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### SQUARE FEET

## For Brands Seeking A Bigger Presence, Tiny Homes Are In

As Fascination in Small Abodes Grows, Businesses See a New Marketing Tool

By KATHY CHIN LEONG

It's a philosophy. It's a lifestyle. And now, it's a marketing tool.

The tiny house, which captured the public's fascination in books like "The Not So Big House," by Sarah Susanka, and TV series like "Tiny House Nation," is catching the attention of corporate America and entrepreneurs nationwide. Businesses are piggybacking off the trend, wooing customers and solidifying their brands.

Some 10,000 people in North America live in these humble homes to shrink both their housing costs and their carbon footprint, according to Ryan Mitchell, founder of The Tiny Life, a website devoted to tiny houses, and the organizer behind the annual Tiny House Conference. Furthermore, a building industry specializing in tiny homes has blossomed with at least 50 vendors in the United States boasting a range of architectural styles from cottage Americana to industrial chic. List prices generally start at \$40,000 and climb past \$100,000, depending on customer upgrades.

"It's still a market in its nascent stage," said Dan Dobrowolski, owner of Escape Traveler, a designer and builder of tiny homes in Rice Lake, Wis. "It has not by any means matured."

In December, the developer of Mountainside at Northstar in Lake Tahoe, Calif., unveiled Rendezvous Cabins, a set of three 400-square-foot homes to be used as perks for residents, said Ron Barnes, senior strategist for the developer, Mountainside Partners.

"I wanted to create an experi-

ential community where people discover paths and get to know nature a little more," Mr. Barnes said. Mountainside homeowners can book them for free for any number of purposes, such as parties, sleepovers or lodging for visitors.

Two of the tiny cabins feature a porch with Adirondack chairs, floor-to-ceiling windows, a leather couch, a kitchen, a bathroom and a king-size bed. The third building is set up more as a living room and meeting hub. To encourage people to disconnect from digital distractions, the units are not equipped with televisions or Wi-Fi, Mr. Barnes said.

Mountainside promotes the Rendezvous Cabins in its marketing strategy; prospective buyers of homes in the development can spend a night in a tiny house or model home to experience the neighborhood. The plan seems to be working: About 90 percent of the visitors become buyers after experiencing a weekend there.

"Everyone is having a great time staying in them," Mr. Barnes said.

Tiny houses are also used to help companies bolster their presence on social media sites like Instagram, Snapchat and Facebook.

This summer, Hormel, the maker of Spam, sponsored a Tiny House of Sizzle Tour with an ornate unit painted in blue and yellow. The home on wheels made stops at festivals, malls and ballparks, where company representatives handed out samples as people took pictures inside and marveled at the Spam souvenirs.

"The tiny house idea is definitely on trend right now," said Brian Lillis, the Spam brand manager. "We are in the process of



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getting our social media numbers, but I am sure we tracked well."

Untuckit, a New York apparel retailer that specializes in untucked shirts, hauled a tiny house that resembled one of its stores throughout the East Coast in 2016,

stopping at universities and in small towns. The aim was to expose Untuckit to more consumers and determine where to open locations, said the company's chief executive and co-founder, Chris Riccobono.

"If we sold shirts, that was a bonus," he said.

Driving the mini-boutique around was like having a moving billboard, Mr. Riccobono said, and the payoff in social media presence justified the \$40,000 investment. The campaign was so successful that the company is planning a second one for 2018.

TheSize Surfaces, a composite-stone manufacturer in Castellón, Spain, also ran a tiny-house tour to showcase a 400-square-foot dwelling clad with Neolith, the company's stain-proof synthetic surface. The promotional journey started in January in Orlando, Fla., and will continue across the

United States throughout the year. The company's aim is to prove that Neolith can be applied on floors, walls, countertops, even exterior siding.

"We believe that anywhere where there's a surface, you can cover with Neolith," said Saudia Utter, marketing manager at FM Distributing, a Neolith provider in San Francisco.

In this tiny house with mansion features, a ladder leads up to an outdoor deck outfitted with a gas barbecue. Inside, the house features a loft bed, two bathrooms with Toto toilets, a kitchen with a tall wine refrigerator, recycling bins, a built-in espresso machine, Miele appliances and a living room with a flat-screen TV and an electric fireplace. A marblelike dining table cut of Neolith stands as the focal point of the kitchen.

"Everyone who has seen it has been impressed, and it is bigger

than everyone imagined it to be," said Ms. Utter, whose company hosted the model house for two months. "We were surprised by the fact it has been on the road all year and nothing has been cracked or broken. It has stayed in immaculate condition."

Tiny homes are gaining traction as rental lodging, too. Across the United States, mini-hotels are springing up in R.V. parks and resorts and on private lots. Over the next five years, "we are going to see whole communities and tiny house hotels all over the place," said Jamie Mackay, the founder and chief executive of Wheelhaus, a maker of modular homes in Jackson, Wyo.

Mr. Mackay also runs the nearby Fireside Resort, which features 25 tiny homes that he designed. After guests asked repeatedly where they could buy one of the units, he started Wheelhaus to sell his houses.

The rental units offer a taste of what it's like to live in one without a full-time commitment. The website for the Tumbleweed Tiny House Company in Colorado Springs tells buyers how they can make a profit on their investment and turn the houses into a hotel or bed-and-breakfast.

The Snake River Sporting Club, a 1,000-acre private club in Jackson, ordered a neighborhood of four one-bedroom tiny houses it calls Discovery Village. Lavished with Restoration Hardware furniture and accessories, the units can be booked for \$225 to \$525 nightly.

And tiny houses offer a humanitarian benefit. In the wake of Hurricanes Harvey and Irma, urban planning coordinators are looking to them as transitional housing that neighborhoods will see as an asset rather than a blight.

Mr. Dobrowolski of Escape Traveler said his company was in Houston helping hurricane-displaced residents with specially designed units. He has developed a lower-cost version of his Escape tiny homes that can be deployed quickly in a disaster.

Mr. Mackay of Wheelhaus recently announced Omni-Haus, a transportable structure that, when installed, can withstand winds of 190 miles per hour, he said. Working with local developers in hurricane-ravaged cities, his company is planning to deploy 100 to 200 units to Florida for hurricane survivors.

"Cheap emergency housing is a Band-Aid," he said. "I want to deliver units that are built to last, not thrown in the landfill later on. Tiny houses are the next big disruption."

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