

The Keys to Killer Curb Appeal

A Definitive Guide for Increasing Listing Value, Impressing Clients, Attracting More Prospects and Selling More Homes.



What Is “Curb Appeal” and Why Does It Matter?

Most prospective buyers decide whether or not to enter a home based on the initial view they see when they drive or walk up to the house, based on its curb appeal. Curb appeal is what makes a house pleasing to the eye; it's what draws them in, makes them like the house before they've even entered it. Curb appeal makes the house easier to sell. The house with curb appeal shows a sense of pride of ownership in the home, of order and tidiness, of warmth and welcome. You have to have great curb appeal *outside* so you can draw buyers *inside*. The majority of people make a decision within five seconds of first seeing a house whether they like it or not – and first impressions tend to last.

Exterior staging is hugely helpful in ensuring your house's curb appeal is everything it can be. The 2008 Realtor Magazine's annual report on Remodeling Costs vs. Value highlights curb appeal's weight in selling and buying a house. One of the findings was that exterior remodeling projects (meaning, maintenance that enhances the value of your property), rather than additions like sunrooms or home offices, return the most money, as a percentage of cost. Curb appeal is necessary, especially in a market like today's, in order to distinguish your house from the competition.

According to National Association of Realtors President Charles McMillan, “As

a trusted source for real estate information, Realtors understand what attracts and motivates their buyer clients, which is why the results of this year's report underscore the importance of curb appeal in the buyer's eye." Realtor Magazine, in conjunction with Hanley Wood LLC, has been producing the detailed report for 11 consecutive years.

A Simple Exercise to Check Your Curb Appeal

In order to sell a property, you've got to get people to see the property. You have to get buyers inside, first off. Therefore it's in the seller's best interest to stage the entire house, both exterior and interior. Prospective buyers want to be able to picture themselves as the owners of the house they're viewing. A neutral, pleasing canvas helps them do that. Many people are unable to visualize changes, and often times, they won't look twice at a house if their first look didn't entice them. Don't allow this situation to happen.

But buyers who *can* visualize changes expect *you* to compensate them for the changes *they'll* have to make, compensate them by lowering the price. Don't allow that situation to happen, either. Ensure that the house has all-important curb appeal.

You can do that by testing it, using a straightforward method. Decide right now to think of the home you're planning to sell as a *house* – a commodity you intend

to get the highest price possible for. Don't think of it a *home*. Now, figure out whether the house has curb appeal, using this simple test.

Walk across the street, or far enough down the driveway, in order to view the house as a prospective buyer might.

- What's your first impression? Is the house clean? Well groomed? Welcoming?
- What are the best exterior features of the house? Of the lot? How can you enhance them?
- What are the worst features? What can you do to minimize them, or improve them?

Now park your car in a spot a prospective buyer might, and approach the house from that angle. What can you do to enhance the first impression of the lot, and of the house's exterior?

Accurate or no, people tend to assume that the exterior is a hint of the things to come... a gorgeous exterior must mean a gorgeous interior; a slovenly, cluttered yard must mean a messy, unkempt house. For example, if the automatic garage doors don't work, buyers will wonder what else is broken. They'll go through the entire house looking for flaws -- even worse, expecting them. Therefore, you need to make sure there are none. Nothing should be broken, nothing cracked, damaged, peeling, cluttered, or run-down. These things will ultimately affect the asking price you get for your client, and can impact the amount of time the house

spends on the market.

Exterior Staging: How to Start

Here are five initial things to look at right off the bat, as you first begin to evaluate the house:

1. **Can you see the house clearly?** If trees and shrubs are overgrown and obstructing the view, it'll be tough to sell the house. You want the character of the house to be evident, and for that to be seen, the house has to be seen.
2. **How's the paint?** Is it a neutral color, and in keeping with the look and feel of the neighborhood houses? Is it peeling, or does it need retouching? Does the trim match the front door and window frames?
3. **How is the driveway?** Are there oil stains or cracks on the surface, or garbage cans out in front? Are there mold or mildew stains along the surface of the driveway, or on the exterior of the house or roof?
4. **Is the exterior entryway defined?** Is there a clearly demarcated path leading to the front door, and is the entryway itself welcoming? Symmetrical? Well lit, bright?
5. **How is the landscaping?** Is the lawn well watered and well groomed? Are there flowers providing bursts of color and warmth flanking the front door, near the garage? Is there a garden anywhere?

Now you have a place to start. Usually it's simpler to begin by fixing anything

that's damaged or malfunctioning, removing anything that's broken, and by cleaning any soiled or cluttered areas first – see to the maintenance that enhances the value of the house. (After that, you can move on to the adding and replacing phase, in which you can improve and enhance areas).

Below is a starter list of areas to concentrate on cleaning, de-cluttering, and fixing.

- Bleach any stains, and kill any mold or mildew on the driveway or on the outside of the house.
- Pressure-wash everything -- the house exterior, any dirty siding, the windows, the driveway, the front door and entryway.
- Edge the sidewalks, and remove any vegetation that might be growing between the concrete and bricks.
- Mow the lawn, and remove any weeds. Replace any dead or yellow sections of the grass.
- Systematically remove all clutter from the front yard and entryway, the garage and driveway. It's sometimes difficult to see junk that has been there for so long, it feels like it's supposed to be there now. Ask a friend to come give the house a once over, then to give you a list of suggestions.
- Trim the shrubs, and trim any tree branches that are too near the house or roof, then rake and remove any fallen dead leaves.

- Make sure the garage doors function properly, and that the garage is not serving as a storage locker. A clean, tidy garage looks instantly bigger, and an organized outer space implies an organized inner space.

Now you're ready to look at the house in specific regions, looking for places where you can boost and enhance. Go one by one, improving as you go!

Your 7-Region Checklist of Exterior Details to Address

Enhancing your house's curb appeal is a lot less daunting if you divide the improvements up by section, or region. This way, you can simply work your way down the list.

1. **Entryway and Front Door**
2. **Driveway**
3. **Garage Doors**
4. **Front lawn & Landscaping**
5. **Siding, Decks, & Patios/Porches**
6. **Gutters, Downspouts, & Roof**
7. **Windows**

Region 1: The Entryway & Front Door

This is a very important area of the house. It's the focal point of the property.

You want to make sure that it's dramatic, but more importantly, that it's

welcoming. Also, you want it to be representative of the entire house.

Prospective buyers often make lasting first impressions of the whole house

based on its entryway.

- **Path to the Front Door:** Make sure the entryway is clear and pleasant, clutter-free. No muddy tennis shoes, no half-deflated rubber balls. Create an edged path with groundcover on either side or planted flowers. Use brick, pebbles, flagstones, even woodchips for the path, whichever material best fits the architectural style of the house.
- **Create symmetry:** Symmetry is inherently pleasing to the eye, and is incredibly easy to do. Flank either side of the front door with matching small potted lemon trees, or potted flowers in matching urns. Also, symmetrical compositions of lighting fixtures can help add to the balanced feel.
- **Replace old hardware:** House numbers, door fixtures & handles, the mailbox, lighting fixtures should all be new and polished. When these small things are out of date, buyers can assume the rest of the house is, as well.
- **Repaint the porch trim and, if applicable, the front door.** If the door is stained, go over any worn or faded areas with a touch of the stain.

- **Install outdoor lighting.** Landscaping lighting adds functionality, but also, tons of curb appeal. Consider adding low-voltage accent lights to trees, or lining the front walkway. Or add a decorative street lamp, or wall sconces flanking the front door.
- **Freshen any planter beds.** Prune, shape, and weed the planter beds, and replace the flowers and groundcover with new and vibrant hues.
- **Consider adding shutters, or tile, or applying a stone veneer.** These decorative options are ways to “dress up” your entryway. Shutters can control lighting and ventilation, as well add welcoming warmth to the entryway. Or you could tile the doorstep in a sort of permanent welcoming mat, using bits of mosaic tile pieces. Or consider applying a stone veneer to a concrete foundation or pillar – stone carries a classic air of permanence.

Region 2: The Driveway

You use the driveway every single day, and it’s the portion of your house that the public sees everyday. It’s the face of the entire house. It needs to look its best.

When you’re going through the sales process, it also needs to be able to serve all the varied cars of the different prospective buyers who may stop by, without getting stuck in a pothole or being blinded by overgrown bushes blocking the driveway’s view.

- **Remove any weeds or unwanted vegetation between the smaller**

cracks in the driveway, or along the edges.

- **If there are any larger cracks, or potholes or bumps, they must be fixed.** Period.
- **Power-wash the driveway to remove surface stains.** Then remove any oil stains, grease marks, and even out any discolorations. Bleach works wonders. If the spots are not removed with bleach, consider applying a concrete stain in a slightly darker shade, to lessen the contrast between the oil stain(s) and driveway.
- **Remove any visible garbage cans, or any gardening or sports equipment.** Many families leave these items out in front of the house, often right on the driveway, and they simply stop seeing them as clutter. But they *are* clutter.

Region 3: The Garage & Garage Doors

This is one of the first things a prospective buyer will see, naturally, because of its sheer size and its usual prominence in the spatial orientation of the property. But it's definitely one of the first things he or she will *notice*, if the garage doors are old, dented, or scuffed. You'd like prospective buyers to *not notice* your garage and garage doors; they should blend in with the surroundings.

Nor should the garage be viewed as storage. If that's how the space is currently being used, consider renting a storage space for a month, so that your garage will look tidier and more spacious.

- **Make sure the garage's exterior, most especially the garage doors, have been power-washed and recently (if not freshly) painted.** The surface area of the garage doors is so big that by simply making certain they're freshly cleaned, painted, or stained makes them seem as if they're new.
 - **If the garage is front facing, consider softening its appearance by adding vines or an arbor overhead.**
 - **Make sure the doors function properly.** Buyers will test them to see if they work, and if they don't, they will wonder what else doesn't work.
 - **Replace banged or dented metal doors.** It's usually less expensive to just replace metal doors rather than try to repair them.
 - **Replace the hardware on the garage doors,** especially if any of the hardware is damaged or has been painted over. You'll need new hardware particularly if the home's address is on the garage doors.
- Prospective buyers need to be able to find the right house!

Region 4: The Front Lawn & Landscaping

Some of these items might be obvious, but the lawn and landscaping set the tone for the whole house, and they're an important component of the total curb appeal.

- **Mow and weed the lawn.** Rake and remove dead leaves. Replace any dead or yellowed sections. Consider edging the lawn for a fresh, updated look.
- **Trim the bushes, remove any dead or dying ones.**
- **Prune the trees, and make sure no overgrown branches.**
- **Clear away excessive lawn ornaments or decorative pieces.** One person's gnome collection is another's clutter.
- **Make certain that any paths or landscaping stones are aligned, filled in, tidy, and firmly secured.**
- **Plant or refresh any landscape beds, updating the flowers for the appropriate season and filling in the groundcover.** If there are no landscape beds, consider adding one, for the burst of color and scent they provide to the curb appeal.

Region 5: Siding, Decks, & Paint

Siding is both protective against the elements and decorative, so it's important that siding be in good shape. Decks are bonus exterior space, and staging any deck so that it seems like an additional room can certainly boost your house's curb appeal. The entire exterior should be power-washed. When that's done, the true state of the exterior paint will be evident. If it still looks dingy, it should be repainted. You should also repaint if the original color is too vivid, bright, or outdated. Neutral colors appeal to a wider variety of buyers, firstly, but also, neutral shades make it easier for buyers to imagine living in the space.

- **Power-wash the whole exterior, including the siding and the deck.**
- **Re-stain and seal the deck after power-washing.** Make sure that the area underneath the deck is clean, and that the surface area is not cluttered with dead potted plants and old toys.
- **If you can't repaint the whole house, at least freshen it up by repainting the trim and touching up trouble spots.**
- **Repair, replace, or remove old deck furniture.** If you can't replace or repair the current furniture, definitely remove the old stuff. Shoddy, worn furniture damaged beyond repair is far worse than a clean, empty

deck. An open, empty open space looks larger than it is, which is not a bad thing.

Region 6: Gutters & Roof

The roof is key in inspiring buyer confidence. It provides protection from the elements as well as symbolically signifying protection (“the roof over your head”). A new roof, along with energy-efficient windows, are the most important part of a house’s weatherproofing and insulation systems, as well as freshening the overall exterior’s appearance. The roof must not only be intact, but should also support the aesthetic of the house.

- **Sweep the entire roof of all debris and leaves.**
- **Trim tree limbs and branches that are near or touching the roof or chimney.**
- **Replace any missing or damaged shingles, and patch any holes in the rooftop.**
- **Consider replacing the roof altogether if it’s very old or damaged, or if it’s in such disrepair that it leaks.**
- **If your house has an older gutter system, consider replacing it with a new vinyl snap system.**
- **Clean the gutters, getting rid of dead leaves, spider webs, and any**

old debris. Prospective buyers may not realize they saw the old dingy tennis balls and moldy leaves littering the house's gutters, but they will have. Certainly these things would contribute to an impression of an overall lack of tidiness and cleanliness.

Region 7: Windows

- **Power-wash all the windows.**
- **Replace any very old or damaged windows with new, double-paned windows in a contemporary style.** New windows are consistently found to return the majority of outlaid costs.
- **Freshen the window trim, and consider adding shutters to add charm and warmth.**
- **Add window boxes, planted with seasonal flowers.** They're an easy way to add color to your house. Choose copper or iron boxes for a more traditional look, wooden boxes for a cottage feel.

Nighttime Curb Appeal

Try that initial curb appeal test at dusk, as well, because it isn't unusual for prospective buyers to drive by houses at night. The easiest, most dramatic way to improve the house's nighttime curb appeal is with lighting.

- **Add accent lighting to trees and to the front path and entryway.**
- **String low-voltage lighting along the driveway, sidewalk, and near main landscaping elements.**
- **Add a decorative street lamp or an attractive lighting fixture on the front porch.**
- **If you can't use wiring, try solar powered lights.**

Variations by Architectural Style, Location, and Season

Be sure to be mindful of any specific variations. Different architectural styles call for different plans for enhancing curb appeal, as do different regional or seasonal climates. For example, you would never spend time and money on seeding a new lawn and planting a new garden in a house in Vermont if it were the winter season. All your work would be wasted, covered in ice and snow. In the summer season in Vermont, on the other hand, a freshly planted lawn and garden would boost the curb appeal tremendously, adding color and warmth.

Accordingly, if your house were a craftsmen-style house (a bungalow in the arts-and-crafts style), in a neighborhood populated almost exclusively with other craftsmen houses, be sure to stay in keeping with the architectural theme of the neighborhood. Use ecologically inspired color schemes and avoid ornate ironwork and railings, and dressy features like awnings and bright paint. You want to maintain the look and feel of the environment and neighborhood.

Painting your San Francisco Victorian 1 bland color, a dull taupe or oatmeal, would interrupt the flow of several of the city's neighborhoods. San Francisco's elaborate "painted ladies" are Victorians that use several decorative colors, as many as 5 or 6 different shades, to highlight the many elaborate architectural

flourishes.

If you had a ranch-style house, you'd take very different steps to enhance the curb appeal. A more subdued, low-key colorscape allows the ranch house to blend in with its natural surroundings, one of the key concepts in this style of architecture. You'd express drama and individuality through an artful, well-tended landscape, not via details inappropriate to the house's architecture.

Pay attention to the particulars of your house – the specific seasons and architectural style -- and be sure to adjust your curb appeal enhancement plans accordingly.