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Dog Days of Real Estate

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When Rhona Sutter moved from London to Naples to be closer to her aging parents 15 years ago, all she wanted was a nice home with a fenced-in yard. Potential landlords liked the well-dressed businesswoman with the posh accent, but nobody wanted her 85-pound dog.

"It was truly a nightmare," recalls Sutter, who finally found a place through a newspaper ad.

Now Sutter's goal is to help others throughout the world have an easier time when they relocate with their dogs, cats, horses or other pets. In January she founded the Pet Realty Network, an online venture that matches pet owners on the move with "pet-friendly" real estate agents and developments.

Annual membership is \$50, which allows sellers to list information about themselves, an unlimited number of properties and photos of their pets at www.petrealtynetwork.com. Buyers interested in finding pet-friendly agents and properties can search the site for free.

Jackie Belcher of Amerivest in Naples says she joined the network because the price was right, and it was an opportunity to post a photo of her cat, Teddy, resting in a colander in the sink.

Robert Konst, broker/owner of Platinum Realty Services in Fort Myers, likes the idea of targeting pet owners. "It's a very big, demanding niche," he says. Though he signed up as "another way to keep our face out there," the face you see on his listing is Chanel, his English bulldog who, along with Schnapples the schnauzer, can usually be found at the Platinum office.

Sutter and Pet Realty Network vice president Molly Pavolino also take their dogs to work. Sutter's Labrador, Pimms, and Pavolino's rottweiler puppy, Reece, play and chew on toys while their owners pitch the business to realtors and developers as a unique marketing opportunity.

"We're the first people doing this, and the timing is excellent. We're in such a challenging market, and there's so much competition out there, each agent or developer has to differentiate themselves from the two million others in real estate," says Sutter. "Real estate is [about] long-term relationships. If you start working with someone and you tell a funny story about you and your cat, people will remember you."

Before she started the Pet Realty Network, Sutter combined her experience as an insurance broker in London with her love of animals and founded Pet Protect, one of England's few pet healthcare insurance programs. Pavolino also worked for that business, which was going strong until two years ago, when-along with the rest of the property and casualty market-it had to increase premiums and decrease benefits. Frustrated, Sutter focused her energies on a more pet-friendly business.

She chose a smart direction. According to the American Pet Product Manufacturers Association, 69.1 million households in the United States include pets, and nearly 11 million of them move in any given year.

Already about 160 members are listed on the Pet Realty Network site, which is still a work in progress.

Pavolino says that much of the "human feedback" they've received has come from people looking for rentals that allow pets, so they are adding a forum for renters. There are also plans to list pet-friendly parks and beaches, information about pet health and product reviews, and to have an online store.

While the Pet Realty Network is primarily a business site, Sutter and Pavolino have been adding more social content. Sutter now has a blog where she recently ranted about dog fighting. Pimms, the company's "director of barking," snagged an interview with the top pup at Dogster.com for his new feature, Monday at the Water Bowl.

The site also highlights shelter pets available for adoption around the country and has started a "Lucky Day" campaign, in which \$5 of every membership fee from Collier County goes to the Humane Society of Naples.

The Humane Society of the United States, Dogster.com and Catster.com, the National Association of Realtors, Animal Radio Network and other media outlets have helped spread the word about the Pet Realty Network. "I never thought we would get the publicity we have," says Sutter. But she also never thought she'd be answering e-mail from cats.

Sutter doesn't mind that she has traded in a closet full of silk blouses and suits from Harrods of London for "early Kmart" jeans and T-shirts that by the end of the day are covered in dog hair. And she doesn't mind that her income doesn't compare with the salary she used to earn. "I've been there and done it. I don't need money as a score card," says Sutter.



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