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Realty agents promote themselves as 'pet friendly'

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In today's real estate market, going to the dogs is not necessarily a bad thing.

Linda Lamb, in fact, is sure it's a smart thing. The South Side Chicago real estate agent plasters pictures of Esau, her Great Dane, on her business cards and brochures. And recently she joined the Pet Realty Network, a new affinity group she hopes will attract clients.

Lamb is one of a handful of Chicago agents who have joined the fledgling online group, which promotes its members as "pet friendly" to help them stand out in an increasingly crowded field.

Indeed, "pet friendly" is becoming something of a buzzword in real estate. Developers tout new buildings that not only welcome animal companions but also cater to them. The Thrush Cos., for example, promotes its condo building's affiliation with a dog-walking and pet-sitting "concierge" service.

And the trend is carrying over to rental apartments, which are increasingly less likely to hang out a "No pets allowed" sign.

"It is an amazing niche market," said Rhona Sutter, a Naples, Fla., real estate agent who got the idea for the Pet Realty Network when she came across statistics on pet ownership.

"Last year, in the United States, 10.7 million people moved with their pets," Sutter said, citing data from the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association. An animal lover who formerly ran an online pet-supply business, she founded PetRealtyNetwork.com to connect pet lovers with like-minded agents.

"The real estate market is very challenging at the moment," she said. "It just seemed that real estate agents need to find a niche."

Affinity-marketing isn't new in real estate. Some agents promote their ethnic backgrounds or religious affiliations to attract clients who want specific language skills or a familiarity with cultural practices. And agents routinely tout such specialties as first-time buyers or senior citizens.

Sutter says demographics suggest that pets' time has come too. America is raining cats and dogs, according to the pet-products manufacturers group, which notes in a 2005-06 study that 63 percent of all U.S. households own pets. This translates to more than 69 million households, up from 51 million in 1988.

That's about 74 million dogs, 91 million cats and 149 million fish. Pet birds number about 17 million. Then there are 18 million assorted "small animals" and 11 million reptiles, the group says.

Sutter is betting that many owners put their animals' needs -- a roomy yard, space for cages or just a friendly condo building -- high on their home-shopping wish lists. And they want real estate agents who understand that.

Agents pay \$50 annually for inclusion on Sutter's site; she says about 200 agents have signed up nationwide since January. The group donates 10 percent of membership fees to animal shelters in the region where the agent does business. In Chicago, she said, the donations go to the New Leash on Life rescue group.

Lamb, who works with Chicago animal-rescue organizations, said she hasn't gained any clients from the site since she joined a couple of months ago, but she expects that will change as she adds more information about herself and as the site gains traction.

"People do business with people they like," Lamb said. Plus, she notes, times have changed.

"In the past few years, all you had to do was raise your hand and say, I am a Realtor and you got business," she said "It's slowing down now, and people are taking their time. They want to work with people they have a connection with."

Agent Lindsey Marcus also signed up, saying it was a good fit for the pet-friendly image she cultivates. She has found new clients while taking Lucky, her Chihuahua, to a dog beach and through a "doggie play group" that meets monthly.

"I tell people I am a pet-friendly Realtor," Marcus said. "I show my dog's picture at the initial meeting with every client."

She said accommodating animals is an increasingly serious point for homebuyers.

"Many people struggle with finding a building that allows pets. Buildings have restrictions on the number of pets or on weight. They may find the perfect home, but then find out that it wouldn't allow them to bring Fido with them."

Chicago real estate agent Mario Greco said he hears that a lot.

"Somebody might say, look, we have a dog, and he weighs 40 pounds," in excess of condo board's limit, Greco said. "And they'll say, I don't care if we find the perfect unit, if it doesn't allow our dog, we are not going into that building."

He's building a home that will have a washing room and a yard to accommodate his four dogs.

"We need a dog-friendly house and a dog-friendly yard," he said.

Maurice Ortiz, marketing director for the Apartment People, a Chicago rental agency, sees the trend in rentals too.

"One of the first questions we get asked (by prospective renters) is, 'Is the building pet-friendly?' Pets now trump the parking issue," he said.

Many landlords say they need to accept animals to remain competitive, he said.

"There was a time, between 2001 and 2004, that owners were really having to put up some kind of incentive or do something that would attract more renters," he said. "The easiest thing to do was to allow more pets."

Additional competition comes from investor-owned rentals in condo buildings that welcome animals, he said.

Penelope Ellis said she was surprised at how easily she and her Italian greyhound, Oliver, found an apartment. She has lived with the dog in various cities.

"It was really tough to rent with a dog in Los Angeles," she said. "And San Francisco, where I lived after college, that was also difficult.

"New York, forget about it," she said. "Chicago is a very pet-friendly town and this is a very pet-friendly neighborhood."

Alex Dobrow started PeopleWithPets.com a few years ago when he had to buy a house because his landlord had banned his 125-pound dog. The site specializes in listings, nationwide, of rentals that welcome critters. He says more than 1,600 apartment communities are included.

"People are still wary, though," Dobrow said. Most communities limit pet size and exclude animals regarded as "exotic," a description that might include reptiles or ferrets, among other types of animals.

"A lot of times a pet interview is required," said Dobrow, whose business is based in Kill Devil Hills, N.C. "They want to see if the dog is aggressive."

But not all realty people think these folks are barking up the right tree. Trainer Bernice Ross said there is a danger in too much of a pet thing.

"The Pet Realty Network, that's perfect niche marketing if you're selling horse properties or you do dog shows or you're

very involved in the animal-rights community," said Ross, chief executive of RealEstateCoach.com in Austin, Texas.

But she says including pet photos on a business card or on a mass-mailed postcard is a consumer turnoff.

"Because you're an animal lover, does that mean you have real estate expertise, that you're going to be a good negotiator?" she asked. "Name one Fortune 500 company -- unless they're selling dog food -- that has a dog on their business cards."

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