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Getting a hand with your errands

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Having someone else do the grocery shopping is a perk that many Valley homeowners are willing to pay for, according to Linda Lindell, founder of youflopishop.com.

Users fill a shopping cart online and send orders to Lindell, who then shops and delivers groceries for a \$50 fee.

Many of Lindell's clients have second homes in the Troon Country Club and Desert Ridge areas, and "they're not worried about saving 10 cents on a cantaloupe," Lindell said. "When they arrive in town, they want to relax and enjoy their visit. Time is more important to them than money."

Lindell, who built a client base as a personal shopper for Desert Ridge Marriott, also provides errand services for \$35. "I've done everything from buying a cane for someone who broke their leg on the golf course to picking up tuxedos," she said.

She also does party planning, including buying and delivering gifts, flowers, wine and birthday cakes.

"The liquor bill for a party is always a lot more than the groceries," Lindell said with a laugh. "I bought \$900 in wine for one party for a client."

Some personal services are companionship-oriented.

When Linda Ancha moved to Phoenix from Illinois in 2000, she and her husband were empty-nesters. "I realized I need to be needed," she said.

A friend asked Ancha to take a resident from a nearby retirement center to the grocery store. "This lady was in her 80s and on oxygen," Ancha said, "but she was laughing and full of life. She even flirted with the butcher. We had a wonderful day."

Referrals grew from the retirement facility to include others in the neighborhood and nearby. Six years ago, Ancha founded Errands by Linda. Today, she has six part-time employees who work with a group of about 30 clients, mostly seniors.

Ancha charges \$20 per hour plus mileage, with a three-hour minimum.

"Some of our clients are with us 12 hours a day, at doctor's appointments, errands and the grocery store. Sometimes, we just go to lunch and to the movies with them. We become friends as well as helpers."

Ancha sees her service as a boon to faraway families.

"Some of our regular clients live alone, and having us as a dependable part of their week is important to their loved ones," she said. "When the families are busy or far away, we are their eyes and ears." In the end, the "feel-good factor" counts with these business owners. "After 15 years in high tech, I was successful - and burned out," said Tim O'Connell, owner of Southwest Concierge in Phoenix. "Instead of going after more money and another title, I'm helping people in a more personal way."

Last year, Austin Kunz was working 60-hour weeks as a finance manager for an auto dealership when a rainstorm caused his roof to leak. "I had to get to work, so I propped a bucket underneath and headed for the office," he said.

Kunz paged through the telephone book looking for help and was startled by the results.

"I wasn't able to find anyone willing to go to my house and wait for the repairman. I realized that there was no one to call when you need an extra set of hands."

The experience led Kunz to leave his job and launch Arizona Genie Time Management Co. in early 2006.

Using direct mail and a Web site to advertise, Kunz began with a handful of clients. Today, Arizona Genie has three employees and more than 160 customers from Troon to Sun City West who call for errand, house-sitting, pet-care and delivery services. Fees vary based on the services offered.

Many of Kunz's clients are absentee homeowners and winter visitors who want to return to a turn-key setup with the refrigerator fully stocked, utilities turned on and the daily newspaper waiting.

Some clients are just relieved to have the day-to-day errands taken care of.

"We return a lot of videos to Blockbuster," Kunz said.

"Everybody works today," O'Connell said. "Most families are two-income earners, and time is at a premium. We do the things that need to get done but no one gets around to."

Since O'Connell's firm launched two years ago, he has been racing to keep up with demand, but he is not surprised. The former information technology guru worked long, pressure-filled weeks for 15 years. "I knew what services I would have wanted as a busy professional."

O'Connell's client base grew from former co-workers and other professional contacts. Today, the firm has about 4,000 clients Valley-wide, including Chandler Regional Hospital, Biltmore Towers and SunScapes condominiums in Scottsdale.

Service requests range from setting up home-maintenance appointments, housekeeping, pet-sitting and party planning to short-term office help.

O'Connell charges a fee of \$7.50, payable by credit card, for requests like theater tickets, dinner arrangements, floral deliveries or service call set-ups, which are arranged by licensed and bonded vendors.

"It's a secure service for customers because their credit card isn't going out there to a bunch of different people," O'Connell said. "We keep their billing information on file, charge the client, and I write a check to the vendor." He is also using his IT background. In October, a virtual concierge kiosk was installed at SunScapes condominiums in Scottsdale, where condo owners are connected online with a concierge, available 12 hours a day, six days a week. "This is a great perk for our owners," said Teresa Santiago, a SunScapes sales and marketing coordinator. "Our condos start at about \$170,000. This type of service is usually offered only at much higher-priced properties."

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