

# Staged Ryte

Ashley Falls, MA  
Dawn Trachtenberg, founder

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*As the real estate market gets ready for an uncertain spring season, savvy sellers and their real estate brokers are once again considering staging to present a property for maximum advantage and to outshine the competition. I spent a morning with Dawn Trachtenberg in her packed Ashley Falls, MA, warehouse learning about this creative business, which requires a large investment, the ability to respond quickly, an understanding of real estate buyers, and, most importantly, a creative flair. Main Street first discussed staging in 2015, seven and a half years ago, during a buyer's market, the same year that Dawn started her company.*

## **Wow, this is a very big warehouse. Do you own all this stuff?**

Before we leased this 5,000-square-foot facility a year and a half ago, we were actually renting 30 individual storage units. Everything we place in a home is from our inventory, which is constantly expanding. We have over 35 sofas. Twenty of them are in clients' homes. We own over 1,000 books, 120 dining chairs, and 500 pieces of artwork and are adding all the time. We can style any room in the house – children's bedrooms, bathrooms, offices – even butler's pantries.

## **Why did you start Staged Ryte?**

My most recent position had been managing operations for my husband's technology ventures so I did have entrepreneurial experience running a business. After years of this, by 2015, I decided that I wanted my own business that would be visually creative. After looking at houses to flip, I saw the need for staging higher-end properties that were for sale in our region.

Our family has had a second home here since 1991, and I was surprised that, unlike New York City where staging had become common, brokers and sellers hadn't understood the advantages of staging to sell quicker and

for more money.

From the very beginning we made the decision to own our inventory. Right now I'd estimate its value at over a million dollars. We specialize in higher-end, unoccupied houses where staging really makes a difference. However, we stage virtually any priced home as we truly believe that every house can benefit from staging.

## **How did you grow the business?**

The business began when a real estate broker I knew asked for my help with a house that should have sold and hadn't. After months on the market, we give that first house a staging facelift with all new furniture, and it sold in a week.

In the beginning we did mailings to homeowners, but that wasn't very productive. Next we bought ads in the *Berkshire Real Estate Guide*. At the same time, we were reaching out to brokers directly and in-person at broker open houses, explaining what we did face-to-face. Educating brokers about staging is critical because it is most often the broker that recommends staging to a client. Right now I have as many as nine houses staged at the same time. We have had as many as 15 staged at once. Around 85% of our business is direct referrals from brokers like Elyse Harney Real Estate and William Pitt Sotheby's.

## **How important is the Internet to your business?**

We are active on social media and keep our website as current as possible. We try to write blogs on a fairly regular basis on topics we think are of interest to potential house sellers. We constantly point prospective clients and brokers to our website for examples of our work and our services. It takes a lot of time and hard work to keep our site up-to-date. We consider

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A dramatic staging catches buyers' attention when they are searching for a property. Photo by Sonja Zinke courtesy of Staged Ryte.



Above: Dawn Trachtenberg (left) and her visiting sister Kari Kroll, who is painting some new canvases for staging homes. Right: A corner of Staged RYTE's warehouse, which stores everything necessary for a staging assignment from rugs to bedding to lighting fixtures. Photos by Christine Bates.

it a constant work-in-progress, but it is crucial to the support of our business.

**What don't you do?**

Normally we don't paint or suggest any renovations. We work with what's there. We don't like to have TV's in rooms – maybe a laptop or monitor in an office. We never set a table because who does that today? We use real mattresses in bedrooms not cardboard boxes. Bedding is appropriate to the house style, with down, insert duvets and percale sheets. We do end up doing a lot of ironing.

Custom window treatments are usually too expensive for staging and would take too much time, although we did do that for a very high-end sale at Canyon Ranch.

I like color but typically only use white towels and white shower curtains in bathrooms. We never include photographs of anyone, so the buyers can imagine themselves living in the house. We also avoid anything with religious connotations that could be in violation of fair housing laws and seldom use nudes – there are children around. Landscaping is also not a typical part of our service, although it can make a major difference, and we will consult on exterior landscaping or cleanup.

**What is your style?**

We don't have a specific style, and no two staging projects ever look alike. We typically appeal to the sophisticated metropolitan buyer, so nothing we do is purely traditional. Our inventory is varied with antiques, vintage,

knock-offs, and modern pieces, with modern art and pops of color. We choose every item for a reason. For example, books on bedside tables suggest that a certain type of person lives there. Our titles are carefully selected to present a story.

**How do you determine a price for a staging project?**

Setting a fee is not a science. We look at the space and determine how accessible the house is; how many sofas, beds, tables, books, art, rugs will be needed and how much it will cost to move them in and out. We also consider the value of the furniture and accessories going into a house, and whether we will be using antique pieces, high-end or low-end, which all depends on the property, its style, and its value. Once we figure everything out, there is a fixed cost for three or six months and thereafter a monthly rental fee. We remind people that the cost of staging is a tax-deductible expense when selling a home.

**What are staging challenges?**

You mean stumbling blocks? Most difficult is when the seller has their own ideas about staging. Staging is not interior decorating, which is done for homeowners and reflects their tastes, interests, and desires. Sometimes a seller will ask if they can come to the warehouse and pick out things. No, they cannot. Sometimes owners drop by while we're working to express opinions before we are done.

It can also be difficult to get clients to get rid of furniture and possessions before staging begins. I try to

explain that they'll have to get rid of everything anyway when they sell, so they might as well do it now. I advise people to take everything out and, if necessary, store stuff in the basement or the garage. It's so much easier to work with an empty space. Staging is about making a house look fantastic for photographs, so the buyer wants to visit the house. During the actual showing, appropriate staging makes the potential purchaser feel good and understand the house.

**How long does it take to complete a staging project?**

Once an agreement is reached on the contract, we start immediately. Actually, by the time we put together the proposal, we've already begun conceptually. We move quickly from contract to completion – usually a week to prepare and three to seven business days from the time we move furniture into a house until completion.

**Where do you get all this incredible stuff? Where do you shop?**

We source locally whenever we can and often purchase from places such as Hammertown. Auctions are great for vintage antiques and accent pieces. Trade accounts with manufacturers are important. Stores like HomeGoods are a must for all stagers for a variety of accessories. Then there's outlet shopping – a great place to buy high quality goods, like Restoration Hardware, at a discount.

Cuddledown is our go-to for pillows and down comforters, while much of our bedding supplies such as duvets and pillow shams come from Annie Selkie at Pine Cone Hill in Pittsfield, MA. We're always looking for unique pieces to make a shelf look great. Estate sales are excellent for acquiring books and to help fill our collections of accessories. The large, abstract paintings are done right here by my sister Kari Kroll when she visits from California. Kari is working on some large green canvases with her signature mix of sand at the moment.

**What is the best part of this business?**

Staging is an incredible creative outlet. Every project is different, and in a few days a house is transformed.

**What do you do for fun?**

We have a multi-generational family – it's a busy household where people gather. I enjoy cooking for everyone. On any given weekend, we could have from five to thirteen people sitting at the table. It is a great entertaining home where we have spent 25 years decorating and accessorizing. We have collected Scandinavian furniture, bird's nests, littala blown-glass birds, cookbooks, and various other items including lots of books! Note the bird in our logo. •

*To learn more about Staged RYTE you can call them at (917) 543-4590 or visit them online at [stagedryte.com](http://stagedryte.com).*

