Women have the edge on home-swapping businesses

A holiday home-swapping site, Love Home Swap, achieved its second round of funding this week. Emma Sinclair looks at the growth of start-up businesses involving swapping goods - and says the model is becoming increasingly popular with female entrepreneurs.

Amanda (played by Cameron Diaz) swaps her California home at Christmas time for a small English cottage - and things aren't quite as she expects.

By Emma Sinclair

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Remember that Cameron Diaz and Kate Winslet film about them swapping houses at Christmas time? Cameron's character ends up in a small English cottage and Kate's in a huge Californian mansion. I know which one I'd rather holiday in.

The practice of home-swapping is becoming increasingly popular - so much so, that viable businesses have been founded off the back of it. It's no longer a pipe dream in films like *The Holiday*.

Love Home Swap, founded by Debbie Wosskow, this week achieved second-round funding of £800,000, from a mix of venture capitalists and angel investors.

The business has seen the number of homes on its site increase tenfold during 2012 to 8,000, expected to rise to 10,000 by the end of the year. It is targeting 50,000 homes by the middle of 2013, through a mixture of organic growth and acquisition of other home-swap sites. With nine out of ten of their members receiving swap requests, that's compelling evidence of its demand and popularity.

There is a term for this type of business. **Collaborative consumption** is the traditional sharing, bartering, lending, trading, renting, gifting and swapping sector which, as a result of technology, has been become a multi-billion dollar industry.

Recently named one of the **'10 ideas that will change the world'** by Time Magazine, the convergence of social, mobile and location based technology has allowed these platforms to work efficiently, and critically - create improved trust between transacting parties.

From enormous marketplaces such as **eBay** and **Craigslist**, to emerging sectors such as Zopa's social lending and **BlaBlaCar's** car sharing, these companies are disrupting business and reinventing not only what we consume but how we consume it. It is increasingly becoming common practice for people to exchange - whether it's unused space, goods, skills, money - or peer-to-peer travel and homes to rent or swap.

Take 35 year-old TED Talk's veteran **Rachel Botsman,** who co-authored 'What's Mine Is Yours: The Rise of Collaborative Consumption**.'** She began writing her book in 2008 "to start a global movement". She told me that at the time, people thought it was a "nice idea, with a strong community side" - but that no one fully understood the commercial opportunity in the space.

Things have changed. Last year saw over £300m of seed capital poured into European and US ventures and, she notes, there are a phenomenal amount of female founders in this space versus other sectors.

These businesses "depend on a very specific culture. There is a big shift from centralised control system to a more community driven networks", she says. And while she notes "men get it", creating a community is, she hypothesises, a more intuitive female skill.

Hugely successful in the US is taskrabbit.com which recently arrived on UK shores. Effectively an Ebay for errands, people post jobs they want doing, such as wanting help assembling IKEA furniture or collecting dry cleaning.

Founded by Leah Busque, 50pc of the runners are women and 25pc are stay at home mums. Leah told me that "TaskRabbit provides women a work option that is flexible given their hectic schedule and gives them an opportunity to contribute to the family income".

Airbnb has made the most noise in the home travel sector, raising some £75m to date. Founded in 2008 in California, it's a community marketplace for people to list, discover and book accommodation. It connects people, at any price point, in more than 26,000 cities and 192 countries via over 200,000 listings worldwide. They hit the 10m-nights- booked milestone in June 2012 and, they told me, 50pc of hosts are women over the age of 30.

At Love Home Swap, the capital will be used to scale the company through acquisition, continue to develop the service and launch a new bespoke insurance product with Hiscox**,** a much-needed feature, a global first for home swapping and a confidence booster for first-time swappers.

Debbie's point of difference? "Sites like AirBnB and HouseTrip are helping consumers to travel like a local through renting but home exchange is the best way to swap your life with someone else's and have a truly different type of holiday experience".

All of these companies could be the next wave of the internet - the next Facebook IPO. At the heart of these platforms are community and empowerment - skills women intuitively know how to create. Following Love Home Swap's new funding round, it would appear that investors are bullish - about the sector, the shift in consumer habits and backing women like Leah and Debbie.