

10 Cheap Ways to Boost Your Home's Sales Price by Spring

By [LUKE MULLINS](#), USNews.com

As the temperature drops and the snow piles up, it's easy to forget that spring is quickly approaching. And after more than three years of a painful housing swoon, real estate experts predict that lower prices, attractive mortgage rates, and a tax perk from Uncle Sam will create the most vibrant spring home selling season in some time. "This is going to be probably the most pleasant experience for a home seller in the last four or five years," says Mike Larson of Weiss Research. "If you have been beating your head against a wall, this is going to feel a lot better." But even if the market does perk up, buyers are likely to retain the upper hand throughout 2010. So to help property owners get the best selling price they can—without burying themselves in expenses—*U.S. News* has created a list of 10 cheap ways to boost a home's sales price by spring:

1. Retouch the front shell: If your property's exterior isn't appealing, no one will want to see your newly remodeled kitchen. So property sellers must first ensure that their home projects a cozy, inviting feeling. "The shell—the outside front—is probably the most important area for improvement, the area where you can make the biggest improvement with the smallest amount of cash," says Pat Lashinsky, the president and CEO of ZipRealty. Touching up the paint on the front-entry portion of the house can be an inexpensive but effective way to make the entire property more inviting, Lashinsky says. "Really focus on that outside, external shell," he says. "You would be amazed by the amount of people that drive by a house and say, 'Ah, that's not for me.' And they can tell just by the way the upkeep and the outside looks."

2. Trim the greenery: Ensuring that the lawn, hedges, and flowers are well maintained helps make your home more alluring to prospective buyers as well. Property owners can hire professional landscapers or break out the lawn mower and get busy themselves. "Many people have landscaping that is overgrown and too heavy, and it is concealing a lot of the house," says Paul Zuch, the president of Capital Improvements. "Trim the trees, trim the hedges ... [and] add a little color to the flower beds."

3. Paint the interior: Putting a fresh coat of paint on the home's interior is a cost-effective way for sellers to make their home more appealing to buyers, says Ron Phipps, a broker with Phipps Realty in Warwick, R.I. But when choosing the color, homeowners should be conservative. "The caution is that your favorite color may not be the favorite color of the buyer." Instead, homeowners are best off using neutral colors, Phipps says. "Go with something that is a very light yellow or a light cream with a contrasting white, so it just looks very fresh and crisp . . . Having the paint in good condition is almost more important than the color."

4. Don't forget the floors: Improving the condition of a home's flooring is also a smart move for sellers—and you don't need to refinish wood floors or install new carpets to make them more attractive. "If it's a hardwood [floor], has the floor been buffed?" says David Lupberger, a home improvement expert with ServiceMagic.com. "If you have carpets, have the carpets been cleaned?"

5. Make all major repairs: Because tighter lending standards demand higher down payments, today's home buyers won't have much cash left over for improvements once they've made their purchase. So it's imperative for sellers to make all major home repairs—fixing the leaky roof, rebuilding the front stoop—before they put the property on the market. "Repairs can't be ignored, because nobody has any extra money," Phipps says. To determine what needs to be done, property owners can scrutinize their homes themselves or bring in a home inspector to examine the property professionally. "The home inspection piece I think is something that is a huge value, particularly if there is something that is a question," Phipps says.

6. Put appliances under warranty: To give buyers more confidence in a home's appliances, Phipps recommends that sellers put them under warranty. Sellers can buy home warranties—which cover repair and replacement costs for many home appliances—from several different firms. "If I have got a 40- or 50-year-old house, it is going to be harder for me to persuade a first-time home buyer with a limited amount of cash to buy it because they will say, 'Well, what happens if something breaks down?'" Phipps says. "If I have a home warranty ... that solves that problem."

7. Make energy-efficient home improvements: Increasing your home's energy efficiency is another good way to make your property more attractive to buyers. Many such improvements—such as new windows or better insulation—come with federal tax benefits. In addition, a growing awareness of human impact on the environment means homes that have these upgrades will stand out from other listings. "If you have some cruddy old windows that are leaky and just not energy efficient, you can put in new replacement windows and take advantage of the tax credit," Zuch says. "It's not green washing. Those are really practical things that make your house more sellable." Many contractors will conduct a so-called energy audit free of charge to determine where efficiencies can be created, Zuch says. "If your house is more energy efficient—you use less energy, it's better insulated—it is going to be more desirable for a potential buyer," he says.

8. New light fixtures: Replacing old or broken light fixtures with new ones can also be a low-cost way to add value, Lupberger says. Installing a nice new light fixture in the foyer near the home's entrance can be a particular benefit, he said, because it can make a strong first impression on would-be buyers. Creating an inviting feeling in the interior entryway, in turn, helps get home shoppers more interested in checking out the rest of the property. "I am not going to redo the house," Lupberger says. "But I can update those features so that somebody can walk in and say, 'You know what? [the homeowners] took care of this.'"

9. New stove in the kitchen: While some homeowners might think the only way to jazz up a dated kitchen is a full-on remodeling job, Lashinsky recommends a much less costly alternative: buying a new stove. "If there is an updated stove in the kitchen, it is amazing how that draws people in, and people say, 'Wow, this kitchen is going to be great,'" Lashinsky says. While upscale homeowners may have to shell out for top-of-the-line appliances to maintain their kitchen's décor, others can budget well under \$1,000 for the upgrade. "You can get a really nice stove for \$700 or \$800," Lashinsky says. "You can basically have the look of a new kitchen that is going to be really enticing to someone—and what you are really trying to do is differentiate your house from somebody else's."

Property owners in neighborhoods where most homes have granite countertops can consider making this upgrade as well. But Lupberger says the project makes sense only for homeowners with extremely dated kitchens that are going to serve as a serious impediment

to finding a buyer. A real estate agent with experience in the local market can help you determine whether or not the upgrade is essential, he says.

10. Freshen up the bathrooms: Getting rid of mildew stains on the bathroom caulking can boost a home's appeal as well. Such stains "scream, 'These people haven't taken care of this house. It's going to be a money pit,' " Zuch says. Use a razor blade to remove the old caulk, and replace it with new, mildew-resistant caulk, Zuch says. And rather than remodeling the entire space, homeowners can reinvigorate a worn-down bathroom by replacing cracked sinks, Lupberger says.