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Anchor Juju Chang

Top Priority: Finding Sitters Online

JUJU CHANG (ABC NEWS)

Hello, and welcome to "Top Priority" where women gather to discuss what's important to them. I'm Juju Chang in New York. You know, it's been called the Match.com of child care. A website devoted to searching for babysitters. Can Sittercity.com transform the process for parents? And what should you do before hiring anyone to take care of your kids? Find out next on "Top Priority."

For a lot parents, me included, finding the right babysitter can feel like a full time job. But now the Internet is making it a little easier. Today, we're going to talk about the success of Sittercity.com and what all parents should know when screening as, for a sitter.

We're joined now from Chicago by the founder of Sittercity.com, Genevieve Thiers, and here in New York we're also joined by mother of two, Jodi Hutchison, who found her babysitter online and by Diane Debrovner of Parents Magazine, who's going to help flesh out all the issues that we are definitely going to encounter. Welcome to you all.

Well, let's start...

GENEVIEVE THIERS

Hi.

JUJU CHANG (ABC NEWS)

Hi, Genevieve. Let's start with you in Chicago. Tell me about how the idea for Sittercity.com started and how you pitched it.

GENEVIEVE THIERS

Sure. Well, I was a college babysitter and I worked for about 30 families. And every time I worked for one family I would get nearly tackled by five other families that were saying, "I need help, I need a babysitter now." So, I thought well, why isn't it there one place in the city where all the parents and all the sitters can go to meet each other, so I created Sittercity.com.

JUJU CHANG (ABC NEWS)

It sounds like a, growing an idea to anybody who's ever looked for a sitter. But I take it you didn't get that much reaction from Internet investors.

GENEVIEVE THIERS

Well, when I first got started, I did go to a bunch of investors. And I think the problem was they were actually men. And I said this is a great idea to babysitting, so I'm sure you're going to love it. And they said, "Well, my wife handles that." And, you know, now it's the biggest thing in child care. But back then, I think it was hard for people to really get it and get the idea of online child care.

JUJU CHANG (ABC NEWS)

I understand that you have in excess of a hundred and fifty thousand people registered on your site nationwide. Now, I also understand that you can get this service through your employer in some cases. How does that work?

GENEVIEVE THIERS

Well, Sittercity has just launched a corporate program, which is really exciting. And basically, it's a way for a company to sign their whole employee base up on Sittercity.com. So, unlike an on-site daycare, a backup care agency or anything that like, you know, there's no people involved, there's space involved, just incredibly simple. You just buy for your whole company. You just click them onto the site. They have instant 24-hour access to a gigantic community of care. So, it's really pretty cutting edge.

JUJU CHANG (ABC NEWS)

It's great because, you know, companies often talk about wanting to be family friendly. And this is a great way to do it. How are the costs done from a corporate perspective versus from a, you know, online, if you just log on, how do the costs register?

GENEVIEVE THIERS

Well, normally a parent on our site will pay about \$95 over the course of the year. And they can, this is just your parent. They can join for either a monthly fee or a yearly fee. But for a corporation, it's very different because there's signing up involved, it can be as low as \$7 to \$10 per membership or per employee. So, it just depends on the company size.

JUJU CHANG (ABC NEWS)

I know that if you sign on, you can get thousands of sitters. How do you narrow the search? And how do you get to the point where you get to actually meet them face-to-face?

GENEVIEVE THIERS

Well, there are two ways once you're on the site to find the perfect babysitter. In the first place, you post a job. And jobs are emailed out every morning to all of our babysitters. So...

JUJU CHANG (ABC NEWS)

So, the sitters come to find you.

GENEVIEVE THIERS

...there's a quite large response. They come to find you. But there's another way to find sitters, too. We have a detailed search on our site where you can say, "I need someone Friday from four to six, that has a car, speaks Spanish, and isn't allergic to my cat," and click submit and here come all the replies, and you can take a look at them, and find the perfect sitter from those.

JUJU CHANG (ABC NEWS)

Right. Everybody has a long list of criteria. My understanding though is that everyone knows that the gut reaction when you meet a sitter for the first time, it means a lot. I know you've come up with a novel way that you could meet a bunch of sitters at once, right?

GENEVIEVE THIERS

Yes. It's called SpeedSitting. It's like a speed date but it's for parents and babysitters or nannies. This is really funny. We get a long table. We put parents on one side and sitters on the other. And they talk for five minutes, and then we ring a bell and the parents stand up and move down the table and talk to the next sitter in line. So, it's a great way to get that gut reaction, which is the only thing you can't get when you're finding a sitter online.

JUJU CHANG (ABC NEWS)

And when, I guess that you sort of do background checks on the, some of the sitters that go on. How important is it to check a potential babysitter's background?

GENEVIEVE THIERS

Well, we believe pretty strongly at Sittercity that if you're bringing care into your home, you should be the one screening it. So, from our side, we make sure our sitters are over the age of 17. But then, after that, we've integrated a very sophisticated four-step-screening process into our site that includes reference checking and feedback from parents and interview and a background check. But it's all integrated online. So the users can very easily do it on each other.

JUJU CHANG (ABC NEWS)

And there's always the boogeyman aspect of the Internet, the fear that, you know, you're going to check predators or you're going to end up with somebody that you don't want to end up with. How do you screen like that using a site like Sittercity?

GENEVIEVE THIERS

It's a four-step process, very, very easy. Once you go to the site, it actually guides you right through it. And again, the first step is checking those references. There is (sic) two. You got to call or email those. Secondly, you can see feedback from other parents that have used this sitter. So, it's a very community-based site. And you can check the sitter out before you even talk with them. The third step is the interview. And we have a huge library about how to do that online. And then the fourth step is to do a background check. So we're really proud that we're able to offer the same screening process an agency does. But it's a do-it yourself process, which I feel is even safer because you should be the one screening your care.

JUJU CHANG (ABC NEWS)

It makes such sense, too, because often mommies log on after the babies are asleep. And let's face it, teens are the ones who know the Internet better than anyone. It's a perfect match.

GENEVIEVE THIERS

Better than me. Yeah. You know, it's a perfect match. And it's really helpful. We're actually about to expand as well to many different care types including tutors and petsitting and other cares. So this is really just the beginning.

JUJU CHANG (ABC NEWS)

Fantastic. Genevieve, thanks so much for joining us.