

Homes & Real Estate

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Give and take: Connect through sharing-related businesses | EcoConsumer

Sharing, swapping or renting instead of buying may have only subtle economic benefits for individuals and households — especially at first — and few sharing-related businesses make big bucks. But environmental and social benefits of the sharing lifestyle abound.

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

We've heard a lot about the sharing economy lately, but it's really more of a lifestyle.

Sharing, swapping or renting instead of buying may have only subtle economic benefits for individuals and households — especially at first — and few sharing-related businesses make big bucks. But environmental and social benefits of the sharing lifestyle abound.

Owning lots of stuff was the dominant way of life in America since the 1970s. Many folks had large garages and basements where they could conveniently keep all of their things.

You can still find plenty of overflowing garages. But today, a new mentality of sharing has also firmly taken hold.

Starting with a slump

The economic slump beginning in 2008 kick-started the current surge in sharing. More people suddenly had less money available to buy things, and some moved to smaller homes with less storage space.

Another main contributor to the sharing boom has been the development of innovative Internet-based sharing services with safeguards that allow people to feel secure about their sharing transactions.

Nearly all sharing services involve fees, but reservations and payment are simple and convenient with a smartphone or computer. Always use online reviews or personal references to thoroughly check out any sharing services and individuals you share or swap with.

Travel and transportation services blazed the sharing trail. Many Seattle-area residents use Airbnb or VRBO (Vacation Rentals by Owner) to book lodging for vacations, or rent out their own home or properties.

Zipcar, Car2Go, RelayRides and other car-sharing services have made it easier locally to live without a car. With JustPark, you can share an extra parking space in your driveway.

Pronto Cycle Share, the new name for Puget Sound Bike Share in Seattle, recently signed a sponsorship deal with Alaska Airlines and is scheduled to begin operation this fall.

Clothes to leftovers

Since sharing begins at home, here's a sampling of sharing, rental and swap services offering clothing, household items, food and more.

Swap.com. This online consignment store for baby's and children's gear allows you to pay for purchases by swapping your own items.

Our Fabric Stash. Serving the "fabric swap community," owner Deborah Boone holds semiannual "purge and stash" sale events in Seattle and Tacoma. Last year, she also opened a membership-based consignment shop on South Jackson Street between Maynard Avenue South and Seventh Avenue South in Seattle. It's filled with colorful fabric scraps and fabric-related items.

ÜbrLocal. This new Seattle-based online service connects gardeners and urban farmers who want to trade or sell their garden bounty or supplies.

LeftoverSwap. Attracting a pile of media attention lately, this iPhone and iPad app lets you share your leftover food, such as those two pizza slices you couldn't eat. It may sound gross, but it beats throwing away perfectly good food.

Tool-lending libraries. Well-established in several Seattle neighborhoods and previously featured in this column, tool-lending libraries epitomize the new sharing ethic. Vashon Island's new tool library is expected to open in September. The next frontier may be kitchen tools; Portland already has two specialized kitchen-tool libraries.

StowThat. Need storage in the Seattle area? Simply enter your ZIP code and find out if anyone nearby has a garage or other space to offer.

DogVacay and Rover. "Find a loving dog sitter" is how both these boarding services promote themselves. Dozens of Seattle residents have listings on each, with most people listed charging you between \$25 and \$50 a night to park your pooch.

Something Borrowed. Serving the entire Northwest, this Portland business rents vintage props, furniture and décor for weddings and events.

Offering benefits for your household as well as potential business opportunities, the sharing movement has really just begun to blossom. It's heartening to see so many folks connecting, reducing waste and conserving resources in ways that couldn't even be imagined a few years ago.

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