



HOME | MARYLAND | NATION | WORLD | BUSINESS | SPORTS | LIFESTYLE | OPINION | JOBS | CARS | REAL ESTATE | SHOPPING

SPECIAL SECTION MENU

print | email a friend

Select An Edition

Keyword Search... Search

View by: Page / Advertiser / Article

Animals on the move

Signature Estate Home
Collection Perfect Fit for Howard County

Real estate advice

Animals on the move

A niche group of real-estate pros smooth transition for pets and their owners

By David Silva CTW Features

Rhona Sutter doesn't consider herself an expert in entrepreneurship, but she knows a howling-good business opportunity when she sees one.

So, after running into problems finding a home for her and her pet, the Naples, Fla., Realtor realized her colleagues in the industry were virtually ignoring a tremendous need among homebuyers and sellers.

About 10.7 million Americans with pets move every year, according to a study by the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association. But few real-estate agents had both the knowledge and willingness to address those potential clients' concerns, such as finding a suitable property for the pets, researching neighborhoods for their access to veterinary clinics and other animal services, or handling the logistics of moving pets across long distances.

"The numbers are astronomical," says Sutter, who's been a real estate agent for 15 years. "A recent study by the American Veterinary Association showed there are nearly 72 million pet dogs and 82 million pet cats in the United States. We spend \$24.5 billion every year in veterinary bills alone."

Sensing a wide-open niche market, Sutter launched the Pet Realty Network in October 2006. The online service connects pet owners on the move with the real-estate professionals who are pet lovers themselves. Perhaps just as importantly, the network connects these professionals with each other.

Sutter charges members \$50 a year for her services, 10 percent of which is donated to animal shelters in the member's area. Business is booming: Nine months after its launch in October 2006, the network had 200 members. Today, it has some 500 members, and Sutter is about to take the Web site international.

"We started off just doing pet-friendly listings," she says. "What we do now is put out our marketing skills for our members. We're not a lead generator, not a broker, and we're not paid per lead. You're talking to someone who hates to be cold-called - can't bear it, drives me insane."

By "we," Sutter refers to herself and Pimms, her beloved Chocolate Labrador listed on the network's corporate chart as "director of marketing." Sutter is a huge dog lover - it was her difficulty in finding a home for Pimms when she moved from London to Florida that first clued her in to the need for the network. But she stresses that dogs and cats aren't the only pets of concern to her members.

"If you're talking to someone about a horse or a llama, you'd like them to know something about horses or llamas," she says. "Horses have their own unique challenges - every animal has its own set of difficulties. You have to be concerned with whether the appropriate veterinary services are nearby, evacuation routes in case of an emergency, and nearby facilities for the pets."

"Horse people" represent about 40 percent of Jodi King's clients. A real estate agent with Keller Williams Check Realty in Prescott, Ariz., King joined the network in mid-2007 as a way to try to boost that percentage to 60-80 percent.

"I haven't seen a lot of inquiries from homebuyers yet, but I've spoken with a lot of agents from other parts of the country who made contact with me through the network," King says. "They were looking for agents in this area who were familiar with horses because it's kind of a specialized field."

"When it comes to horses," she says, "besides just zoning regulations, you have to be on the lookout for deed restrictions, 'CC & R's' (codes, covenants and restrictions) that prohibit horses even though the area is zoned for them. If someone is serious about horses, and do more than just trail riding, then they're going to need lots of usable space. A person who uses roping horses has different needs than someone with jumping horses."

King is exactly the kind of member Sutter had in mind when she set up the network: a professional with practical knowledge in helping clients with their specific pet needs.

Becky Gresch, who with her husband owns Waggin' Wheels Pet Courier in Jacksonville, Fla., was one of Sutter's first members. She uses the network to reach Realtors with clients who need to relocate their pets.

"When you're talking about people with large animals, such as a bull mastiff or Great Dane, the thought of having the animals stay with them in a hotel can seem overwhelming," Gresch says. "What we do is allow the family to make the move and get settled, then we'll bring the animals to them, walking them every four or five hours on the way. If we have to stop somewhere overnight, we book the animals in pet-friendly hotels."

That's another major benefit of the network, Sutter says: It connects pet owners unfamiliar with the areas they're traveling to with professionals who know the areas well. It's just one less thing to worry about during the already enormously stressful process of moving.

"If you're thinking about taking your dog into Manhattan because of your work, you need to talk with someone who knows the ins and outs of co-ops in Manhattan," she says. "I was talking to someone who was moving to San Francisco, and [who] owned a mastiff. You really need a lot of space for a mastiff, and it helps to know someone intimately familiar with San Francisco." You can find the Pet Realty Network at www.petrealtynetwork.com.

© CTW Features



About baltimoresun.com | About The Baltimore Sun | Tribune | Sun Store | Get home delivery

Jobs | Autos | Homes | Apartments | FSBO | Boodle Coupons | Open Houses | Houses for Rent

Privacy Policy | Terms of Service | Work for us | Feedback