants to keep classes small and limit them to two at a time. "I don't want to lose the formula that made us successful in the first place," she said.

Her future challenge: "Making the rent!" In addition to the \$2,400 she pays for her share of the Woodbury lease, she'll pay \$3,200 a month in Stillwater. But she's prepared. She's already set up new classes to start when the Stillwater center opens to start giving her more income for the additional overhead.

— Gita Sitaramiah

TALK BACK

Know any successful entrepreneurs? Mail your suggestions to Casey Selix, Sunday Business Team Leader, 345 Cedar St., St. Paul, MN 55101, or e-mail sundaybusiness@pioneerpress.com.

(vacant) house would look like with furniture in it, especially nice furniture," Kinney said.

Although Sharon Mitchell thinks her education and previous career in interior design give her an advantage, she points out that stagers have a unique mission.

"Interior designers have to work with the specific taste of the owner," she said. "Staging is about simplicity so the focus is on the house."

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WHERE DID THEY GO?

The Business People and Mover columns can be found on Page 2D