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AGENT | MARKETING

12 real estate listing photo crimes that you can never unsee

Keep your toilets, pooping dogs and creepy doll collection off the MLS

BY MARIA DAMPMAN
NOV 14

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Celeste Barber, the Australian comedian known for her legendary celebrity photo spoofs, is my hero.

Even Lady Gaga's surfboard yoga and Beyonce's glowing pregnant brilliance don't hold a candle to Barber's hysterical takes on what happens when real people, like you and me, try to emulate the same poses.

With over 2.6 million followers on Instagram, Barber has taken the world by storm, one belly laugh at a time.



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Of course, real estate is no stranger to this kind of photographic schadenfreude.

Aside from getting the address right, listing photographs are the most important part of the home sale listing.

A study conducted by Michael Seiler of Old Dominion University stated that buyers spend **60 percent of their time reviewing a listing looking at the photos**.

A **Redfin survey found** that homes with professionally taken photographs get an average of 61 percent more page views and have a 47 percent higher asking price per square foot.

Despite the countless articles and advice abound detailing what you need to do to set up and take great listing photos, photo listing fails continue to plague MLSs nationwide.

So, once again, here's a top 12 list of the most common causes of photographic listing failures for your education and amusement.

1. Putting the cart before the horse



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Listing photographs should tell a story. Cover shots should show a pretty house with a well-maintained front yard, and maybe the second shot is of the very traditional open and welcoming front door with a bit of the entryway showing.

Perhaps the third shot is the great room, or sitting room, or whatever you would see next.

A jumbled photo display can confuse browsers. Going from kitchen to basement to master bedroom disorients the viewer and breaks up the flow between rooms.

Also, if you have multiple homes or a guest apartment on the property, caption them accordingly and group the photos together for each separate home.

Most agents and buyers first look through pictures pretty quickly to rule out the duds, and only when they see something they like do they slow down and really check out the shots.

Also, nearly all MLS systems allow for personalized captions where you can point out the best parts of a room. A picture of a \$100,000 salt water pool and seriously landscaped area with the standard caption of "exterior" is just boring. Use the spot for your verbiage to sell the home, not just show it.

2. Show me your toilets, trash cans and tampons

ColdwellBankerHomes.com get it, bathrooms aren't easy to photograph. Most of them are small, narrow and require a few shots to get everything shown. What I don't understand is the photo of just the toilet.

Seriously? There is no reason to have a shot of just the King's Crapper unless it's a full-sized replica of the iron throne monstrosity on *Game of Thrones*.

While on the topic, if you have to put in the toilet shot because you feel it's an exceptionally awesome toilet, make sure it's clean and the toilet seat is down.

If the seat is up and I can guess how long it has been since the commode was last cleaned, and that's just nasty — no one wants to see that.

Also, remove the fuzzy toilet covers, around-the-toilet shaped rugs, and any other coordinating carpeted items. Bathroom shots should be crisp, clean and clear and not leave you wondering if a hazmat crew needs to come and clean the shower.



William Raveis Real Estate

Also, please clear the counters of personal products. I don't need to know what brand of tampons you use or that you pay \$300 a bottle for night cream.

While on the topic, make sure trash cans are empty, and if possible, put them under sinks or just remove them temporarily for the photos.

I'm sure you have a trash can somewhere, but I don't need to know where from the photos. Leave me some surprises for when I check the home out in person.

Lastly, I know your stager told you to replace the moldy shower curtain, but if you have awesome tile in the shower, let us see it! Great bathrooms are a huge selling point, so don't cover up masterful tile work with a shower curtain.

3. What does clean really mean?



ColdwellBankerHomes.com

An often discussed problem is what to do if a home is tenant occupied, and the tenant is less than cooperative about tidying up.

If it's just not as tidy as you would like, then the seller needs to have a detailed chat with their tenant.

Remember, "clean" is a very subjective term. My "clean" and your "clean" may be very different. My mother's "everyday clean" was darn near the standards of a sterile surgical theater, but I'm thrilled if I've found and cleaned up all the cat vomit from overnight and the house has been vacuumed in the past week.



Photo: realtor.com

However, on picture day, you can bet I have a floor you could dine from and beds so tightly made you could bounce a quarter off of them.

There is always something that will need a tweak here and there on picture day — maybe removing an overlooked pet's bed or tidying up a playroom just a bit more.

As a [listing agent](#), I am always there for the photos so I can lend a hand if Jimmy's bed isn't made quite right or if the couch cushions need a fluff.

Some clients will require more help with this than others, but setting a clear expectation of what needs to be done before photos is always helpful.

4. Devil dolls and Hummels, my favorite!

I once saw pictures of a guest bedroom that had been turned into what looked almost like a Halloween haunted doll museum.

There were at least 70 of those creepy old-fashioned glass-eyed dolls in the room, on shelves, in boxes, posed in chairs having "tea" on the floor, you name it.

I can't tell you anything else about that house except I was convinced at least half of those dolls come to life at night and terrorized the neighborhood. I [love a good haunted house](#), but these glassy-eyed demon children were too much for me.

The most memorable thing about a home's photos should not be how many Hummel figurines can comfortably cohabitate in a listing photo. The photos should be clear enough of "collections," aka clutter that buyers can focus on the house.

I'm speechless on the MLS pics of this new listing in Citrus Park...anyone interested in an antique doll collection AND a new pool home?! WOW...good luck to the Realtor trying to sell this one!



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Some buyers may take offense if you mention their collections should be boxed up prior to photos and certainly be gone for showings, so tread carefully.

Mentioning that you worry something may get broken, which is always a possibility, or that the collection is so “amazing” that you are afraid it will “outshine” the room may help.

Just be very careful that you sound sincere and not sarcastic as you say this.

5. Christmas in July?

Sometimes a house takes forever to sell. We won’t get into that topic here, but trust me, if the season has changed, so should your outdoor photos.

Nothing screams “Why hasn’t this sold?” more than a primary picture of a home with a foot of snow on the ground and is now the middle of July.

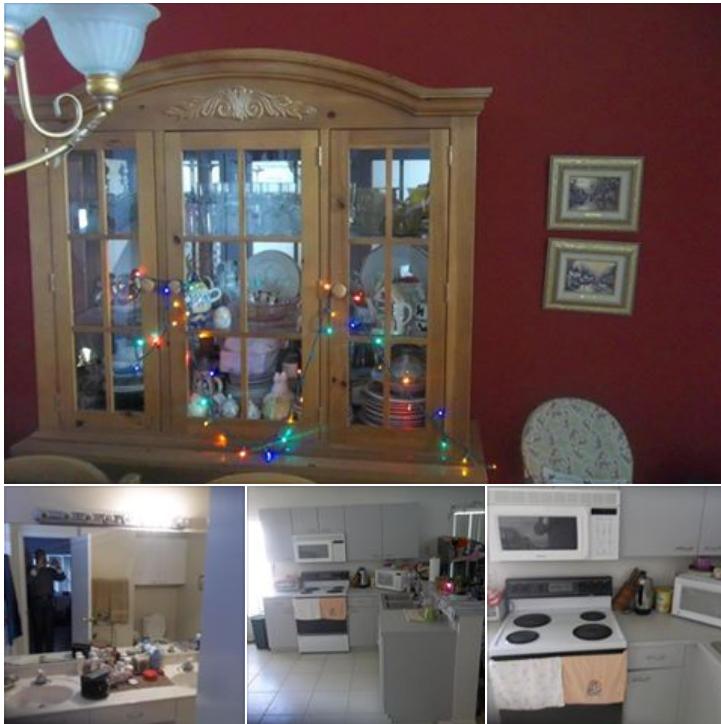
I know it sucks to have to pay for the photographer to come out again, but seasonally inaccurate photos are a giant red flag to viewers.

When most buyers see a seasonally specific picture and you aren’t currently in the same season, the very next thing they will check is when this house went on the market.

We all know the next question after a long DOM (days on market) is “What is wrong with it?”

Now, if during the winter you had a lovely picture taken with the snow, some people will put that at the end of the photo listing to show “House during the holidays” or some other tagline. That’s fine — just don’t let that be the leading photo.

Bad MLS listing photos of the week. Congratulations to this moron for taking such fabulous photos of your beautiful listing. The holiday lights are a nice touch! Are they included in the sale?



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6. Through the eyes of a carp

I was showing a house one time, and I was positive that I had somehow screwed up as I could have sworn there was an oversized refrigerator in the listing photos.

When I pulled it up on my cell phone, I did a side-by-side comparison of photo to reality, and I saw the photo had some serious distortion.

Wide lens and fish-eye distortion is very common in even professionally-taken photographs. What gets buyers angry is when they see a picture of an enormous master bedroom that, in reality, is not much larger than a closet.

Again, I get it. We all want to show off a home to its best advantage.

But if there is distortion in your picture that may be misleading, at least put in the room size measurements so potential buyers can determine if their king size bed will fit before wasting everyone's time seeing a home that simply won't work for their needs.



7. Look out for little Katie and Sir Poops-a-lot

My all-time favorite listing picture fail was of a picture of a gorgeous bay window overlooking a beautiful back yard.

OK, so far so good, until you look a little closer and see the owner's Great Pyrenees taking a colossal dump and has now been caught for photographic posterity in glorious mid-poo.

What made me nearly hyperventilate laughing was the horrified look on the dog's face, almost as if he knew this was his soon to be claim to fame.

I love pets. When I meet people out walking with their dogs, I greet the dog first. But unless the pets convey with the home, keep them out of the photos.



Photo: Facebook

Now, in cases of farm properties, no one expects you to move a herd of cattle off property for shots of the pastures or cares if the horses are all in their stalls because it's 104 degrees outside.

In these cases, photos showing happy and healthy animals in the setting almost acts like a form of staging implying a useful and usable flow to the workspace.

Having people in photos is never a good thing, either. Buyers need to be able to see themselves and their belongings in a property, but having little Katie's pictures or even little Katie herself in the photo is not helpful.

Also, when selling a home, for [security reasons](#), anything with the children's names and photos should be removed.

Unfortunately, there are criminals out there that can use this information against you and can put your family at risk. I know it sounds exceptionally paranoid, but it happens.

8. Grainy is a term only good for condiments

In this day and age, there is no excuse for poor quality pictures. Blurry, grainy, watery, dark and fuzzy should only be used to describe a long-forgotten bottle of mustard you just found in the back of your refrigerator.

This is where I highly recommend hiring a professional home photographer.

I may be able to take a decent selfie on my iPhone, but I am not a professional photographer by any stretch of the imagination.

Most of us also don't have the tools to correctly fix odd tints, strange shadows and other photographic anomalies that routinely occur even for the professional.

I had photos once that were taken on a rainy day, and my photographer was able to swap out the dark clouds for a clear blue sky with no one except us the wiser. It's amazing what new technology can do.

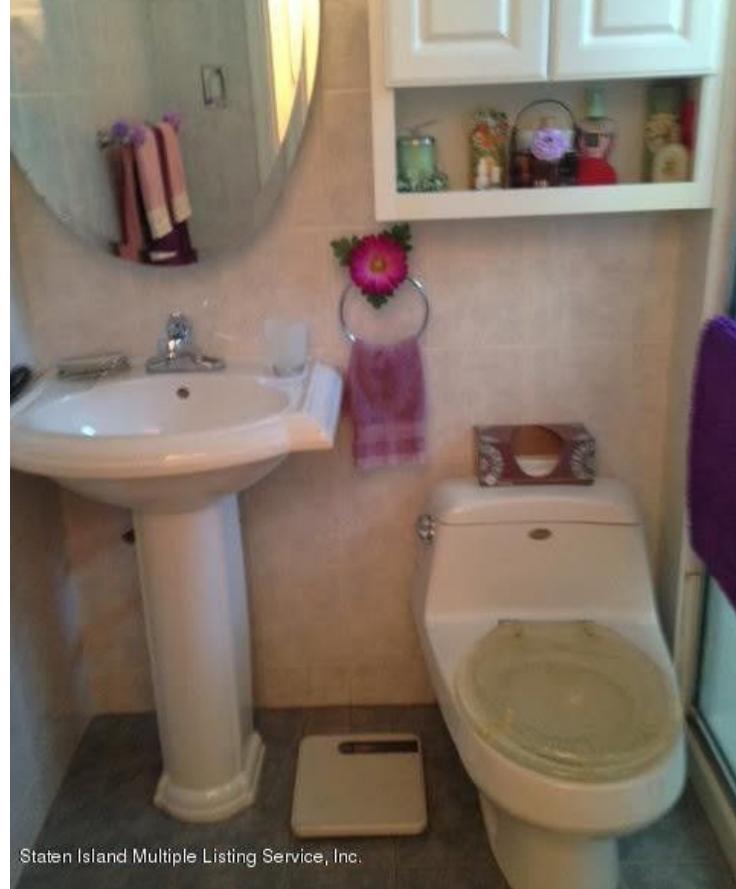
There are a lot of agents, and even more than a few owners, who determine that they want to do their photos themselves. If you sincerely have the skills and the technology, by all means, go for it.

But you are not helping your sellers or your own career, by producing listings that look like they were shot with a 30-year-old Polaroid.

There are also those low-dollar listings, short sales, foreclosures and tear down listings barely worth the land they are located upon that are tempting to make you save the money on a pro.

If you can't resist the temptation to save a few bucks, and you want to give it a try, take the pictures. Then compare them to a similar listing that clearly was shot by a professional lens jockey.

If you and a friend can't say you can honestly tell the difference between amateur and professional, go for it. If it's a night and day difference, pick up the phone, and call someone who does this full time.



Staten Island Multiple Listing Service, Inc.

Photo: realtor.com

9. The 'buried-in-a-box' house

I once listed a house that was done in what I coined as “gothic chic” motif. It was dark. Really dark. Most rooms had black curtains, the bathrooms were painted a very dark blue, and by choice, most of the lamps didn’t have all of their light bulbs as the owners liked a dimly lit home.

To me, it felt claustrophobic, like being buried alive, but they loved it that way. I tried to explain to them that we needed to make some changes before putting their house on the market as few buyers were going to find this style to suit their taste, but my sellers were stubborn and refused every suggestion.

When it came time for pictures, I came with a case of light bulbs and a ladder and got there before the photographer. I opened all the curtains and did my best to lighten and brighten. Was it ideal? No, but it was better.

Sometimes you just do the best you can and call it a day.



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10. At least get out of the car

Last month, I saw a picture that was taken from *inside* a car. I could see the passenger's side view mirror, and the house was even a little blurry because I'm not sure the agent taking the picture was even fully stopped.

I don't care if you are getting paid \$50 for commission, at least stop the car, put it in park, and get out to snap the picture.



Long & Foster Real Estate

11. What are you trying to hide?

In my research for this article, I saw a million dollar listing that had seven photos taken. Seven. It was a 6,000-square-foot house on 11 acres, and you could only find seven things you thought a buyer may want to see?

This leads me to the questions, how long has this been on the market (267 days) and then: what is wrong with it?

bedroom.

Instead, these sellers got pictures that looked like they came from a toy camera handled by a six-year-old child.

Sometimes you do get a client that doesn't want to have interior photos done for security reasons. In these cases, explain that a lack of photos is going to make it really hard for them to get a buyer based on the aforementioned research.



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12. Prevent Photoshop failures

For the love of Pete, please resist the urge to photoshop anything out of a picture unless you really have to — and you know how to do it. Most MLS systems do not allow a main photo that has a brokerage sign in the front yard.

In these cases, to prevent a possible fine, these should be removed by someone very well-versed in doctoring photos. Having a main photo with a ghostly odd blurry section is not going to make the best first impression.

Also, please resist the temptation to make a picture look better by removing things like high-voltage power lines and cell phone towers. If these items are unfortunately part of the landscape, they need to stay in the pictures, or you are misrepresenting the property.



Facebook / Arizona Homes by Nancy

Having a good laugh over photo fails is a hoot. Whereas Barber uses her talents to bring humor into an often depressing world, real estate photo fails are also learning tool — that's no joke.

Maria Dampman is the owner and manager of Smiling Cat Farm and a Virginia State licensed Realtor and ABR with Century 21 Redwood in Leesburg, Virginia. Visit her on [Facebook](#) or [LinkedIn](#).

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Absolutely outstanding! You are so spot on!

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**Jeremy James** · Real Estate Agent at Bluegrass Team Danville, KY homes and land for sale

This is a great article, but we all know that we "read" these articles for the pictures. Too bad only two bundles of them are showing for me. Refreshed and reloaded the page several times.

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I've had issues with Inman articles too. I deleted cookies for the site on my computer and the articles loaded much better.

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**Ken Smith** · Owner/Broker at Ken Smith Properties

Where are the photos??

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**Sandye Blalock** · Mississippi College

Excellent article. Thanks The other item I often see is someone taking a photo of their favorite furniture (zoomed in of a lovely bedspread)....vs the room and its architectural features.

[Like](#) · [Reply](#) · 1 · Nov 14, 2017 6:17am

**Tom Pratt** · Agent at Anne Whiting Real Estate

Great article. I see the same mistakes all the time, especially the bathrooms ugh.

[Like](#) · [Reply](#) · Nov 14, 2017 6:38am · Edited

**Thomas Caetano** · Real estate broker at KW Bellevue

The last photo made me laugh hard. The ghost dog is hilarious. I did an open house a few months ago on someone else's listing and every single room on this condo, I repeat..... every single room had clown paraphernalia. There were clown figurines, clown statues, every wall had at least four or five clown paintings. I counted at least 40 clowns. What's funny to me is that I didn't realise this setup until almost an

**Paula Swayne**

Thank you for the giggles!

Like · Reply · Nov 14, 2017 12:58pm

**Sean Williams** · Master Gunnery Sergeant at USMC

I have to say I saw some of these same fails, especially not using a professional photographer on a nearly \$1 million property, grainy photos with the agent in the mirror of the bathroom photo and a picture of a kitchen drawer, I had to shake my head (and the home never sold)...thanks for the great discussion. I am going to post to my FB business page.

Like · Reply · Nov 14, 2017 9:02pm

**Andy Alford** · Realtor at Keller Williams Realty

I continue to be amazed at the contrast between the high quality professional photos/videos (or top notch agent photography) and the listings that have a half dozen or so poorly lit, blurry, messy photos obviously taken in haste with a cell phone. Some of the photography is so bad that I sincerely believe it ought to rise to level of an ethics violation for failing an agent's duty to listing clients.

Like · Reply · Nov 15, 2017 11:42am

**Joe Bryson** · President/Broker at Real Estate Alliance, Inc.

One additional comment or suggestion I would like to add is, shoot horizontal if at all possible! Try to resist tilting up or down, especially when using any wide angle lens. It may seem natural to your mind's eye when you are there, but it is disorienting to a viewer of the photo. With wide angle, this also makes walls that curve inward towards each other.

Like · Reply · Nov 15, 2017 1:00pm

**Al Peterson** · Realtor (Commercial & Residential) at Realtor @ John Rea Realty

Good article about "Photos" , with very few photos.

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