

Realty TV

Shows from 'Sell This House' to 'House Hunters' are putting a new face on how property is bought and sold

BY JULIETTE FAIRLEY

Joe and Daria Zawadzki were a young couple with a bright future, and a big problem. They had good careers and plans for a family. But they also had an apartment that they just couldn't sell.

For six months, potential buyers traipsed through the newlyweds' one-bedroom apartment on the Upper West Side. There were lots of lookers, but no takers.

Enter the makeover experts from A&E's "Sell This House," one of a handful of shows that are turning real-life real estate dramas into weekly television entertainment.

As it turns out, people buying and selling a home can experience the same range of emotions as contestants on other reality shows like "The Apprentice," from the promise of sudden riches to public embarrassment.

The Zawadzki got a little bit of both. Cameras from "Sell This House" were hidden around the couple's apartment to record the observations of potential buyers who attended an open house. Chastened by their comments — the place was too messy, too cluttered — the Zawadzki were put to work remaking the place. The changes, as it turned out, were mainly quick and inexpensive cosmetic improvements.

Within the month, the couple got their original asking price, around \$650,000.

"Sell This House" is part of a hot new genre of real estate-themed reality shows. HGTV produces a real estate reality show called "House Hunters," which helps buyers find a place, and the Discovery Channel produces "Double Agents," which features the stories of real-life house hunters. There are also a slew of home-renovation reality shows including "Building Char-



PHOTO BY JORI KLEIN

Daria and Joe Zawadzki, in their loft apartment, sold their home on A&E's "Sell This House."

acter," "While You Were Out," "House Rules," "Trading Spaces" and "Curb Appeal."

Real problems, big ratings

"Sell This House," now in its second season of production, is A&E's highest-rated lifestyle show. It airs Sundays at 5:30 p.m.

"Our show features owners having real problems selling their homes that we help them with," said Rob Sharenow, the program's Manhattan-based executive producer. "The thrill for the show viewer is that it's voyeuristic. Who doesn't love seeing what other people have? The show gives viewers license to be nosy."

The Zawadzki heard about the show through their broker, and submitted a tape to the producers. Other than the hidden camera scenes — "Had we known some of the content, we wouldn't have told my in-laws or my husband's business associates to watch when it aired" — Daria said the help was essential to the sale.

"It's important to get rid of all of your family photos during an open house because potential buyers get stressed by family photos. We were told by the show producers to empty out our bookshelves and put half of our possessions in storage," said Daria, a 29-year-old social worker whose husband, also 29, is an Internet entrepreneur.

Potential buyers need to be able to picture themselves living in the space. "Personal photos, piles of mail, general clutter isn't conducive to imagining the space as your own," she said. "A fresh coat of paint is another inexpensive way to make the place look clean and new."

Keep an open mind

But most important, the expe-



NEWSDAY PHOTO / J. CONRAD WILLIAMS JR.

Executive producer Rob Sharenow of reality TV's hot property "Sell This House"

rience taught the Zawadzki not to judge a book by its cover, which led them to a deal on the apartment they bought last summer, a three-bedroom flat in Chelsea.

"Four college students had been renting it, so it was messy during the open house. We were able to look past that," Daria said. "Some people need the place to be perfect in order to buy, but we realized from our own experience that we could miss out on a great apartment if we were looking for perfection in how well the seller keeps the house clean. As a result, we ended up with a big sunny three-bedroom with lots of space. After it was cleaned up, we saw what a gem it was."

While A&E's main concern is the selling of homes, HGTV's "House Hunters" focuses on buying them.

Yoav and Lisa Irom were selected for the show after videotaping themselves talking and puttering around their old apartment. They sent the tape to the show's producer on the recommendation of their broker, Aileen Grossman, and were contacted a few days later.

HGTV cameras followed them for four days, capturing on tape their experience looking at three apartments before settling on their two-bedroom apartment in Gramercy Park area. They were paid \$500 for four 10-hour shooting days.

They learned from the show's experts the importance of timing when buying an apartment in Manhattan.

"The place we bought had been on the market three months already and so we were in a better position to bid for it because the owner was more open. We got shut out of other apartments because the timing wasn't right," said Yoav Irom, an insurance broker. His wife represents designers.

"House Hunters" is going into its fifth year and has already has 200 episodes in the can. The one featuring the Iroms is scheduled for June 10 at 8 p.m. on HGTV.

The show's popularity shows no sign of diminishing, said Betsy Allman, supervising producer of its creator, Los Angeles-based Pietown Productions. "Television viewers like to look in other people's homes, and it has a makeover aspect to it."

"You see how the house is when they buy, and we come back three months later to see what they've done with it. It's character-driven and viewers get to know the players quickly," she said.

Although it pays little and in some cases nothing at all, appearing on a real-estate reality show has its perks. The Zawadzki are celebrities in their social circle. "It's been playing over and over for about seven months. We get calls from friends every couple of weeks saying they saw us on TV," said Daria.

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SPICK-AND-SPAN FOR SALE

Roger Hazard, the on-air designer for A&E's "Sell This House," offered some tips on preparing your home for sale. "Ninety percent of homes are bought due to emotional reactions, not logical reasons," he said. That means personal belongings that make your house a home, such as photos, shoes and mail, will be viewed as clutter to potential buyers. The goal should be to create an environment that potential buyers can envision themselves living in.

1. If walls are beyond cleaning, paint them. A few dollars and some elbow grease can go a long way toward freshening up a tired-looking interior.

2. Pay special attention to animal odors. You might not smell the litter box, but someone

new to your home will. Clean out the box and replace litter daily.

3. Clean everything, then clean everything again. Pay special attention to the kitchen and bathrooms.

4. Make all repairs, even if they seem insignificant, to items such as cracked tiles, leaky faucets, clogged drains, toilets that don't flush completely, missing door-knobs, etc.

5. Highlight any architectural details, such as a fireplace or a great window with a view, by adding special lighting or paint outlining. For example, paint a room that has a fireplace in a neutral color, then use a stronger color on the wall above the fireplace mantel to give it more power. — JULIETTE FAIRLEY



PHOTO BY NANCY OPITZ

Broker Aileen Grossman encouraged her clients to appear on "House Hunters."