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NY REAL ESTATE RESIDENTIAL

Home-Sharing Hosts Turn to Online Property Management Firms for Help

Firms Assist Owners by Delivering Keys, Arranging Cleaning; 'Type of Concierge'



City CoPilot co-founder Maggie Barnett, left, lends a hand to customer Darra Landman. *KEVIN HAGEN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

By **KAYA LATERMAN**

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It's the time of the year for hitting the road—visits to family, ski trips, getaways to sun-soaked spots.

And more and more travelers are opting to rent their apartments while they are gone—through home-sharing websites.

But a good number come to realize they don't have enough hours in the day to clean, stock the refrigerator and turn over the keys.

Now, time-strapped hosts have help to prepare for their guests: online property management firms.

Investment adviser Robert Guterma often rents his apartment through the private accommodations service Airbnb when he goes away on business.

For a while, Mr. Guterma relied on friends to hand off the keys to his home in the Union Square area; then he discovered a firm called Proprly, which he has used some 20 times in the past five months.

“I relied on ad hoc combinations of friends and cleaning people to collectively take care of the various things that need to be done to reach outgoing and incoming reservations and it was truly a nightmare,” Mr. Guterma said.

Proprly, like Airbnb, operates online; the host pays a fee for any number of services: cleaning, doing the laundry, handing over keys and supplying special items that a guest has requested, such as champagne or a portable heater, said founder Randy Engler.

“We are trying to turn the traditional hotel-and-hospitality business on its heels...,” Mr. Engler said.

Proprly has four full-time employees who dispatch some 30 to 50 part-time cleaners and key couriers in an average week. To help with the holiday rush, he increased his staff.

“You really can't afford your cleaners not showing up when you have guests booked while you're away,” said Mr. Engler, noting his firm will expand to San Francisco and Paris next year.

Proprly's cleaning service starts at \$95 for a studio and runs to \$250 for a four-bedroom apartment. A key delivery—from courier to guest—costs \$40 from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. The price is \$100 if the delivery takes place between midnight and 6 a.m.

Many of Proprly's key couriers have occupations with flexible schedules; a busy one is Amand Barton, a freelance footwear, graphics and packaging designer.

“I do think of myself as a type of concierge because I can provide all sorts of information about the neighborhood,” Mr. Barton said. “It’s fun, interactive, and you have to be able to think on your feet.”

Proprly competes locally with a handful of firms that include Guesty, Keycafe and City CoPilot.

For Guesty, launched earlier this year from Israel by twin brothers Amiad and Koby Soto, the holidays are the time to lure new clients. Guesty, which has its U.S. headquarters in San Francisco, is offering discounts to sign up more clients in New York, which totals about 10% of the firm’s business.

“The busy holiday season is an incentive for new users to give us a try,” said Amiad Soto.

Other firms are trying to fill the gap through a brick-and-mortar presence.

Occupying a small, stylish storefront in the Lower East Side is City CoPilot, which accepts packages for those who live in non-doorman buildings and handles key exchanges and luggage storage.

City CoPilot offers package deals; a one-time key exchange at the store costs \$9.99.

“I once saw a girl come out of a local coffee shop crying because no one could find the key that was supposedly left for her,” said co-founder Maggie Barnett. “Our bartender and barista friends in the neighborhood are fed up dealing with people’s keys. Now we deal with them.”

Ms. Barnett describes her business as “a front desk” to the Lower East Side, where she also lives. She passes out postcards that list her favorite local coffee shops and restaurants and considers her unofficial concierge service as an integral part of her business.

Keycafe places kiosks in neighborhood cafes; right now, the Vancouver, Canada-based firm conducts key exchanges for about 1,000 properties in the area at 44 locations.

“New York is a very important market for us,” said co-founder Jason Crabb. “If you do your business well and prove yourself in New York, then other markets [that you’re expanding to] don’t ask many questions.”

And then there is the occasional host like tech entrepreneur Rami Bitar who takes matters into his own hands.

After failing to find a property manager on Craigslist, Mr. Bitar invented a “front door lock bot” and text messaging system called ZipBnB, which automates the scheduling of cleaners and guests, sends reminder and security texts, and lets him remotely open the door to his building with his cellphone.

“I think the sharing economy is real and here to stay,” Mr. Bitar said. “There’s going to be a lot of different services that will be offered to decentralize the market.”

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