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THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

WSJ.com

METRO MONEY | AUGUST 21, 2010

Beyond File Sharing

By ANNE KADET



While I can't tell you much about Luke Tucker's social life, I do know that his vacuum cleaner is very popular. So far this summer, the 31-year-old software engineer has rented his robotic Roomba to various Boerum Hill area neighbors six times, charging \$10 a day.

The income barely sounds worth the hassle. But for Mr. Tucker, who arranges the rentals through a new local website dedicated to item sharing, it's more about participating in a cool community experiment: "It's kind of a little rebate for being neighborly."

New Yorkers have always been big on sharing. It's not that we can't afford to buy our own stuff, it's more that we just don't have room for it. I'd love to buy a dining-room set, but unless I'm willing to free up the space (goodbye, bed!) it's easier to borrow someone else's furniture for my once-a-decade dinner party.

Our cramped conditions also encourage sharing on a grander scale. There's no place to park the [Toyota](#), so we share a fleet of Zipcars. Zucchini won't grow in a 12-inch pot, so we fuss over our 600 community gardens. The kids share playgrounds, the dogs share communal runs and everyone shares the subway.

Technology only feeds the communal urge. Never mind Craigslist, where folks share everything from rehearsal space to sex partners. The 48,000 New Yorkers who subscribe to the local FreeCycle.org email list post roughly 75 messages a day requesting free goods (a 10-gallon aquarium, hangers, a diabetic cookbook) and offering stuff they don't want (moving boxes, eight cans of Alpo, a 40-inch TV). My recent request for a used fridge yielded what looks like a legitimate offer, along with several notes from folks who apologized for not having a refrigerator to give away.

The cycling world, meanwhile, is abuzz over SoBi, a new bicycle-sharing system to be test-launched this fall by former DOT intern Ryan Rzepecki. Members will use a phone app to locate bikes around the city, unlock them with a PIN, and ride off into the sunset. It sounds

idealistic, but similar systems function in Paris and London. Mr. Rzepecki predicts we'll get a lot more people cycling in this town once we remove what he calls "the Burden of Ownership."

I love that phrase. When your home comes with a basement and an attic and a garage, it's easy to escape your stuff. Living in a New York apartment, the StairMaster and that \$2,000 guitar are always in your line of sight, silently complaining of neglect. When you live in your own closet, it's better to borrow, and there are several sites devoted to arranging exchanges with folks willing to rent their personal goods.

Some startups fail to catch on in New York, perhaps because they're based in far-off cities. But the newest launch, Dumbo-based SnapGoods, is making a good go of it.

For a small fee (typically \$10 a day), members can rent goods ranging from an air conditioner or an iPad to a tent, a digital projector or an inkjet printer. Payment is typically through PayPal, and lenders usually request a security deposit. It takes about 10 minutes to sign up and arrange your first deal.

My first rental, of course, was Mr. Tucker's Roomba. It seemed like a good way to try the vacuum before buying—and I'm glad I did. While the little round robot was both easy to use (you hit the "clean" button and it starts cleaning) and totally charming (I almost gave it a biscuit), it deposited little mounds of dirt all over my apartment. "Maybe it's a form of job security," observed a friend who came by to watch.

Later, I rented a \$10-a-day GPS system for a trip upstate to visit my little sister, as well as a sleeping pad (yes, sis made me sleep on the floor). The woman renting out the nav system was kind enough to invite me in for a quick lesson. But her tone changed to one of scorn when she learned I was only driving up to Lake Champlain. "You don't need this for that!" she said.

The photographer who rented her sleeping cushion for \$5 a night was sweeter. But falling asleep on the purple pad, I suddenly realized that given the city's bedbug situation, renting a mattress from a stranger qualifies me as a total moron.

She didn't look like she had bedbugs, but they never do. Maybe SnapGoods can rent me a bug zapper.

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Printed in The Wall Street Journal, page A14

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