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Some real estate agents have pet projects

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"Dogs are the new children," Djuna Woods says when I reach her in her Coldwell Banker office in Menlo Park.

Although Woods' words have precious little to do with real estate, as an elevator pitch it's hard to do better than a single sentence which cleverly defines her target client and makes a sweeping generalization about our culture.

In a market where many real estate agents are struggling to distinguish themselves from the property hoi polloi, carving out a niche has become the requisite exercise in individual branding. For agents willing to spend a fat wad, an entire industry has sprung up to help them identify their hidden specialty.

Neighborhood specialists have always existed. More recently, agents began marketing themselves as experts in certain architectural styles - be they Victorians, brownstones or green housing. Others have developed an expertise in a process - such as remodeling or rezoning. But increasingly, niches have taken a turn toward the personal by defining the very essence of the client. Broad generic categories that the U.S. census might measure - gay, black, Christian - have long formed the basis for real estate networks.

Some eccentric niches

Katharine Holland of Coldwell Banker in San Francisco has set her sights on single women (a growing sector of first-time home buyers), offering classes which teach them the home-buying process. But now the niches are becoming more narrow and in some cases, downright eccentric.

Catherine Aubale Epstein of Paris Immo Realty specializes in Americans who don't speak French or know French real estate laws but who nevertheless want their own pied-a-terre in Paris. Jackie Youngblood, a Florida agent, has uncovered a niche for nudists in the Tampa Bay area. Her tagline: "Skip the outfit, wear the lifestyle."

Woods' dog-friendly niche epitomizes the trend in real estate agents tapping into the culture's deeper lifestyle biorhythms. Her Web site, www.peninsulahousehound.com, and blog, Peninsula Househound (househoundblog.com) explore intersections between real estate and Fido, including profiles of unofficial as well as official dog parks, a search engine that helps find dog-friendly homes for sale, and advice on how to ready a home for market when it's still occupied by your beloved furry friend.

Her Yahoo Group for Peninsula dog owners allows local dog owners to trade tips and meet each

other.

"It's really a quality of life issue to have a home that makes sense for your dog," she says. "Being close to a dog park is especially important."

Suiting the dogs

Woods enumerates other factors attractive to families with four-legged members, include having hardwood floors (instead of carpet), a fenced yard, a pet-friendly neighborhood (filled with neither anti-pet people nor violent fight dogs) and a place to separate the dog from guests or workers.

In shopping for condos, she adds, owning a dog can be a deal buster because many new condo projects restrict pets but don't advertise this in their marketing materials. "I've heard about clients falling in love with a condo, putting an offer down and then reading the CC&Rs and discovering that no pets are allowed," Woods explains.

"It's really about understanding your clients and how they live." She says that most of her clients are "just starting families - and have gotten a dog to test their parenting skills."

Woods isn't the only one to have jumped on the profit potential lurking in the creature-caring community. In fact, she got her inspiration from another local real estate agent who networks by throwing parties for cavalier King Charles spaniels, the breed of Woods' own dog.

The community extends nationwide with a network which offers a searchable database of fur-friendly agents and advice about relocation with a pet (www.petrealtynetwork.com).

A nationwide network

Owned by Pet Protect, a pet health care insurance company, the organization promises that "Everyone at the Pet Realty Network is a pet parent and understands how important it is to have a pet as part of the family. We are committed to both the real estate and pet industries and can offer unparalleled insights to pet owners and pet friendly real estate professionals."

Knowing my fair share of pet parents, I can see that this is more than niche silliness: It's getting right to the bones of the matter. In a region where many cities boast more dogs than children, where schools are closing and dog hotels are thriving, dog ownership isn't a peripheral pleasure, but increasingly the very core of many people's identity. The evolution of the real estate agent as a lifestyle consultant makes sense.

As any dedicated real estate agent will tell you, helping someone buy or sell a home is more than crunching numbers, showing houses and, if you're lucky, forcing a ream of forms through a bureaucratic slot; it's an intimate consultation with the clients' passions and dreams.

And if those passions involve caring for a canine as one would one's own offspring, then these agents are barking up the right tree.

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