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# Apartment Sellers Insist on Exposure, of the Feet

By **CHRISTINE HAUGHNEY**

Darren Sukenik has some basic requests of people who come to his open houses. They should make enough money and have sufficient assets to afford the apartments he is selling, which often go for several million dollars. They should be serious about buying a home and not just gawking.

Most people have no problem with those requests. But the one that stops some of them at the door is a simple one: that they kindly remove their shoes.

"This apartment is precious," Mr. Sukenik, of Prudential Douglas Elliman downtown, said of a \$2.3 million two-bedroom in Manhattan he was showing last week. "You want to make it feel like a jewel box. You wouldn't wear construction boots in a jewel box."

Add the shoes-off issue to the list of New York neuroses. While it is no longer considered an imposition to ask one's dinner guests to remove their Nikes or Blahniks, brokers say that more sellers today, if not the brokers themselves, are demanding it during showings as well.

Their reasons vary. Sellers say they don't want buyers to dirty the rugs their toddlers crawl on, for example, or dent the softer wood floors in many new condos that can't withstand heels.

But some brokers say that in an industry that depends on foot traffic and first impressions, it is off-putting to make someone fumble with their shoes, and perhaps reveal that they are overdue for a pedicure or have ripped socks, before they even see the kitchen.

"In a slower market, you just don't need another excuse," said MaryJo Farling, a broker with Barak Realty. She says she has seen sellers imposing the no-shoes rule take longer than others to sell their apartments. "People believe in signs. When they show up and you ask them to take off their shoes, it's almost like, 'This might not be the one for us.' "

Leonard Steinberg, who, like Mr. Sukenik, works for Prudential Douglas Elliman, said he once thought the request was “anal-retentive.”

But he has become so fanatical that he unlaces his shoes in his elevator before he enters his Chelsea apartment, and has buyers take shoes off at most of his open houses. “Just look at a sidewalk in New York and you know where that seller is coming from,” Mr. Steinberg said.

There are dangers, he acknowledges, with some buyers “close to breaking their necks” when they try to take their shoes off standing in the doorway.

At his open house last week, Mr. Sukenik told potential buyers that children lived in the apartment and asked them to take off their shoes in the hallway or cover their shoes with surgical booties, the kind that doctors wear in the operating room, which he provided.

Mr. Sukenik said that in the past, some buyers, especially hedge fund executives who view it “humbling” to bare their feet, have angrily stormed out. But Mr. Sukenik, who wore the booties himself during the open house, said that none of the 28 visitors complained and that they seemed to appreciate the apartment’s immaculate condition.

One of them, Hayley Cohen, 27, said that it was the first time she had been asked to take off her shoes at an open house. “It was a little weird,” she said, describing how she arrived to a lineup of shoes in the hallway.

Ms. Cohen said that while she and her fiancé were not interested in the apartment for other reasons, she thought Mr. Sukenik smoothed over what could have been an awkward situation by being so gracious with his request.

Apartment seekers are generally respectful if they think that the owners have a legitimate reason for the request, like a cultural preference, a newborn or unfinished floors, said Jason Saft, a Citi Habitats broker who understands the sensitivity about this. His mother was so fanatical that people not wear shoes in her house that friends teased him growing up they had to take their shoes off when they walked down his block.

But perhaps no request was odder than one from the owner of a \$6,000-a-month apartment in a Perry Street town house. To honor his clients’ Asian heritage, Mr. Saft wanted renters never to wear shoes inside — even after they moved in. Mr. Saft received a few strange looks and expletive-laced questions. But within a week, he said, he found a renter happy to comply.

At another apartment, on West 23rd Street, which he is trying to sell for \$925,000, the renter living there taped a note on the door telling visitors to take their shoes off. But when

prospective buyers stepped inside, they found a home in such disarray that it was like “Animal House” meets “Girls Gone Wild.” The renter has left, but Mr. Saft is still trying to sell the apartment.

At an open house for one apartment Ms. Farling was trying to sell at 12 West 72nd Street for more than \$1 million, the sellers insisted that potential buyers remove their shoes because they feared their children could be exposed to germs.

So when a well-dressed man appeared, walking with a cane, Ms. Farling had to tell him to take off his shoes, one of which appeared to be orthopedic. He stared hard at her, told her she didn’t understand what pain this would cause him and told her, “Why don’t you call me when they get ready to sell this apartment?” she said.

Then he and his shoes walked out.