

Los Angeles Times

The Safe Open House

When your home is for sale you open the doors to both buyers and burglars.

KATHY SENA | SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

When the owner decided to sell the Los Feliz home Eva Bizar and her husband were living in, Bizar was prepared to be helpful. She polished the floors, kept the kitchen spotless and agreed to stay away from home for an afternoon during an open house arranged by the real estate agent.

What she wasn't prepared for were the two men who blended in with the crowd during the open house and made off with her jewelry--including a much-loved diamond anniversary band.

"I couldn't believe some people would go to an open house with the express purpose of stealing things," Bizar said.

But that's exactly what about 5% of the people who attend open houses are doing, said Gregg McMullin, a police officer for the Manhattan Beach Police Department's crime prevention unit. "You get a real cross-section of people at an open house," he said. "You see buyers and you see burglars pretending to be buyers."

Across Southern California, home sellers have reported having money, jewelry, family heirlooms, collectibles--even prescription drugs--stolen during open houses.

It's tough for a real estate agent to keep a constant watch on everyone who wanders through an open house, McMullin said, "so you need to control things as much as possible."

Bizar thought she was doing just that when, in preparation for the open house, she placed her frequently worn jewelry in a box and tucked it in the back of a drawer in the bathroom.

"I thought I was being careful," she said. "I didn't leave the jewelry out on a dresser, waiting to be stolen." But the thieves were in and out of the house in minutes.

And many stolen items aren't covered under a standard homeowner's policy, said Robert Ray, a registered representative with Prudential Property and Casualty Insurance Co. in Redondo Beach.

"Valuables like antiques and jewelry are generally not covered under the basic policy and would need their own policy," he said. "But even if I had insured all these items, I wouldn't take any chances. I tell people to put valuables in their safe deposit box during an open house. Why take the risk?"

But what if your autographed Mickey Mantle baseball won't fit in your safe deposit box? There are lots of safe places to hide your valuables, experts said.

The main objective is to put Aunt Susie's silver pendant and Tommy's baseball card collection out of reach, not just out of sight. Try the attic, the trunk of your car or the neighbor's house. (One note of caution: Prescription drugs shouldn't be left in a hot car trunk.)

"You might as well pack up everything of value, since you're going to be moving anyway," said Susan Stearns, a Realtor associate with Prudential Jon Douglas West Valley. Having two agents working an open house together can be a great security measure for both the seller and for the agents, said Dorothy LaRose, an associate broker with Shorewood Realtors in Manhattan Beach.

"With team open houses, you can have one agent at the door greeting people and the other agent showing prospective buyers through the house," she said. "With just one agent, you can't cover a large house or a two-story house."

Although the agents interviewed for this report acknowledged that most open houses are covered by just one agent, "it's a good idea to request two agents when you give permission for an open house," suggested Marty Rodriguez, part-owner of a Century 21 agency in Glendora.

Also, LaRose said, make sure everyone who enters the home signs the guest register, is acknowledged by the agent, and--if possible--is accompanied by the agent on the tour of the house.

Also, keep in mind as you're doing your pre-open house security check (see accompanying story) that a potential burglar may stop by the open house to check out your home for a future break-in.

"You want to make your home look lived in, whether or not you're living there at the time," McMullin said. For instance, don't leave a stack of unopened mail or newspapers in view.

If you have an extra car parked at home during an open house, don't leave the car keys on your dresser or on a hook in the kitchen. That makes it easy for a car thief, McMullin said. "Put the keys someplace like a suit jacket pocket."

Credit card receipts left on the dresser are an open invitation to a thief who would love to have your Visa number. In fact, while you're at it, take the trash out, too. "Thieves like to look in your trash for credit card information and for information about your whereabouts," McMullin said.

Your family calendar--the one in the kitchen noting Jimmy's soccer games and Susie's school play--can also be a source of valuable information to a burglar. During your open house, don't let the world know you're heading to Grandma's for a week next month, McMullin said.

Also, ask your agent in advance to avoid giving out your schedule inadvertently, advised Stearns. "Even if you're at work all day, you want your agent telling people, 'Yes, they're here all the time.' "

While you're guarding your property, don't forget to guard your privacy during an open house. Your child's baby pictures or your wedding photo may not tempt a potential thief, but do you really want 30 or 40 strangers knowing your intimate family details?

Consider depersonalizing your home just a bit before the crowd arrives. This makes good marketing sense, too. After all, do you want potential buyers to look at your son's diploma or at the lovely view from the living room?

And speaking of intimate details, one area of concern among real estate agents is how to remind homeowners--tactfully--to remove or lock up any X-rated videos or other adult items during an open house.

"I explain to clients the importance of presenting their home in a professional manner," LaRose said. "I tell them not to leave 'open invitations,' which include money, jewelry and what I delicately refer to as 'items of intimacy.' "

What if, despite all your precautions, you have a theft during an open house? Is your real estate agent responsible?

"[Agents] really don't have any liability unless they are negligent," said Gov Hutchinson, assistant general counsel to the California Assn. of Realtors in Los Angeles. Hutchinson said that, when it comes to safeguarding a seller's property, agents are held to a "general negligence standard" and that to be liable, "the agent would have to do something like leaving the house unlocked or letting in a known criminal."

"I know of no cases [of theft during an open house] that have held the agent liable," said Paula Reddish Zinnemann, a Beverly Hills real estate attorney and counsel to the law firm of Schwartz, Wisot & Wilson.

And in late July, a Small Claims Court judge ruled against Eva Bizar, who had sued the agent who held the open house during which her jewelry was taken. "The judge said the agent didn't have any liability," Bizar said, "but that just doesn't seem right."

Even though the final responsibility generally rests with the homeowner, agents should explain to owners the element of risk inherent in holding an open house, she added. And sellers should discuss with agents--in advance and in detail--how they want their property handled.

In the end, no matter how careful you are, you're still taking a risk when you open your home to the public, Rodriguez said, adding that an open house is not always necessary to sell a home.

"I do very few open houses today because I find it's not a productive use of my time," she said. "What you want are qualified buyers." Often, when holding an open house, "you get a lot of looky-loos, including all the neighbors who want to see how you live and what you did to your house."

Although holding open houses may increase an agent's overall exposure and bring in potential new business, the average owner's chances of selling a home as a result of an open house are only about 1%, Rodriguez estimated.

So it's important for the owner to weigh both the risks and the benefits of flinging open the doors for John Q. Public. Just ask Eva Bizar.

"People need to be aware of the potential problems when they have an open house," she said. "I never thought this would happen to us."

Open-House Security Checklist

It's easy to remember to remove Grandma's ivory pendant from the jewelry box before an open house, but some other items are not so obvious:

* **Small electronic items.** Remove portable CD players, radios, cameras, CDs and cassette tapes. "Anything that's concealable is a possible target for theft," said Gregg McMullin, an officer for the Manhattan Beach Police Department's crime prevention unit. Cordless and cellular phones are also popular among thieves.

* **Guns and ammunition.** Deterring theft is an obvious reason to remove these items, and protecting curious children from possible disaster is even more important. Putting a gun on a high closet shelf isn't enough. Get it out of the house.

* **Small items that might be fascinating to a child.** "I have a sterling silver bird from Tiffany's," said Delia Delgado, a real estate associate with Re/Max South County in Newport Beach. "I sure wouldn't want a child to walk off with it, thinking it was a neat toy." Although young children might not steal something intentionally, it would be easy for a youngster to arrive back home with a bird in the hand.

* **Valuable artwork, figurines, collectibles, silverware and crystal.** Pack it for moving and store it before the open house. An added bonus: Your cupboards will appear more spacious.

* **Cash, credit cards, watches and keys.** This may seem obvious, but how many of us have a change jar on the dresser or emergency cash in the sock drawer? And who doesn't routinely leave a watch or keys on the dresser or night stand?

* **Garage door openers.** "If you leave your garage door opener in an unlocked car or on the kitchen counter, someone could walk off with it and use it to break in later," said Delgado.

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