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Speak softly: Political signs can be a turn-off

BY JULIE BROWN • O&E STAFF WRITER • OCTOBER 16, 2008

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Freedom of speech is certainly a good thing, but real estate pros urge caution if you're selling a home and supporting a political candidate.

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In this charged and partisan environment, an Obama or McCain sign could be a definite turn-off to a potential buyer.

"Oh, absolutely," said Ruth Martin of Livonia, an associate broker with Remerica Hometown One in Plymouth. She urges restraint "unless you're extremely passionate and don't care."

"I have to admit I judge," Martin said of political signs. "You do judge."

Agreeing is Keller Williams Realtor Nancy Austin, a Canton resident licensed in Ann Arbor serving Wayne and Oakland counties. "I would keep that house as neutral as I can inside and out," said Austin, this year's Realtor of the Year for the Western Wayne Oakland County Association of Realtors. She agreed free speech is important, but also noted you don't want to turn off a potential buyer with partisan statements.

"Obviously people have a right to freedom of speech, but it could influence somebody," Austin said. "I'm really careful about politics" with customers.

When she writes letters to the editor, Austin is also cautious. "That's a separate conversation for family and friends," she said of political discourse.

Some pros recommend even taking down family photos when you're selling, but Austin doesn't think that's necessary, as it can lead to a "sterile" kind of environment.

Martin's careful with politics while working as well, and doesn't run down competition. "You talk about how good you are."

She recalled a grocery store strike years ago; her sister-in-law, married to a Teamster, was unhappy Martin went into the store for an Easter ham.

"She said, 'I hope nobody ever buys a house from her.' But I bet she ate my Easter ham."

His years as a marketing professor at the University of Detroit Mercy let Mike Bernacchi of Huntington Woods know that political signs can be a home sale turn-off.

"When you're marketing your home, it's nice to be aggressive and always put your best foot forward," said Bernacchi. "Whatever messages you have please assess them."

He agrees with Martin and Austin that today's political climate makes that particularly vital: "Of course we have such divisiveness today. Why would you take the chance?" Bernacchi said.

He joked that a seller could have a McCain/Palin sign on one side of the home, an Obama/Biden on the other. "It would cause people to smile," he said. "It would signal patriotism to the nth degree."

Bernacchi noted rewards aren't commensurate with the risk if you're selling in such circumstances. "Have the Realtor call you before or tell you which one to put in. Outside of that, don't do it," he said of presidential placards.

His son has a Jeff Foxworthy message on the phone which Bernacchi dislikes. "Why would you alienate other people in leaving that message? I told him I don't want to listen to this.

"We don't need hurdles, we don't need preconditions," he said. "We just want a sale."

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