

PH_campus culture8_student-student relationship (Being roommates)

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How Roompack aims to predict and prevent college-roommate conflicts



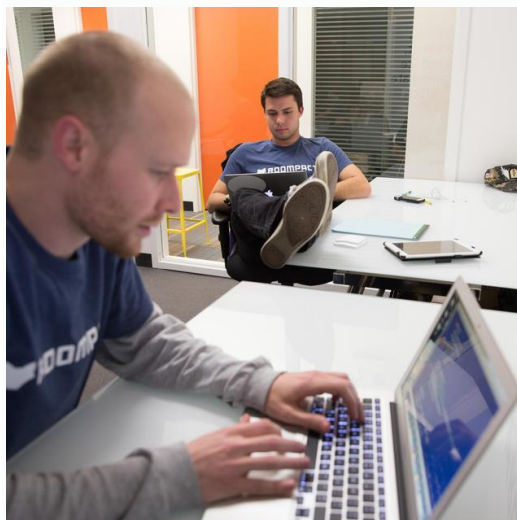
Dan Statter, from left, Ryan Musser, lead developer, and CEO and founder Matt Unger work together in Roompack's Chicago office. (Alex Garcia / Blue Sky / April 3, 2014)



The three-member team work on the Roompack site, which uses a predictive roommate conflict engine to work to prevent roommate conflict before residents begin the moving-in process. (Alex Garcia / Blue Sky / April 3, 2014)



Roompact puts the entire roommate agreement process in the cloud and residents can sign a downloadable roommate agreement online. (roompact.com)



Ryan Musser and Matt Unger work in the Chicago office. (Alex Garcia / Blue Sky / April 3, 2014)



Unger, Musser and Statter in the Chicago office. (Alex Garcia / Blue Sky / April 3, 2014)

By [John Carpenter](#), [@ScoopCarp](#), Blue Sky Reporter

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With college dormitories come roommate conflicts. But one Chicago startup hopes that its digital tools and advice will appeal to colleges looking to help students solve those problems.

Roompack, fresh out of 1871 and settling into its new office at 211 W. Wacker, is building its business around predicting, preventing and reducing roommate conflict.

Roompack founder Matt Unger, a Marquette University graduate, sees his business as, first and foremost, educational.

“It’s a learning tool,” he said. “We help them (students) learn how to get along.”

The cloud-based platform also has a dashboard feature for residential housing staff. But Unger said the emphasis is on helping students avoid, or at least work through, problems.

The process starts with a student survey developed with help from Karen Erlandson, an associate professor in communication studies at Albion (Mich.) College who has published research on roommate relationships. The survey aims to tease out potential conflicts. Roommates can use it to customize a roommate agreement they both sign.

Many colleges already use roommate agreements, which tend to focus on issues such as cleanliness, sleep habits and guests. Erlandson said important emotional issues often get ignored. These include feelings about personal space and expectations about the roommate relationship.

Erlandson said some students enter college fully expecting their roommate will be their best friend, with all the time and emotional commitment that goes along with that. Other students have no such expectations. “If those two people happen to hook up as roommates,” she said, “there’s going to be a lot of disappointment.”

The Roompack survey identifies this and other issues and encourages students to discuss them and make them part of their agreement, she said.

“It’s all about upfront communication, then arming them with some tools to deal with things,” Erlandson said.

Unger said the system will also include ongoing “micro surveys” in which a student will get a text message asking how the roommate relationship is going. The micro-survey will ask users to respond “1 for good, 2 for OK and 3 for bad,” he said.

The idea is to catch problems early so that staff can become aware of them and, if necessary, intervene, Unger said. Students might also respond with detailed complaints, which would trigger suggestions from Roompack.

“We can tell them how to constructively initiate a conversation about a conflict,” Erlandson said.

Michael Coakley, a college housing industry consultant who serves on Roompack's board of advisors, said Roompack provides the first process he knows of that digitizes roommate agreements.

"Today's students are digital natives," said Coakley, former chief housing officer at Northern Illinois University. "They prefer things online."

Cass Coughlin, director of residence life at Loyola University Chicago, said he hadn't heard of Roompack but that it "might be something we would take a look at."

A successful roommate situation "starts with communication," he said.

Unger, 24, said he was doing freelance Web development work and looking for something to build a company around when he hit upon the idea of Roompack. He and his apartment mate were having some problems managing their living situation, and as he researched ways to improve their relationship, he realized that others had experienced the same problems.

He began building the platform and working with experts in the residential life profession, who he said liked the idea.

"I figured if they thought Roompack was a good idea, then it was a good idea," he said.

Unger said he is in talks with schools and hopes to get started with some on Roompack in the fall. Meanwhile, he continues to attend industry events, talking with housing officials and tweaking the cloud-based platform.

Unger said he has raised a small amount of angel funding, though he declined to say how much.

"My goal would be for us to grow and grow, and be helping these institutions for decades to come," he said. "My goal is not an exit."