A GUIDE FOR HOMEOWNERS

How Homes Actually Sell

A Better Way to Think About Selling Your Home

Gene Hauck

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Most homeowners only sell a handful of homes in their lifetime.

That means much of what people believe about selling comes from a past experience, a conversation with a friend, an online estimate, a television show, or a market that no longer exists.

Some of those beliefs are useful.
Others quietly lead to expensive decisions.

The housing market changes. Interest rates change. Technology changes. Buyer behavior changes. The way homes are marketed changes.

But the foundation of a successful sale is remarkably consistent.

It comes down to understanding what matters, recognizing what the market is telling us, and making informed decisions at the right time.

This is not a checklist for getting a home ready.
It is not an argument for hiring a particular Realtor.
It is a better way to think about the sale itself.

My goal is to help you understand the reasoning behind the decisions that shape an outcome: which path to take, how to position the home, what to improve, how buyers will compare it, when to adjust, and what tradeoffs are actually worth making.

No one can remove every uncertainty from a real estate transaction.
We can remove a great deal of unnecessary guesswork.

That begins by asking better questions.

IN BRIEF

The Principles

Nine ideas make up this guide. Here is each one in a single line, with the page it lives on — read straight through, or start wherever is useful.

ONE

Every Situation Has More Than One Solution

One of the most important lessons I have learned in real estate is that there is rarely only one path forward.

Two people can own nearly identical homes and need completely different strategies.

One seller may want the highest possible price and have the time and resources to prepare the home carefully.
Another may value certainty because a job transfer has already created a deadline.
Another may want to avoid repairs, showings, or the risk of carrying two properties.
Another may need the proceeds from this sale before buying the next home.

None of those sellers is wrong.

They are solving different problems.

That is why my first reaction to a difficult goal is usually not yes or no. It is:

> *"What would need to be true for that outcome to happen?"*

If the goal is to sell at a certain price, what would buyers need to believe about the home compared with the alternatives? If the goal is to move before a specific date, what level of certainty would the strategy need to create?

If the seller wants to avoid making repairs, how will the price, buyer pool, financing, and negotiation need to account for that decision? If the next purchase depends on this sale, how should the timing and contract terms work together?

The question does not guarantee that every desired outcome is possible.

It forces us to identify the conditions required for it to become possible.

That distinction matters.

A good strategy is not built by choosing the most appealing outcome and hoping the market cooperates. It is built by understanding the goal, identifying the constraints, and deciding which tradeoffs are acceptable.

Sometimes the best path is a traditional sale after thoughtful preparation.
Sometimes it is selling as-is.
Sometimes it is completing only a few targeted repairs.
Sometimes it is changing the timing.
Sometimes it is negotiating terms that matter more than price.
And sometimes the right answer is not to sell yet.

There is no universal plan that serves every homeowner.

The best solution is the one that fits the actual situation.

Goals → **Strategy** → **Decisions** → **Outcome**

The strategy chain — goals set the direction; the market determines what's achievable along the way.

PRINCIPLE

The market determines what's possible. Your goals determine which path we take.

ASK YOURSELF

What matters most in this sale—and which tradeoffs am I genuinely willing to make to protect it?

TWO

We Start With You, Not Your House

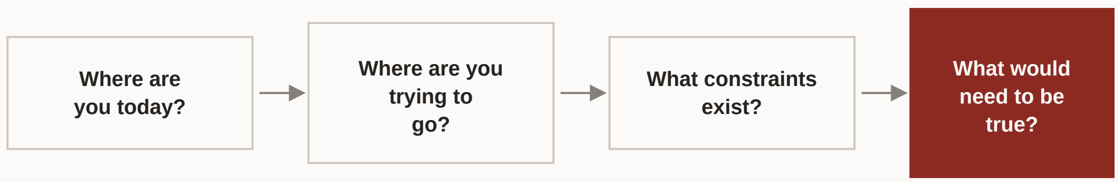
It is tempting to begin a listing conversation with square footage, recent sales, repairs, and list price.

Those things matter.

They just do not matter first.

Before I can recommend a strategy for the property, I need to understand what the sale is supposed to accomplish for the person who owns it.

Every useful recommendation begins with four questions.



The consultation framework — every recommendation begins here.

Where are you today?

What is prompting the move? What is working about the current situation? What is no longer working? Is selling a choice, a preference, or a necessity?

Where are you trying to go?

What does a successful result actually look like? Is the priority price, timing, certainty, convenience, flexibility, or some combination of them? Is there another home to purchase? Is there a date that matters?

What constraints exist?

Every strategy operates inside real limits. There may be financial considerations, repairs, family needs, employment changes, financing requirements, occupancy concerns, or another transaction that must happen first.

Ignoring a constraint does not make it disappear. It usually allows that constraint to become a problem later.

What would need to be true?

Once we understand the destination and the constraints, we can begin identifying the path with the highest probability of reaching the goal.

This is the difference between giving advice and solving a problem.

Advice often begins with the property:

Paint this. Replace that. List here. Reduce the price.

Problem-solving begins with the reason behind the recommendation.

What specific obstacle are we trying to remove? What buyer behavior are we trying to influence? What risk are we trying to reduce? What result are we trying to protect?

Imagine two sellers who are each told to invest $20,000 before listing.

For the first seller, those improvements may materially expand the buyer pool and create a strong return. For the second, the work may delay the move, strain available cash, and produce little more than a dollar-for-dollar increase in value.

> *“The same recommendation can be intelligent in one situation and careless in another.”*

The property gives us facts.
The seller gives those facts meaning.

Only then can the strategy begin.

> **PRINCIPLE**
>
> **A strategy without understanding the seller is still a guess.**

ASK YOURSELF

If I could protect only one outcome in this sale, what would it be?

THREE

The Market Doesn't Care About Our Goals

This may be the least comfortable principle in the guide. It is also one of the most useful.

The market does not care what we need.
It does not care what we owe.
It does not care what we spent on improvements.
It does not care what a neighbor once sold for.
It does not care what an online estimate says.

The market reflects what buyers are willing and able to do today.

That does not mean your goals are unimportant.

Your goals determine the strategy.
They do not determine how the market responds.

This is where sellers can get trapped by a number that has meaning to them but not to a buyer.

Perhaps it is the amount needed for the next purchase.
Perhaps it represents the cost of improvements.
Perhaps it is anchored to a sale from a stronger market.
Perhaps it simply feels like what the home should be worth.

All of those reasons can be understandable.

None of them creates market value by itself.

Value is discovered through comparison.

Buyers look at the home, the price, the condition, the location, the features, the financing environment, and the other choices available to them. Then they decide what represents the best overall option.

Our job is not to argue with that process.
Our job is to understand it well enough to position the home intentionally within it.

Online estimates can be a useful reference point, but they are still only a reference point. In Montana, where final sale prices are not publicly disclosed, automated valuation models may lack important information about the actual sale price, seller concessions, financing terms, property condition, or circumstances surrounding a transaction.

An algorithm can process data. It cannot walk through the competing homes with a buyer and understand why one feels like the better choice.

That is why a pricing conversation should never be reduced to one automated number, one price-per-square-foot calculation, or one neighbor's sale.

The goal is not to find the number we like best. It is to understand the range the evidence supports and decide how to position the home within it.

> **PRINCIPLE**
>
> **Your goals shape the plan. Buyer behavior shapes the result.**

ASK YOURSELF

Which part of my expected value is supported by today's market—and which part is based on what I need or hope to receive?

FOUR

Buyers Compare Before They Buy

Most buyers do not evaluate a home in isolation. They compare it with everything else their money can buy.

That comparison begins online, often before the buyer or agent ever schedules a showing.

A buyer sees the price. Then the photos. Then the location, size, condition, features, and monthly payment.

Within seconds, the home is placed into one of three broad categories:

The buyer decision path — most sellers focus on the offer. Buyers are already deciding at Compare and Eliminate.

Worth exploring. Possible, but not compelling. Eliminate.

This is why one of the most common pricing arguments—"Let's leave room to negotiate"—can create the opposite of the intended result.

Many buyers do not negotiate first. They eliminate first.

“Buyers don't negotiate first. They eliminate first.”

If the home does not appear competitive enough to justify a showing, there may never be an opportunity to negotiate.

Consider two similar homes.

One is priced slightly higher but presents beautifully, feels move-in ready, and has terms that reduce the buyer's immediate costs. The other is less expensive but photographs poorly, shows deferred maintenance, and leaves the buyer uncertain about what else might be wrong.

The cheaper home is not automatically the better value.

Price is only one part of the comparison.

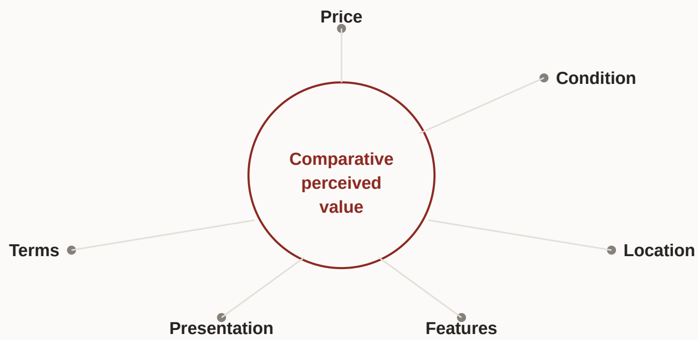
Buyers are also pricing effort, uncertainty, convenience, emotional appeal, and risk.

This is why the best comparable sale is not always the house with the closest square footage. A technically similar property may compete for a completely different buyer because of its layout, condition, school area, lot, garage, updates, or price range.

Useful market analysis asks two different questions:

What have buyers already purchased?

And what can they choose instead of this home today?



The value comparison — buyers weigh these together to form a sense of comparative value, not a formula.

“Sold homes help establish value. Active homes establish competition.”

Both matter. Sold properties show where buyers have already committed money and what an appraisal may support. Active properties show the options standing beside your home right now.

If we study only the past, we can miss the choice the buyer is making in the present.

PRINCIPLE

Buyers do not ask whether a home is good. They ask whether it is the best choice among the options they can afford.

ASK YOURSELF

If I were buying today, why would I choose this home over the alternatives?

FIVE

Pricing Is Positioning

List price is often treated like a declaration of value. It is more useful to think of it as a positioning decision.

The price determines which searches the home appears in.

It influences which properties buyers compare it against.

It changes expectations before they walk through the door.

It affects how much imperfection buyers will tolerate.

And it shapes the kind of leverage a seller may have when an offer arrives.

“Pricing is not the strategy. It is one of the tools within the strategy.”

A seller who prioritizes speed and certainty may position differently than a seller who can wait for a narrower buyer pool. A home with rare features may require a different approach than one competing against ten close substitutes. A home entering a market with low inventory may have more room to test demand than the same home entering a crowded price range.

The right price is therefore not simply the highest number that can be defended. It is the number that best supports the seller's goal within the current competitive environment.

There are real consequences to starting too high.

The first days on market often create the largest concentration of attention. Buyers with saved searches see the listing. Agents share it. People who have been waiting for a particular type of home evaluate it at the same time.

If the price and presentation create compelling value, that attention can become showings, urgency, and sometimes competing interest. If the home is dismissed, the same audience may not reconsider it until something meaningfully changes.

That is why a later price reduction does not always recreate the opportunity that existed at launch.

The listing may now carry more days on market.
Buyers may wonder why it has not sold.
Some may assume there is a problem.

The seller can still recover, but the negotiating position may be different.

This does not mean every home must be priced aggressively low.
It means the launch should be intentional.

There is also no perfect price that guarantees a result. Pricing is a probability decision made with incomplete information.

We study the evidence, identify the likely range, examine the competition, understand the seller's priorities, and choose the position that creates the best balance of opportunity and risk. Then we watch what happens.

> **PRINCIPLE**
>
> **Pricing is not about leaving room to negotiate. It is about earning the opportunity to negotiate.**

ASK YOURSELF

Does our price support the outcome we want—or simply reflect the number we hope to hear?

SIX

Marketing Creates Opportunity

Professional photography does not sell a home. Video does not sell a home. Social media does not sell a home. An open house does not sell a home.

Any one of them can contribute to a sale, but their primary job is to create opportunity.

Marketing helps the right buyers find the property.
Strong presentation gives them a reason to pay attention.
Clear information reduces friction.
Compelling positioning earns a showing.

Once buyers walk through the front door, the home begins doing the selling.

I think about marketing through three stages.

Marketing creates exposure and interest. The home, its positioning, and the buyer's experience create confidence.

Exposure

Can the right buyers find the home? This includes the MLS, major consumer websites, agent networks, search behavior, social platforms, direct outreach, signage, video, and any other channel appropriate to the property. Exposure is not measured by how many places a listing is posted. It is measured by whether the likely buyer can discover it.

Interest

Does the presentation give that buyer a reason to act? Photography, video, copy, pricing, property information, and the order in which features are presented all influence whether a buyer keeps scrolling or schedules a showing. Marketing cannot manufacture value that is not there. It can make real value easier to recognize.

Confidence

After seeing the home, does the buyer believe it is the best overall choice among the alternatives? Confidence comes from the home's condition, the way it shows, the consistency between the marketing and reality, the available information, the terms, and the buyer's sense of risk.

> *"Marketing creates exposure and interest. The home, its positioning, and the buyer's experience create confidence."*

This is also the proper way to think about open houses.

Sometimes the eventual buyer attends. Often the value is broader.

An open house creates another wave of visibility. It gives agents a reason to share the listing. It can re-engage buyers who noticed the home but had not scheduled a tour. It creates activity around the property.

The tactic should not be judged by whether the attendee signs an offer that afternoon. It should be judged by whether it serves a useful purpose in the strategy.

More marketing is not automatically better marketing. The question is always the same:

> *"What problem is this supposed to solve?"*

> PRINCIPLE
>
> **Marketing creates opportunity. The home creates confidence.**

ASK YOURSELF

Are we merely creating visibility, or are we giving the right buyer a clear reason to take the next step?

SEVEN

Preparation Should Solve a Problem

The question "What should we do before listing?" rarely has a universal answer.

Some homes benefit from meaningful preparation. Others need far less than their owners expect.

The danger is treating improvement as automatically valuable.

Not every dollar spent comes back. Not every project expands the buyer pool. Not every update solves the concern that is actually limiting demand.

Before recommending work, I want to know which problem it addresses.

Does it remove a financing obstacle? Does it prevent a buyer from assuming the home has been neglected? Does it improve the first impression enough to generate more showings? Does it reduce uncertainty around a major system? Does it help the home compete with move-in-ready alternatives? Or are we simply making the home more consistent with our own preferences?

Major remodeling before a sale can become especially dangerous because the stopping point keeps moving.

New flooring can make the older paint more noticeable. Fresh paint can make dated lighting stand out. An updated kitchen can make the untouched bathroom feel further behind.

Even after the work is finished, buyers will still have their own tastes.

That is why the highest-value preparation is often less dramatic:

A thoroughly clean home. Good lighting. An uncluttered presentation. Fresh air and a neutral smell. Deferred maintenance addressed. Clear access to the spaces buyers need to evaluate. A property that feels cared for.

These fundamentals influence nearly everyone.

The right preparation plan also depends on the likely buyer.

A first-time buyer using financing may respond differently to needed repairs than an investor planning a renovation. A buyer at the top of a price range may have less cash left after closing. A buyer comparing turnkey homes may discount inconvenience more heavily than the actual cost of the work.

The objective is not to make the home perfect. It is to remove the obstacles that matter enough to affect buyer behavior.

> **PRINCIPLE**
>
> **Every improvement should earn its place in the strategy.**

ASK YOURSELF

What specific buyer concern will this work remove—and is that concern worth the time, money, and delay?

EIGHT

The Market Is Always Communicating

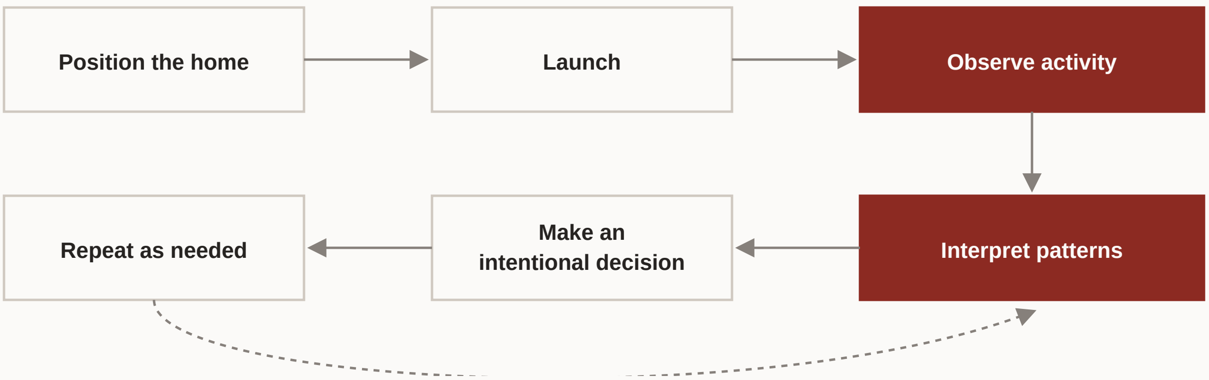
A list price is not a finish line. It is the beginning of a conversation with the market.

From the moment the home is introduced, buyers begin giving us information.

Online activity is information. Showing activity is information. Showing feedback is information. Second showings are information. Offers are information. Competing homes that sell are information. Competing homes that sit are information.

“The market is always communicating.”

Our job is to interpret what it is saying without reacting emotionally to every individual opinion.



The market feedback loop — pricing and marketing are the beginning of a conversation, not a single decision.

One buyer may dislike a paint color. Another may want a larger yard. Another may need a bedroom on a different level.

Those comments may tell us more about the buyers than the property.

"One opinion is feedback. A pattern is information."

If several buyers independently identify the same concern, that deserves attention. If online traffic is strong but showings are weak, the home may be earning attention but losing the comparison before buyers visit. If showings are strong but offers are absent, buyers may like the home but not believe the total value is competitive. If activity is low across the entire price range, the issue may be broader than the listing. If comparable homes are moving while this one is not, the difference matters.

The data must also be interpreted in context.

Seven quiet days in a fast-moving market do not mean the same thing as seven quiet days during a seasonal slowdown. Ten showings without an offer mean something different when every buyer mentions price than when each buyer gives a different reason.

The objective is not to change course every time someone has an opinion. It is to recognize meaningful patterns early enough to preserve options.

Imagine a home receiving strong online engagement but very few showings. The instinct may be to increase advertising. But exposure may not be the problem. Buyers are already seeing the home. The real problem may be that the price, photos, condition, or features do not compare well enough to earn a visit. More exposure would simply show the same problem to more people.

Good decisions come from diagnosing the signal correctly.

> PRINCIPLE
>
> **The market is always communicating. We have to listen for patterns, not noise.**

ASK YOURSELF

Are we reacting to one opinion—or recognizing a consistent pattern?

NINE

Negotiation Begins Before the Offer

Most people think negotiation begins when an offer arrives.

By then, much of the leverage has already been created or lost.

Negotiation begins with positioning. It begins with how the home compares. It begins with the quality of the launch. It begins with the information available to buyers and the confidence they have in the property. It begins with whether one buyer is interested or several buyers are paying attention at the same time.

A seller negotiating during the strongest period of demand is usually in a different position than a seller negotiating after months of limited activity.

That is why the objective is not simply to sell quickly.

> *"The objective is to create the highest probability of negotiating from a position of strength."*

Price is only one term.

Closing date, possession, financing, appraisal risk, inspection rights, concessions, contingencies, included property, and certainty of performance can materially change the quality of an offer.

The highest offer is not always the strongest offer.
The cleanest offer is not always the best offer.

The right decision depends on which risks matter to the seller and how the terms work together.

Consider two offers. One is slightly higher but depends on the sale of another home, asks for substantial concessions, and creates a long period of uncertainty. The other is lower but has stronger financing, fewer contingencies, and a closing timeline aligned with the seller's next move.

There is no automatic answer.
The difference must be evaluated in the context of the seller's priorities.

Good negotiation also requires discipline.

Not every request deserves a concession. Not every point needs to become a contest.

The goal is not to "win" every line of the contract. It is to protect the outcome that matters most without creating unnecessary risk elsewhere.

That requires knowing where flexibility is inexpensive and where it is dangerous. It requires understanding the other side's motivation without confusing it with our own. And it requires remembering that the strongest leverage often comes from having credible alternatives.

> PRINCIPLE
>
> **The best negotiation position is usually created before anyone writes an offer.**

ASK YOURSELF

Which terms matter most to my outcome—and where can I afford to be flexible?

CLOSING PHILOSOPHY

Making Better Decisions

Selling a home involves uncertainty.

No agent controls interest rates, buyer timing, the next competing listing, an appraisal, an inspection, or every decision on the other side of the transaction.

> *“The goal is not to avoid uncertainty. It is to make better decisions within it.”*

That means beginning with the seller rather than the property. It means separating personal goals from market value. It means understanding that buyers compare before they buy. It means treating price as positioning. It means using marketing to create opportunity, not as a substitute for value. It means preparing with purpose. It means listening to patterns in the market. It means building negotiating leverage before an offer arrives. And it means connecting every recommendation to a clearly understood problem.

When the market gives us new information, I use a simple decision filter.

Observation

↓

Pattern or isolated opinion?

↓

Problem identified

↓

Options considered

↓

Tradeoffs explained

The decision filter — from raw observation to a decision tied back to the seller's original goal.

What did we observe? Is it an isolated opinion or a meaningful pattern? What problem does the pattern reveal? What options could address it? What are the tradeoffs of each option? Which decision best supports the seller's original goal?

These principles do not guarantee that every transaction will be easy. They do something more useful. They create a process for thinking clearly when the answer is not obvious.

That is what good representation should provide.

Not pressure. Not false certainty. Not a promise that every preferred outcome will happen.

Context. Options. Honest guidance.

And a decision-making process strong enough to adapt when new information appears.

No one can promise the outcome of a sale.

What I can promise is that every recommendation will have a purpose, every important decision will be informed, and you will understand the reasoning behind both.

Because this is not my move.
It is yours.

You only get one opportunity to sell this particular home.

My goal is to make sure the decisions that shape that sale are made intentionally—not accidentally.

Where you start is usually a conversation, not a decision.

FINAL PRINCIPLE

The best outcomes are rarely the result of one perfect decision. They are built through a series of thoughtful decisions made for the right reasons.

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Not sure which selling path fits your situation?

Book a strategy session to compare your options and determine the right next step.

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