

New Year's Resolution: Commit to Home Improvement

If you had to sell your home tomorrow, would you be ready?

Years before becoming a home stager, I purchase my first home, and as I ponder the inevitable and truly necessary upgrades and changes, I am keenly aware of how important it is to keep resale in mind. Maybe I'm just an optimist, hoping that Prince Charming or Publisher's Clearing House will someday come knocking on my door, or maybe I just realize that you can never tell when life will change. Whatever the reasons, I know I wouldn't want to be forced to put my life on hold just because of a few neglected home improvements, repairs, or upgrades. "Be prepared" is not only the Boy Scout motto, but mine as well.

After moving into my small, one-bedroom condo, I make a list of all the potential improvements. Besides the avocado green kitchen appliances and 1970's wallpaper, there are all the builder-grade light fixtures, moldings, and finishes. My list includes upgrades to the doors, moldings, flooring, reconfiguration of closets, a bathroom upgrade, and the biggest item of all, a complete kitchen remodel.

Chunking it out by year makes it achievable. Each year, first picking a project, then estimating costs and setting the time line, along with the inevitable savings plan, keeps the momentum going. Over the course of seven years, learning and earning as I go, I work my way from the smallest and least expensive projects to that final and most ambitious project, the kitchen remodel.

So why not make this year, and every year, the year you resolve to tackle just one of your own home-improvement projects? This is an easy resolution that takes little willpower or sacrifice. It's not about restrictions, it's about personal enjoyment and return on investment.

The key is making changes that you will enjoy while simultaneously adding value to your biggest investment, your home. My first rule of thumb? Keep in mind the next potential owner. Will it most likely be a family, senior, or young professional? Will the new owner be on a fixed income, or is this his/her starter home? For me, knowing that I am the third owner of my home, tells me that I will probably not be the last. So I simply take what others have started and build on it for the next owner.

Even so, I never make a change that I don't absolutely love and—here's the tricky part—know that I will love for years to come. My second rule of thumb is to go for classic design and neutrals with your biggest and/or most labor-intensive investments. Have fun with color and style, with the finishing touches like paint, light fixtures, hardware, and accessories. I choose white cabinets, white tile, and white appliances. Sounds boring, right? All that white. Well, the beauty of white is that it goes with any color palette you choose. You may need to repaint before the sale, to depersonalize those choices, but you will probably need to do that anyway.



Repairs and maintenance are your top priority. Keep up with minor repairs as they occur, and plan ahead for major maintenance and upgrades. Everyone knows that kitchens and baths sell houses, so pay special attention to keeping these spaces current. As stated earlier, paint, light fixtures, hardware, and window treatments are easy and inexpensive upgrades that can change the look and feel of a room for little investment. Do you remember remarking on things during the buying process that you said you would fix after the purchase? Well, now is the time to fit those items into your plan. Remember, if you didn't like these things when you initially saw the home, it's likely the next buyer won't like them either.

Does this all sound like too much work? Well, imagine what a potential home buyer will say if you don't make these changes. Not only are you asking a new buyer to pay big bucks for your home, you're asking him/her to make the improvements that you refused to tackle as well. Keep in mind—at a minimum—that buyers desire a move-in-ready home. No buyer wants to pay top dollar for a project.

Having trouble choosing which projects to attack? Seek the advice of the real estate agent who sold you the home or a professional *home stager*. Use this time to brainstorm all your goals—both short and long term—while breaking them down by priority and value added.

As a home stager, one of the saddest statements I hear from my home sellers is, "I wish I had made these changes before I decided to sell so that I could enjoy them." Start this year with no regrets, and end it happier than you were when it began.



Susan Atwell, home staging expert and President of *AtWell Staged Home*, is known for her ability to showcase the beauty and character of any for sale home so that it sells high and sells fast.

Let Susan show you how quick, economical, and fun it can be to stage your home beautifully using what you already have.

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