

Sharing In Calgary

Everything from pets and nannies to real estate.



Sharing is one of the first lessons we teach children, and yet for adults, it's looked upon with more than a bit of skepticism. Why share when we can buy our own? But, as many are discovering, sharing not only lowers costs for rarely used items, it can decrease waste and build community.

“These days, if I went to my neighbour and asked to borrow a cup of sugar, they would look at me like I had three heads,” says Sean Young, a Calgary entrepreneur and the president of BorrowMe.com, a website where people from all over the world borrow items from other people within certain groups that the individual user establishes (such as trust networks, neighbourhood affiliations and so on).

Young aims to override our collective reticence about sharing and borrowing with BorrowMe.com, which was launched as a study in 2006 and will relaunch later this year.

“When we did our research originally, we looked at the social sharing movement,” says Young. “It encapsulates everything from car pooling to open-source software, and is becoming a really big social phenomenon.”

Young describes our society as weighed down by “stuffocation” – debt-ridden and overwhelmed with personal possessions, where we no longer need our neighbours for anything. Instead, if we need a rake twice a year for the yard, we drive to the big-box store and buy the latest and greatest. If we are short an egg for a muffin recipe, we wait until we do the weekly Costco run or zip down to the corner store, instead of asking a neighbour for one.

BorrowMe.com is contributing to a change in that insular, suffocated condition by reaching beyond our neighbours, allowing members to set up wish lists, and establishing borrowing/renting lists of their own (for example, they can lend their karaoke machine to their close friends for free, rent to people they don't know for a small price if they choose and so on). Members regain control of their “stuff,” while other members make good use of items they need – and maybe avoid a trip to the big-box store to buy items that ultimately contribute to the clutter in their lives.

BorrowMe.com is not about managing stuff so much as it is about intelligent consumption. Young stresses the “stuff” in question must be durable and idle, and can include anything from a week in a villa in Italy, to an exchange of skills or even that unused garden rake.

“BorrowMe.com is a social commerce lending marketplace where you go to borrow, lend and rent,” says Young. “You do a favour for me, I’ll do a favour for you, so you build a relationship with your neighbour. It’s a great opportunity to create social capital and create goodwill.

“We want to encourage people to engage in that behaviour and create that social commerce or social capital.”

Young and other like-minded people might just change the face of our world through exchanging social capital, and the concept does generate some serious warm fuzzies and practicalities. But when it comes down to “sharing” their sharing experiences, some people seem almost ashamed to admit they are exchanging capital in a way the rest of the world isn’t quite ready to embrace.

For example, there are some people who find themselves in a sharing situation with regards to things somewhat more precious than a rake or a bike, such as a beloved pet or childcare arrangements.

Todd and Christopher* are former partners who share the brown-eyed affections of 14-year-old Chance, “the best dog in the entire world,” according to Todd. Chance is an Australian shepherd cross who has lived, since the couple split, in Todd’s studio. As time permits, Christopher, who is reluctant for people to know about the dog-sharing arrangement, takes Chance for overnight visits, walks and trips to the vet when necessary.

At 14, Chance is getting a little long in the tooth for a dog, and both former partners contribute to decisions about Chance’s ongoing care.

“It works just like child custody, only without all the issues,” says Todd. “And Chance is an absolute gentleman about it, never making strange and there’s never any weirdness.”

Neither partner had to relinquish Chance’s affections, and the responsibilities of caring for a pet can be shared equally. Plus, if one owner goes away on a trip, there is always a loving, familiar home waiting for Chance.

From the outside looking in, the arrangement looks like a perfect situation for busy singles who simply don’t have time to care for a dog full time.

In fact, in the U.S., “flexible pet ownership” is catching on through an organization called [Flexpetz](#). For at least US \$1,350 a year, canine lovers get unconditional love, minus the responsibility of full-time puppy love. These kinds of services are already popular in Japan, so I was curious why the couple seemed reluctant to go on record as canine sharers.

“I would never have chosen a dog-sharing situation, and this is only due to circumstances,” says Todd.

“What’s best for” is often the question that comes up when entering any sharing or borrowing situation.

“It really speaks to the relationship you have to the world and your resources and how we value convenience, and about building a relationship with your neighbour,” says Young.

While sharing a pet may be more convenient and less costly for each owner, it may not provide what is seen as the ideal stability for the pet and finding a balance between all needs can be difficult. In short, the idea is to do “what’s best for” everyone.

But that is a subjective concept, especially when it comes to things like childcare, even though parents have been swapping childcare since the dawn of time. With myriad legislated standards and under the ever-growing scrutiny of the general public, swapping childcare or using babysitting time as a currency is sending many parents undercover as they struggle to find “the best” arrangement for their children.

“We looked at several different options for childcare when I went back to work,” says Nicole*. “We didn’t want someone living in our house, nor did we want to have to drive our daughter to a daycare with a bunch of other kids every day. I tried working part time from home, and switched off with my husband, but that was a total nightmare.”

However, a family across the street from Nicole employs a live-in nanny full time, so Nicole brings her daughter to that family’s house during the day, pitching in for a portion of the nanny’s fees.

The families remain open to changing the parameters of the arrangement as the children’s needs change, or as the parents’ work situations evolve. With many daycare facilities jammed to the rafters in the city, this situation is working – for now. There’s just one drawback.

“This arrangement is basically illegal,” says Nicole. “Plus, we don’t benefit from the federal government’s \$1,200-a-year childcare tax break. We work around this by getting extra childcare weeks.”

Nicole and her husband are not the first parents to adjust their comfort level with an “under-the-table” arrangement. But if the arrangement turns sour for any reason, or legal matters arise, parents in a situation like this need to be sure they’re prepared to face the consequences. If they’re not, then it’s probably best to stick with officially sanctioned childcare practices, even if it means paying more out of pocket, or entering into waitlist hell for coveted childcare spots.

While it’s unlikely [BorrowMe.com](#) will feature an offer to borrow a child any time soon (although Young’s wife jokingly offered her “slightly used” husband on the website at one point), legalities are worth considering when sharing just about anything.

Sure, we are looking at a movement that is based on trust, and a sensibility that values social relationships over stuffocation. But let’s face it – you still want to cover your ass.

“You don’t hand over your stuff to someone without getting their driver’s licence or a deposit, and you do need to look into your own insurance if you were to find yourself in a situation where your property wasn’t returned,” says Young, who is still working out some of those kinds of kinks from the first incarnation of BorrowMe.

But for the residents who live at Prairie Sky Cohousing community, sorting out the legalities of sharing

almost everything (no wife-swapping jokes, please) started long before the community was completed in 2003.

The co-op was designed and built by the 53 people who live there, and each household owns its own home and a share of the common facilities, which include a common house, gardens and underground parking.

Prairie Sky residents agree to share responsibilities such as cleaning and maintenance of common areas, enjoy weekly common meals and regular celebrations together, and can also choose to become part of the car share, workshop share or laundry share.

“For the workshop, about five or six of us got together and pooled our tools in a designated area, then we let go of duplicate tools,” explains Dennis Swenson, who has been living at Prairie Sky since the beginning. “If someone wants a new tool, they buy it and can choose to share it, or put it on a certain shelf if they don’t wish to share that tool.”

The laundry share and community computer are set up on an honour system, while the car share employs a more formal set-up, with a group of some 11 members initially securing a loan to purchase a car, paying \$800 to join and booking use of the vehicle through a computer program. By pooling other resources, from skills and labour, to childcare and cash, the community works to maintain what many see as a kinder, gentler corner of the world.

“People don’t always hold up their fair share of the work or responsibility, which occasionally happens,” says Dennis’s wife, Kathi. “Like if someone uses the lawnmower and it breaks and then they don’t tell anyone, then it does create some friction. But we have learned to communicate about anything and be honest with each other, and things quickly get resolved.”

This kind of sharing requires a huge commitment and lifestyle adjustment by each household to make it work, and most Calgarians don’t have the opportunity, or the inclination, to take sharing to this level. But social movements that led to Prairie Sky and BorrowMe.com are sweeping over our consciousness, and have been for some time.

Since 1999, the [Calgary Alternative Transportation Co-operative \(CATCO\)](#) has been offering temporary wheels to its members who want to share cars. Recently given a Corporate Award for Environmental Achievement by the City of Calgary, CATCO aims to expand its fleet of eight cars (mostly inner city, plus one at the University of Calgary). Members pay monthly dues of \$5, plus a refundable \$500 deposit to join.

With just under 200 members, CATCO provides a great alternative to car ownership for those short-haul trips, although Stuart Peters, chairman of the board, advises, “You can’t compare it to rental rates, as this kind of car sharing is best suited for those times when you only need a car for a few hours. Comparing it to car rentals is like comparing apples to oranges.”

Admittedly, sharing still makes some people squirm. Fans of two-wheeled vehicles were disappointed when a recent suggestion by Alderman Druh Farrell to consider a bike-sharing program in Calgary was shot down by council by a slim margin.

Bike-share programs have been popular in Europe for years, but only recently started to catch on in North America. Montreal recently rolled out 2,400 bikes for its citizens to share.

But sharing everything from cars and childcare, to rakes and cups of sugar has always been part of being human, even if it is learned behaviour. More formalized arrangements like Prairie Sky and BorrowMe.com might just give us a space to express kindness and caring to our neighbour in a city where we are taught, at least as adults, to consume and collect as much as possible.

Sure, there's a risk your neighbour might snap a tongue off your rake, or you might break the karaoke machine, or that some obnoxious artist might dip into your best acrylics when they borrow your studio space.

On the flip side, there's a chance that through sharing we'll relearn how to interact and socialize with people, and step outside of our comfort zone as we learn to resolve problems, then enjoy the rewards that come with generating a whole new kind of capital.

Says Young, "The social sharing movement is pointing to change in the way people will live their lives."

COMMENTS
