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## Framingham design firm makes its mark in real estate

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*Bear Cieri/Daily News staff*  
Dan Houde owns of D&D Design Solutions, an interior design company in Framingham. One of its services is staging homes to help them sell faster.

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By **Bob Tremblay/Daily News staff**  
**GateHouse News Service**  
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FRAMINGHAM — Staging a home to improve its sale is nothing unusual.

Hiring an interior designer to improve that staging is nothing unusual.

Hiring an interior designer who brings his own furniture to the home is something unusual.

While most designers get their furniture from rental centers, Dan Houde, the owner of D&D Design Solutions in Framingham, gets his furnishings from a local warehouse where he stores hundreds of pieces of furniture in different styles. The items include complete sets of furniture for living rooms, dining rooms, bedrooms and patios as well as a large collection of accessories such as lamps, chairs and tables.

"This gives me an advantage," says Houde. "I can truly tailor the furniture to every single home. I'm not at the mercy of a rental center and the inventory it has."

The better look has its advantages. "On average, a home that is not staged is on the market anywhere from 137 to 160 days," says Houde, citing real estate blogs. "A home that is staged is on the market between 30 and 40 days. With D&D Design, the average for a single family home to be on the market is 17 days. Condos are 30 days. "Also, a home that is staged will sell, on average, 3 percent higher than a home that isn't staged."

The success stories include a home in Framingham that was on the market for 408 days. The owner eventually got a new real estate agent and the agent put the owner in touch with Houde, who staged the home with his furniture. A sale agreement was reached in the first week.

A home in Natick had been on the market for six months. After Houde painted it and brought in his furniture, a bidding war broke out among five potential buyers. The winning bid, again received in the first week, was above the asking price.

"The house was a contemporary ranch," relates Houde. "If I had brought in traditional furniture, it wouldn't have showcased the beauty of the house. My furniture gave it a

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more contemporary look."

The problem, according to Houde, is that owners aren't looking at the bigger picture. "There are a lot of people who are suffering with these houses they have on the market for so long," he says. "The information is not getting out to them that if they just staged it... those houses would sell."

In many cases, the problem isn't the price, it's the look. "When people walk into a home, if it's not perfectly set up, if it doesn't speak to them, they're just looking at the negatives, not the positives. You can turn that perception around."

"Does it make sense for you to take a hit on your house at \$25,000 a pop (the average drop in price of a house that fails to sell promptly) or spend \$5,000, have it staged, get the asking price and sell it quicker? People don't want to spend more money up front, but in reality you're saving so much more money if you do."

Marie Presti Cunniff, co-owner of The Cunniff Group, a Newton real estate firm, concurs. Her company has worked with Houde on several projects for about a year.

"Over the years, we have used interior designers for different situations where we're looking to make the condition of the property better than it has been in the past so staging isn't new to us," she says, "but I can tell you with Dan's services, he's really been able to go above and beyond any of the services I've been provided with in the past."

"If the home is vacant, he's turned this empty house into a beautifully furnished home. It looks like someone is living there. It's like a decorator's dream."

"He also works quickly and he's more reasonably priced than many others because he actually owns the furniture."

The cost of the rental fees a designer pays for furniture is typically passed on to the customer, whether it's the real estate agent or the seller, according to Houde.

Continues Cunniff, "Every home has its challenges and Dan has been able to take those challenges and make them go away. He can stage the furniture to get around any challenge. He'll solve my challenges and see other challenges himself and solve those. He'll tell me what rooms need work."

"At one property Dan had furnished, when the buyers came in for the home inspection, they said to us, 'We love the property so much and we want to buy the furniture with the property.' I've had that happen at five different homes where he has worked."

Unfortunately, Houde doesn't sell his furniture.

"Realtors, a lot of the times, have the ability to see the issue," Cunniff says. "We know a room is dark. We know it looks small, but we're not interior designers who can fix the problem. And a lot of designers will ask us, 'What do you want to do?' 'How do you want to fix it?' Dan's been able to figure out how to fix it and very affordably. ... It's reasonable enough that it more than makes up for the money they're going to get. It usually adds a lot of dollars in the seller's pockets."

In homes that are already furnished, Houde advises sellers to "emotionally detach themselves" from the properties. "It doesn't matter what they like anymore," he says. "What matters is selling your home. That's the bottom line, and I'll do everything in my power to get you to the point, but you have to release the control to me. If people are living in the house, they can't take out all their furniture, but I'll enhance what they already have by bringing in other things to make it come to life."

Adds Cunniff, "There's a home in Chestnut Hill with the furniture still there and a lot of antiques. But that didn't show it to its full potential. It's a \$4.8 million home, but it didn't look like a \$4.8 million. The owners liked (the look), but others have to like it now. It's how the majority would like it rather than one particular owner. Dan touched every room. He used what was great, made (the house) more open, improved the lighting, added color, added items that weren't expensive. ... When the owners saw it, they said, 'Wow! Amazing.'"

If a home already has furniture, the average cost at D&D Design to stage the property ranges from \$1,000 to \$3,000. A simple redesign costs \$750.

The consultation fee for real estate agents is \$75 an hour. "That service usually takes one to two hours and for that the client gets a complete punch list from A-to-Z in every single room," says Houde. "They can implement it themselves or bring me in."

If Houde gets hired for a staging and furniture is needed, the average cost ranges from \$3,000 to \$8,000. A bigger house typically means a higher price, smaller translates to lower. The furniture, meanwhile, remains in the house for a minimum of three months. "Most of the homes sell before three months," Houde points out.

The New Bedford native launched D&D Design in 2005. The first two D's in the title refer to Houde's first name and

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Don Wajda, who provides woodworking services for the interior design company.

Before starting the firm, Houde worked in retail for 25 years. "My claim to fame was my merchandising ability," he says.

Houde had previously worked for the Framingham-based TJX Cos. Inc. as store manager, working at various times at four of its superstores, including those in Milford and Acton. His eye for design came into play here, too.

"The stores in a mall are very cookie-cutter," Houde says. "They have plan-o-grams. But dealing with a TJX or a HomeGoods, there are no plan-o-grams. What you get in is what you get in. It's your ability that makes the store look the way it does."

An appealing look can pay off with merchandise, too. Houde says the sales at the stores he managed were always 15 to 20 percent above last year's sales. The Milford store he managed was also chosen as the prototype for the TJX's Christmas setup nationwide in 2000.

Houde's talent didn't go unnoticed. "People kept saying to me, 'You really should go out on your own,'" he recalls. "Before I turned 40, I said, 'I can't see myself being in retail at 55 or 60. So I went back to school at 39.'"

School was the New England Institute of Art in Brookline where Houde focused on interior design. "I've always had a flair for design and fashion," he says. In addition to getting certified as an interior designer, he garnered a real estate license. "I've always had a love of real estate, too," he said. "I wanted to get a license to give me an edge on what was going on in the market."

In addition to staging, services at D&D Design include interior design. "That's where I create a new look for a home," Houde says. The company also redesigns. "That's where I go into a home utilizing what you already have and maybe add a few accessories to create a whole new look."

The cost for an interior design is \$125 an hour. For a redesign, the price tag is \$750 for a full day, typically involving five to six rooms. More rooms raises the price.

In the staging arena, Houde has worked with five real estate agents. "I'm a marketing tool for them," he says. "For every listing they get, they offer their clients a consultation with me. I give them ideas of what's going to help them to sell their property for more and what they need to do. The most typical adjustment is furniture placement.

There's too much of it, not enough of it or it's misplaced. Like putting a loveseat and a couch in a ballroom. That makes it look like an oversized family room."

As an interior designer, Houde says he's hands-on. "If the room needs to be painted, I do it," he says. "And once the client sees me, they continually see me. A lot of interior designers will make the first assessment and never be seen again. An assistant goes in. There's not a great bond. Clients have told they like the fact that I come back. So if there's an issue, I'm there to problem-solve it. If there's a change in the design because something happened, I'm there to problem-solve it."

Then there's that talent thing. "It's hard to say you're really good at something," he says. "I feel very blessed that I can go in and assess a property, look at it once, shop for the right components and completely redesign it without having to look at it twice."

Houde does find the job rewarding. "From the staging part, it's watching somebody sell their home after not being able to sell it," he says. "From the interior design part, there are people who have tried to do it themselves. They spend so much time shopping, buying and returning, buying and returning and not finding the right thing for their home. Then when I come in, and put it together in one or two days, it's seeing the joy on their face that they finally have the room they envisioned it to be. That's fulfilling for me."

(Bob Tremblay can be reached at [btremblay@cnc.com](mailto:btremblay@cnc.com) or 508-626-4409.)

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#### **D&D Design Solutions**

**Owner: Dan Houde**

**Employees: One**

**Industry: interior design**

**Company background: Based in Framingham, D&D Design Solutions is a full-service interior design company. Its Web address is [www.dddesignsolutions.com](http://www.dddesignsolutions.com).**

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