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Ready to Downsize? There's Plenty of Help

Entrepreneurs are finding there's good money in helping boomers and their parents relocate

BY JULIE HALPERT

DOWNSIZING IS becoming big business.

It's all about demographics: Entrepreneurs have found a lucrative niche in helping the growing number of baby boomers, and their aging parents, downsize and move.

Consider Kimberly McMahon, who in 2006 co-founded **Let's Move**, which helps seniors in Baltimore and Washington, D.C., downsize and relocate, often to residences in retirement communities. Her business reduces, packs up and moves households, and makes its clients comfortable in their new homes, hanging pictures, for example, and even making beds.

"There is more business than we can handle," says Ms. McMahon, a former sales director at Lucent Technologies. She says her company has served 5,500 clients so far and has grown an average of 50% a year for the past decade.

"This industry is booming," she says.

The National Association of Senior Move Managers, a trade group based in Hinsdale, Ill., has seen membership grow steadily since its launch in 2002. Its roughly 950 member companies reported \$225 million in total revenue in 2016, the first year the association requested the data. This year, it says its membership has grown to nearly 1,000.

Caring Transitions Inc., a Cincinnati-based franchiser of

senior relocation and transition services, was founded in 2006 and now has 178 franchises—17 of which opened this year, according to the company. Its franchises have served 19,000 clients so far, says Tiffany VanJohnson-Lutz, the company's director of marketing, who adds that business has "rapidly expanded over the past five years."

'It's draining'

Demographics are the key driver of growth, says Mary Kay Buysse, executive director of the Senior Move Managers association. Baby boomers

The stress of downsizing is one reason people turn to professionals.

want to help their parents downsize and relocate, she says, but are often busy juggling work and family. A third-party professional is often the best option to do this kind of work, she says, especially when a relocation becomes necessary due to a crisis. Even under the best of circumstances, it's a difficult task.

"Going through a lifetime of possessions and taking a house that's 2,500 square feet and moving to a 400-square-foot assisted-living community, it's not easy work," says Ms. Buysse. "It's draining for everybody."

The stressful emotions can be another reason why many people turn to professionals for help. The pitch by the companies is that they offer a trusted intermediary that can help families avoid friction at a sensitive time, says Carol Bradley Bursack, a consultant on caregiving and aging issues. These services can provide their customers with "emotional empathy," Ms. Bursack says.

Some retirement communities help cover downsizing and relocation services as an enticement to new residents, Ms. Buysse says. Or they may provide a list of recommended senior moving companies. Potential clients should not blindly accept such help, or hire a service independently, without first doing some checking on the contractor providing that service.

When dealing with vulnerable seniors and their valuables, it's essential to hire a trustworthy company, Ms. Buysse says. Companies that belong to her association, for instance, must undergo a four-course training program with testing, she says. The group also has a peer-review commission if a customer has a complaint.

Ms. Bursack, the consultant, says any company needs to be bonded and insured. Ask for references, she says, and check with the Better Business Bureau to see whether it has been the subject of a complaint. Reading online reviews also is helpful.

Interviewing the movers



Companies that help people downsize and relocate are thriving.

themselves is key, Ms. Bursack adds. Ask yourself, "Do they love what they're doing enough to do this well, or are they just in it for the money?" A good service will stand back and let the elder reminisce as objects are packaged, Ms. Bursack says. They'll sympathize, but not dissolve into tears, as family members might.

Demand is expected to grow even more, Ms. Buysse says, as boomers themselves continue to age in the coming years.

"We're still five to seven years away from critical mass," she says. Right now, she says, the oldest of the 79 million boomers are just 71.

The service isn't cheap. Some companies will charge a set fee in advance, others an

hourly rate. Costs tend to range from \$40 to \$125 an hour, depending on the region, according to Ms. Buysse. Ms. McMahon says her company typically charges \$65 to \$75 an hour for its services, which include arranging for the sale or removal of unwanted items. Total costs for each job typically are \$5,000 to \$10,000, she says.

Move-in ready

Many companies in this business provide a comprehensive service: first deciding what to throw away, donate or sell, followed by packing and moving, holding estate sales and preparing houses for sale.

Greg Gunderson, who started **Gentle Transitions** in Manhattan Beach, Calif., in 1994, says his company has ex-

perienced 15% growth a year over the past three years, serving roughly 1,000 seniors a year, with the average move costing \$3,000 to \$5,000. Employees sort through everything and use a magnetic floor-planning board to determine what the client's new space will be able to accommodate. They contract out for the physical move, but at the other end they unpack everything, and even make the bed and connect the electronics. Half of Mr. Gunderson's business now comes from retirement communities that pay for part or all of his company's services for new residents, he says.

Rita Coulter, 87, of Altadena, Calif., hired **Gentle Transitions** to help her move from her 2,000-square-foot condo to a 1,275-square-foot home in a retirement community. Her daughters had helped her with an earlier move, she says, and she didn't want to burden them again.

Employees worked with her to determine what could be accommodated at her new location—down to the number of pots and pans—and helped her donate or dispose of what she wasn't taking.

They unpacked everything in her new home while she left for a few hours. When she returned, she says, her paintings were hung and crystal was displayed as it had been in her prior condo.

"When I walked in, they had the lights on softly and they had music playing," Ms. Coulter says. "My daughters thought it was terrific."

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