

your home

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Tips and trends for homeowners, buyers and sellers

FINANCING A FIRST HOME

➤ Although financing a first home can be challenging, buyers who are prepared and know what they can afford up front can help expedite the process and save themselves unnecessary headaches later. Before starting your home search, follow these financial tips from the National Association of Home Builders and Bankrate.com.

- ➔ First, **figure out what you can afford to pay each month.** In addition to principal and interest, figure expenses for local taxes, insurance, and if buying a condominium, monthly assessments. Once you have this calculation, don't be tempted by lenders to pay more than that. Free mortgage calculators, which are available on many real estate and finance websites, can help you estimate monthly payments based on current interest rates and down payment. Generally speaking, no more than 28 percent of gross monthly income should be allocated to housing costs.
- ➔ **Pay down your debts.** Any credit card debt you have can limit how much you can borrow from a lender. Check your credit report thoroughly for any errors or unpaid accounts, and resolve those issues before moving ahead. Allow at least six months to iron out any credit problems before shopping for a home, experts suggest.

- ➔ **Determine your monthly cash flow.** Track your spending for two or three months to see where money is going. Once you know what you can afford and what your cash flow is, you can determine your down payment.
- ➔ **Organize documents,** especially those that validate income and taxes. Most lenders may want to see two recent pay stubs, W-2s and tax returns from the previous two years, and the last two monthly bank statements. Having these documents ready ahead of time can help the lending process run more smoothly.

If you are just getting started, check out local home-buying seminars or sites like HUD.gov, which provides information about shopping for and financing a home. Ask friends, family and co-workers for referrals for lending professionals they've worked with previously, and talk with lenders and credit counselors to find financing options that will work best for you.



HOMES BY DESIGN FOR 2015

Looking for a few ways to freshen up your home's interior design for the New Year? Check out these ideas from home furnishings retailer BoConcept New York and Cheryl Hucks Interior Design.

Get the Blues – Blue is the color of the year, and while cooler tones have been popular for several years, shades of blue will be more prominent in home design in warmer and bolder shades. To update your home décor, add a sofa or accent pieces in midnight blue or indigo.

Heavy Metal – Add a little sparkle to your home décor by adding a few metallic elements, such as a brass floor lamp, silver picture frame or throw pillows with copper stripes.

Natural Elements – Using natural materials adds more space and depth within your living space. Furniture made of natural wood, especially in lighter shades, creates an open, airy atmosphere. Try mixing wood pieces with other natural materials.

Tone on Tone – Create a contemporary tone-on-tone look by layering one color with varying shades and textures of the same color. Despite using different textures and saturation levels, designers at BoConcept say the overall appearance will be soft, calm and sophisticated.

Make a Statement – Some designers say using large prints and floral fabrics for accent furniture pieces can make a bold statement and give a room a creative focal point.



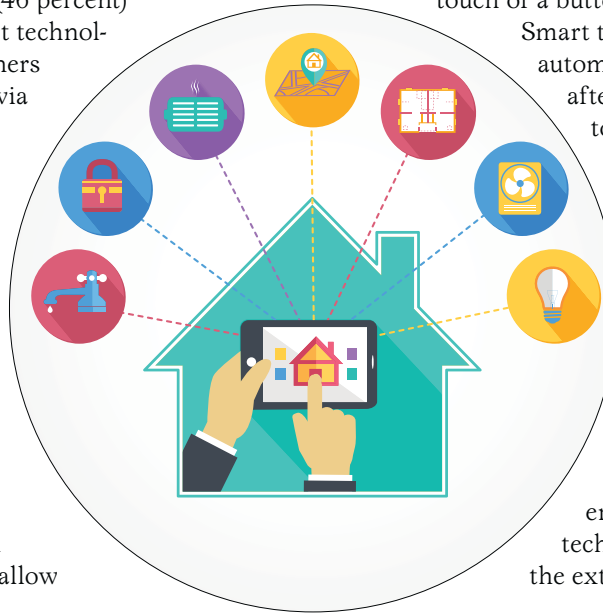
BUYERS SEEK smart homes

How smart do you want your next home to be? According to a recent survey by ERA Real Estate and HGTV, nearly half of today's homebuyers (46 percent) want their next home to have smart technology. Smart homes enable homeowners to control systems and appliances via Internet-connected devices. Many consumers believe a home with smart technology brings more comfort, safety and cost savings.

The survey also finds that more than half of homeowners (51 percent) would consider installing smart home technology to make their home more marketable to future buyers. The most popular smart features for homebuyers involve security, heating and cooling, and lighting. For example, homes equipped with remote access to security cameras allow

homeowners to monitor their home while they are away and can be programmed to close and lock doors remotely with a touch of a button on a smartphone.

Smart thermostats can be programmed to automatically adjust room temperatures after the homeowner has left the house to avoid unnecessary heating or cooling during their absence, or adjust the temperature to the owner's comfort level before they walk in the door. Some programs also track a home's energy consumption through a website or app. Automated lighting is another sought-after feature that enables homeowners to turn lights on and off remotely from a smartphone. For many tech-savvy homebuyers, investing in a house with smart technology is a practical choice worth the extra investment.



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