

Pet-friendly agents form real estate network

By Laura Layden

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Nowadays, pets are part of the family.

They go along on shopping trips and vacations — and sometimes they even go to work with their parents.

So shouldn't they be considered when buying a new home? That's the idea behind The Pet Realty Network, a new online service that connects buyers with pet-friendly agents and properties across the country.

The network is owned and operated by Naples-based Pet Protect, founded in 1997 to provide health insurance to pets. Rhona Sutter, Pet Protect's president, is the inspiration behind the new venture. She's also a licensed real estate agent, though she no longer sells property.

"I've just sort of been goofy about animals all my life," she said. "Coming from London, people sort of care more about their animals than they do about people."

Of course, she has a pet of her own, Pimms. The chocolate Lab, who just turned 6, is named after an English brew. He can be found on the company's Web site, petrealtynetwork.com. He has his own page, where he offers to "retrieve" the answers to questions about pets and pet-friendly real estate. Sutter describes him as the director of "barketing."

Sutter, a Realtor in Naples for 14 years, has seen first-hand how challenging the market is for agents as sales have cooled across the country. The network gives agents a unique way to promote themselves.

"It's marvelous to be able to show your client that you are actually doing something new and innovative in marketing, as opposed to just sending out another postcard or sticking a magnet on the fridge, where people probably have 400 of them," Sutter said.

Dozens of real estate agents have joined the network, from Florida to Alaska.

"It really is growing every day because it has just started," said Molly Pavolino, the company's vice president.

In Florida, there are 26 members. One of them is Sandra Madrigal, an Orlando real estate agent who describes herself as a "dog lover at heart" in her profile on the Web site.

“My life is all about my six dogs, or more like my six babies,” she writes.

The network makes its money from its memberships. Real estate agents pay a \$50 annual fee that allows them to upload their biographies, tell visitors about themselves and their pets, and list an unlimited number of pet-friendly properties.

There’s also a photo gallery where they can post more pictures of their pets.

On the site, agents can tell visitors what animals their properties are good for and show off pictures.

“No two properties are the same, and they all have their uniqueness about why they would be pet-friendly,” Sutter said.

The network does not collect visitors’ names, e-mail addresses or other contact information. Prospective buyers must contact agents directly.

Sutter said she doesn’t plan to return to selling real estate while involved in the network because she sees it as a conflict.

As an agent, she has worked with investors nationally and internationally, and she’s been involved in some of the most-exclusive real estate sales in Southwest Florida. She’s also sold real estate in the Bahamas and the Caribbean.

The new service continues to evolve since it launched in January.

Recently, the network started the “The Lucky Day” campaign. In cooperation with animal shelters, it’s working to raise awareness about pet adoption and the increasing number of pets that are surrendered to shelters because of residential pet restrictions or relocations.

The company has also started a program in which it donates \$5 from every membership fee collected in Collier County to the Humane Society in Naples. It has partnered with a few other shelters in other areas to do the same.

There are plans to add pet-friendly rental properties to the site, which this week added a pet blog.

“As far as we know there is nothing else out there like it,” Pavolino said.

“That is why it’s an exciting venture for us and sometimes a little scary. Going into it, being the first one, you never know what you are going to get.”

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