

'Homeless' Airbnb founder hails sharing economy

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Nate Blecharczyk, Co-Founder & CTO Airbnb speaks onstage at David Over Goliath: Power Of The Sharing Economy during the 2013 SXSW Music, Film + Interactive Festival at Hilton Austin on March 9, 2013 in Austin, Texas.

On any given night, up to 60,000 people stay in places they found on Airbnb. One of them is always the guy who co-founded the fast-growing

online travel lodging service.

"In June 2010, I moved out of my apartment and I have been mostly homeless ever since, off and on," Brian Chesky said at the South by Southwest (SXSW) interactive, film and music festival.

"I just live in Airbnb apartments and I check in every week in different homes in San Francisco," where the company is based, he said. "It's the best way to take the pulse... The key is to always use your product."

Hundreds of aspiring startup entrepreneurs turned up Sunday to hear the 31-year-old discuss some of the lessons he learned with business partners Joe Gebbia and Nathan Blecharczyk.

One trick, inspired by cartoons, was to hire a storyboard artist to conceptualize, in drawings, each step in the Airbnb [user experience](#) to help fine-tune the overall product, the design school graduate said.

Founded in 2008, Airbnb is an online community where registered users can find a privately-owned room, an apartment, an entire house, even a tipi, igloo or a European castle for a few nights or weeks.

Each property is professionally photographed for the stylish Airbnb.com website. Guests and hosts can post online reviews about each other and hosts are protected by a \$1 million guarantee from Airbnb in case of damage.

The service makes money from user fees, while the prices for users often undercut those offered by big-name chain hotels. And the hosts make money from space that would otherwise go empty.

Privately held, Airbnb—the name was inspired by the air beds Chesky and Gebbia once used to rent out in the mid-2000s to help pay the

rent—has become a poster child of the Internet-driven "sharing economy."

Leveraging smartphones and social media, consumers can now rent—or rent out—a host of goods and services from DIY tools and designer togs to [bicycles](#) and cars for a few hours or days.

Using the service means avoiding buying something you'll rarely use. Chesky cited power drills as an example: there are 80 million such tools in the United States, but each is used an average of just 13 minutes in its lifetime.

"What we want you to do is to live locally, in a world where, post-mass production, the economy is powered by people," he said. "The shared economy, for me, is an economy powered by people"

Speaking to AFP afterwards, Chesky said Airbnb—present in more than 30,000 cities in 192 countries—is striving this year to develop its presence in East and Southeast Asia, where it has opened a Singapore office.

"We're bigger in Europe than we are in the United States, which is like our second biggest market," he said.

"Latin America is third. Asia is still pretty new, except for Australia. We are focused on Tokyo and Seoul and Southeast Asia. It's one of our fastest-growing markets."

He acknowledged there were some cultural hurdles to overcome in Asia in getting homeowners to warm to the idea of renting out their unused spaces to strangers.

"But what I've been surprised by is not how different people are, but

how similar they are," he said.

"There are certain types of 'Airbnb people,' and they are in every city in the world—it's just that in some cultures, there is more of a generational divide."

But that is not a great concern for Chesky, who told his SXSW audience—a third of whom found their Austin accommodation on Airbnb—that a "deep well" of initial enthusiastic users makes the best springboard to success.

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