NAEBA Issues Guidance on Virtual Staging and Digital Photo Alterations in Real Estate

NAEBA urges homebuyers to verify listing photos and tour homes with a dedicated buyer agent for added protection.



The NAEBA 30 Year Logo - 3 decades protecting homebuyers

MESA, AZ, UNITED STATES, March 5, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Virtual staging and photo editing are not automatically unethical or illegal, and many uses are intended to help prospective home buyers visualize a space. However, the National Association of Exclusive Buyer Agents (NAEBA) warns that listing images can raise ethical and legal concerns, as well as home buyer frustration, when they create a misleading overall impression of a home's size, condition, finishes, or views, especially if any disclosure needed to prevent confusion is unclear or conspicuous.

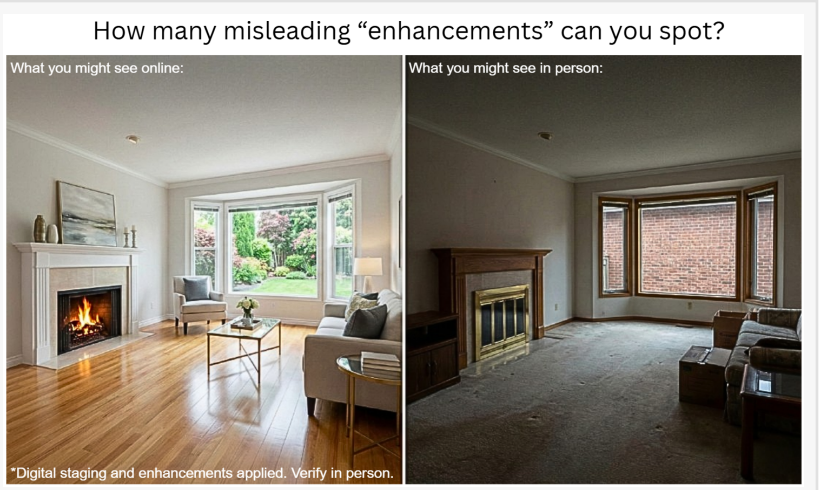
Federal truth-in-advertising standards emphasize that marketing must be truthful and not misleading, and the National Association of Realtors' Code of Ethics requires Realtors to present a "true picture" in advertising, including online images.

> The concern is the gap that can occur when images imply features, scale, or conditions that aren't there in person, especially when digital changes are not clearly disclosed."
>
> *Rich Rosa, Past President of NAEBA*

"Listing photos are an important home shopping and selling tool, and many types of photo improvements are meant to help a home show well," said Rich Rosa, a past president of NAEBA and co-founder of Greater Boston's Buyers Brokers Only. "The concern is the gap that can occur when images imply features, scale, or conditions that aren't there in person, especially when digital changes are not clearly disclosed."

WHAT'S CHANGING IN HOME LISTING PHOTOS?

Homebuyers have long seen brightened rooms, carefully chosen angles, and wide-angle lenses that make spaces appear larger. It's the listing agent's job to maximize the property's appeal to home buyers. Today, more powerful digital tools can also add furniture, remove clutter, change finishes such as flooring or paint colors, and even alter what appears outside a window. Agents alter images for legitimate marketing purposes, but they can also lead to confusion when the "net impression" of a listing suggests the property is different from what it actually is. NAEBA notes that consumers often struggle to detect manipulated real-world images. That matters in real estate because home buyers may use photos to decide which homes seem worth the time to visit.



How many misleading "enhancements" can you spot in this illustration?



Rich Rosa, past president of NAEBA

ARE THERE LAWS AND RULES GOVERNING REAL ESTATE ADVERTISING?

In the United States, the baseline expectation is not that advertised photos be "no edits." It is "no deception." Federal truth-in-advertising principles focus on whether marketing is truthful and not misleading, and whether any disclosure needed to prevent consumer confusion is clear and conspicuous in the way people actually view the content, including on mobile devices.

In addition, many real estate professionals adhere to industry ethics standards. NAEBA points to the National Association of Realtors (NAR) Code of Ethics, including Article 12, which requires Realtors to present a "true picture" in advertising and marketing. The accompanying standards of practice also address misleading images and the manipulation of online content in ways that can create a deceptive or misleading result. Article 2 further cautions against exaggeration, misrepresentation, or concealment of pertinent facts.

Because state laws and local rules vary, the same marketing tactic can pose different compliance risks across jurisdictions. Some multiple listing services (MLS) and states are moving toward more explicit "digitally altered" labeling and, in some cases, side-by-side presentation of altered

images with original photos. However, disclosure can be inconsistent when syndicated listings populate across multiple websites, social posts, email campaigns, and printed flyers.



Rich Harty, past president of NAEBA



Benjamin Clark, President of the National Association of Exclusive Buyer Agents

WHY DOES REAL ESTATE ADVERTISING DISCLOSURE AND ACCURACY MATTER?

One of the most common practical outcomes of heavy virtual staging or altered images is simple: prospective homebuyer disappointment. When a home looks bright, spacious, newly renovated, or "move-in ready" online, but appears darker, smaller, more worn, or differently configured in person, buyers can feel misled even if the listing included disclosures. That mismatch can waste time, discourage home buyers, and affect decision-making in a high-stakes purchase. "At some point, the house in the photo stops being the house that's actually for sale," says NAEBA President Benjamin Clark. "You aren't going to trick a buyer into closing the deal based on a digital illusion. They will see the reality the moment they walk through the door. It's a 'bait-and-switch' experience for the buyer." Misleading property marketing usually backfires on a home seller. Ultimately, what was intended as a marketing boost becomes a liability and can cause a property to languish on the market.

HOW CAN HOMEBUYERS PROTECT THEMSELVES FROM MISLEADING OR CONFUSING REAL ESTATE PHOTOS?

NAEBA recommends a few straightforward steps to reduce risk without turning every prospective home buyer into a photo detective:

• Check for labels and remarks such as "virtually staged," "digital rendering," or "digitally altered," and note which rooms are affected.
• When a photo appears staged or unusually "perfect," ask whether the originals are available.
• Verify what photos commonly distort, including room dimensions, ceiling height, storage, lighting, and property context.
• Have your buyer agent ask if floor plans are available.
• Cross-check views and location context using maps and exterior context photos, and confirm window orientation at the showing.
• If you are touring a home remotely, ask your buyer agent whether a 3D tour is available, or request a simple phone video walkthrough.
• Rely on seller disclosures and an independent home inspection to confirm condition, systems, and material facts, especially when photos emphasize cosmetic updates.

"Photos should help buyers understand what a home offers, not create uncertainty," said Rich Harty, a past president of NAEBA and co-founder of Chicagoland's Harty Realty Group. "If anything about a listing feels unclear, it's reasonable to slow down, ask questions in writing, and verify the details that matter most before you make a major financial decision. Lean on your exclusive buyer agent for guidance."

Visit NAEBA.org for homebuyer resources or to ask questions about the process.

ABOUT THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF EXCLUSIVE BUYER AGENTS (NAEBA)
The National Association of Exclusive Buyer Agents (NAEBA) is a nonprofit professional organization founded in the mid-1990s to give homebuyers a true advocate in an industry long shaped by seller-centric traditions and dual-agency conflicts. NAEBA ensures its members represent home buyers exclusively - never sellers - eliminating the divided loyalties and conflicts of interest common in brokerages where agents work both sides of the transaction. As dedicated fiduciaries, NAEBA agents provide expert negotiation skills, transparent guidance, and unbiased advice throughout the home-buying process, upholding the highest professional and ethical standards in the industry. By focusing on member education, consumer protection, and ethical excellence, NAEBA has become nationally recognized for advancing transparency and genuine exclusive buyer agency. Find a verified exclusive buyer agent at https://NAEBA.org.

ABOUT NATIONAL CONSUMER PROTECTION WEEK
National Consumer Protection Week is an annual event established by the Federal Trade Commission in 1998, held during the first full week of March to educate consumers on their rights and help them avoid scams. It has evolved from focusing on general fraud to tackling digital, identity, and financial threats, with participation from government agencies and advocacy groups.

Benjamin Clark
National Association of Exclusive Buyer Agents

+1 801-969-8989
naeba@naeba.info
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