

Can Color Cost You a Sale?

Take care when giving color advice to home sellers. Their color choices might be sending the wrong message to potential buyers.

By Melissa Dittmann Tracey

Many salespeople and stagers say neutral beige or off-white walls are what sells listings—but a touch of color may be just what you need to revive buyers' interest in a languishing listing. And although beige may offend no one, the right color on a home's walls or spotlighted in the accessories can trigger positive physiological and psychological responses among potential buyers.

"Color can change how you feel; it has an instantaneous effect," says design psychologist Constance Forrest, principal of Forrest Painter Design in Venice, Calif., who incorporates psychological techniques in the design of interior spaces. "If people walk into a space and sense a warm color, they immediately get a sense of a cozy home and will probably react positively."

White, on the other hand, "makes the room invisible," Forrest says. "White is a missed opportunity to create a feeling in the space. It doesn't help buyers imagine themselves in the home." (Not to mention, in Asian cultures, white is associated with death and can add a certain doom to listings.) Forrest says that pastel colors—which have a mostly white base—can have a similar, invisible effect.

RESPONSIVE HUES

Research on color responses has shown that warm colors, such as orange and red, can increase excitement and energy, whereas cooler hues, such as blue, can be calming and relaxing. Indeed, research shows color can influence a person's senses—even

body temperature—and make scenes more memorable. Knowing the responses colors evoke offers insight into where and when you should use color in a home to appeal to buyers. (See "What Color Choices Say," page 35).

GO GREEN, CAUTIOUSLY

"Many studies have been done on the impact of color in packaging on purchasing decisions," says Debbie Zimmer, spokeswoman for The Rohm and Haas Paint Quality Institute, a research and education group on decorating and color techniques. "You can take that concept of color and paint and apply it to a space to create a mood in a home."

So what color can lift a buyer's spirits? The most potent color is green, Forrest says. In light-spectrum research that focused on treatments for seasonal affective disorder, she notes, subjects exposed to green colors were in better moods than any of the other subjects tested.

But before you start splashing green on all your listings, take caution. Not all shades of green are a safe bet. For example, lime greens—or any yellows with green undertones—"look sickly to most buyers," says interior designer Jeanette Fisher, an author of 22 books on design psychology. Fisher has used color techniques to redo and sell homes for more than 20 years. Medium shades of green such as sage—and bedrooms painted in creamy tones of green—can be a good choice, she says. Fisher also favors buttery yellows inside and out, complemented with white trim accents. ■

4 STEPS TO SELECTING A COLOR

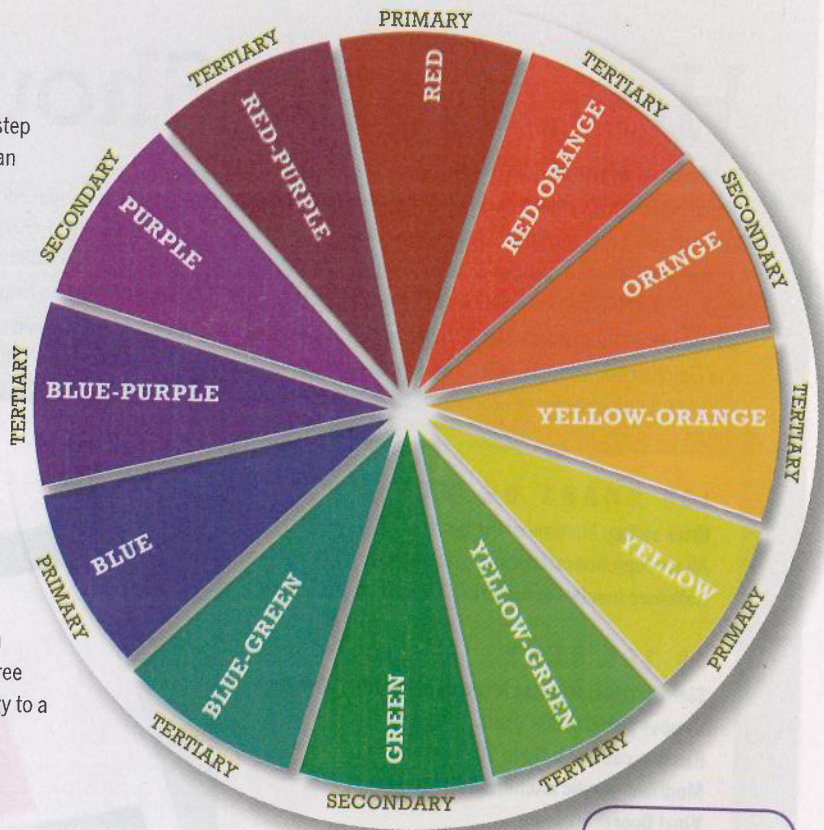
To select the right color for each room of your listing, design experts recommend applying the following strategies.

1. COORDINATE WITH THE ROOM'S USE. Certain colors lend themselves to certain activities. For example, studies show that kitchen and dining areas painted in "food colors"—such as celery green or red—increase appetite, whereas blue acts as an appetite suppressant. On the other hand, the tranquility evoked by blue makes it ideal for bedrooms, Fisher says.

2. PAINT FOR THE SEASON. Color directly impacts your senses, making a room's temperature feel cooler or warmer. For example, bring in warm colors—such as reds, oranges, and yellows—in the fall and winter months, and cooler colors—greens, blues, and purples—during the spring and summer. To save yourself some hassle, paint just one accent wall in a room, or bring out the season-appropriate colors using accessories such as throw pillows or a vase of flowers.

Use the Color Wheel to Mix & Match

Remember learning about the color wheel in grade school? This 12-step circular rainbow graphic shows the relationship among colors and can serve as a helpful guide in choosing what colors to mix and match in a home to get pleasing results. Here's a refresher. The color wheel is broken down into three main categories: **primary** (foundation colors used to create all other colors), **secondary** (created by combining two of the primary colors), and **tertiary** (formed by combining a primary and an adjacent secondary color). To mix and match colors easily, you can use the color wheel in one of two ways:



1. COMPLEMENTARY

Two colors that fall directly opposite one another on the color wheel (e.g. red and green, blue and orange, and yellow and purple). They create a maximum contrast and can be visually intense.

2. ANALOGOUS

Color schemes that consist of any three colors located side by side on the color wheel (e.g. yellow, yellow-orange, and orange). One of the three colors usually dominates. This color scheme can add depth and energy to a room.

Source: Color Matters, www.colormatters.com

What Color Choices Say

Although people's color preferences and psychological responses vary, research into color has revealed some commonalities.

RED

Increases energy and heart rate, creates excitement, and stimulates the appetite.

Best for:
Dining rooms.

ORANGE

Adds comfort, warmth, and cheerfulness, but too much can bring about feelings of cautiousness.

Best for:
Living rooms and family rooms.

YELLOW

Brightens mood and promotes welcoming and joyful feelings; increases positive thinking.

Best for:
Poorly lit foyers and dark hallways; buttery shades of yellow for living rooms.

GREEN

Most restful color. Reduces nervous system activity and muscular tension, calms and relaxes, offers reminders of nature.

Best for:
Living rooms (light greens); accent for kitchens and dining rooms (midtones).

BLUE

Promotes feelings of calmness, security, tranquility, and cleanliness; lowers blood pressure, cools a room, and serves as an appetite suppressant.

Best for:
Bedrooms or any restful, peaceful area in a home.

PURPLE

Boosts creativity, imagination, and meditation, but can have unpleasant subconscious responses. Many adults dislike purple on walls, particularly lighter shades of purple that are perceived as more youthful.

Best for:
Children's bedrooms and play areas.

Sources: The Rohm and Haas Paint Quality Institute, www.paintquality.com, and Architects Design Group Inc., www.adgusa.com

3. USE A DIRECTIONAL APPROACH. The effect of color on perceived temperature also means that the direction a room faces should influence color choices. North-facing rooms may not feel as warm and inviting to buyers because they don't get as much sunlight, an impression that can be lessened by painting them a warm color. "If you have a very warm room that is facing south, and you want to cool it or calm it down, use cooler hues of blue or green," Zimmer suggests.

4. HARMONIZE. You can also use color to provide a sense of order and balance in a home. Using variations of the same color throughout a house, rather than painting every room a different, contrasting color, provides a sense of flow from one room to another and doesn't distract buyers' eyes.

"Color is always a very personal choice," Zimmer adds. "So color choices can be subtle. A color doesn't have to be McDonald's yellow or Red Roof Inn red to be noticed. It can be a derivative or a subtle tint or tone of those particular colors to create the warming effect buyers want in a home."