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Screening the caregivers

SCI-TECH SCENE | Need a babysitter? Help with elderly? Sittercity matches people, services

November 30, 2008

BY [SANDRA GUY](#) Sun-Times Columnist

Lisa Morrell, a management consultant, went online to find two babysitters for her 4-year-old daughter, Krista, and now considers the sitters part of her family.

"When I posted the job, I wrote in detail what I expected, and I learned to search by criteria, such as whether the sitter knew CPR, liked animals and had good references," said Morrell, a single mom. "It shortcut the interview process because [the would-be sitters] had already passed my list of 20 criteria."

Morrell, who valued the time she saved, now tells others about Sittercity, a Chicago company that matches people with service providers much like a dating service.

Sittercity, started by Genevieve Thiers in Boston seven years ago, provides lists of caregivers who've posted resumes, provided references and gone through a background check, and whose pay rate is 80 percent to 90 percent cheaper than a staffing agency, Thiers said.

Parents and others are responsible for conducting a four-step screening process of the caregiver, including checking references, doing interviews and reading other clients' reviews. To get full access to the site, the yearly membership fee is \$95.88, or subscribers may opt for a monthly membership that can be canceled at any time. The monthly fee is \$39.99 for the first month and \$9.99 for each additional month.

"We're not sending sitters out on jobs," said Thiers, who moved with her husband to Chicago six years ago. "We're putting people together."

Ironically, Thiers and her husband, Dan Ratner, the chief operating officer of Sittercity, met through an online dating service seven years ago. They married last year.

Sittercity's technology allowed Ratner and Thiers to realize that people were seeking pet sitters, help with elderly parents and other services besides babysitting. So they expanded Sittercity two years ago to offer tutoring, housekeeping, a corporate program and caregivers for pets and the elderly.

The growth boosted Sittercity to No. 287 on Inc. magazine's 2008 list of the 500 fastest-growing private companies nationwide, with \$2.6 million in revenues, 29 full-time employees and a database of more than 1 million nationwide. The company's three-year growth soared 961.9 percent.

Sittercity is not yet profitable, but expects to reach that goal soon, Ratner said.

Ratner, a Chicago native and entrepreneur who got his degree in engineering at Brown University, lent his expertise in technology and business development when he joined Sittercity in 2005.

The company uses next-generation technology, such as filters and artificial intelligence tools, to look for behavioral anomalies, and Sittercity allows clients to see caregivers' regularly updated profiles and to monitor caregivers via real-time webcams.

A variety of webcams are available with features such as pan, tilt and zoom, and they are linked via Motorola's Homesight Gateway products. The company's data centers are hosted by Hosted Labs of Evanston.

Sittercity keeps its software development, customer service and quality assurance in-house, and has not yet taken money from institutional investors.

"It's a Web 2.0 experience. We listen and act," Ratner said.

Ratner practically inherited entrepreneurship. His paternal grandfather and his family, the Ratowczers (later changed to Ratner), started Forest City Enterprises, a Cleveland-based developer of malls, apartments, hotels and office buildings, as well as residences in Chicago's Central Station development in the South Loop.

Ratner and his father, Mark, the latter the "father of molecular electronics," have written two books explaining nanotech to the layperson.

The younger Ratner started three businesses in the Boston area -- ISP Wired Business, a distributor of DSL-based Internet access; Snapdragon Technologies in Cambridge, a tech and business consulting firm, and DriveltAway.com, an online car-auction site.

Not to be outdone, Thiers, a trained lyric soprano opera singer, started Chicago-based opera company OperaModa with her husband, her sister-in-law, Stacy Ratner, and friend Mary Lutz.

OperaModa hires only emerging opera professionals, and performs American operas in English about three times a year.

"Our goal is to be a stepping-stone for someone to become a professional," Thiers said.

Nik Rokop, managing director of the Knapp Entrepreneurship Center at the Illinois Institute of Technology, said Sittercity has plenty of competition, ranging from neighbor networks to peer networks to Web sites that offer tips on picking babysitters.

Yet Sittercity keeps growing, in part because it caters to people's life cycles, from children to pets to the elderly, Rokop said.

Thiers and Ratner, who live in the Lake View neighborhood, manage to take time to appreciate seeing thankful moms' eyes light up when they have found a great sitter or caregiver through Sittercity.

"Going with Genevieve to local moms' groups and PTO organizations and hearing people say, 'You saved my life. You've saved my marriage. You've saved my job,'" is awesome," Ratner said.