

Start A Pet-Sitting Service - Turn Your Love of Animals into a Profitable New Venture

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CAREER OPPORTUNITIES. Flexible hours, Promising salary. Holidays negotiable. Be your own boss. No experience necessary.

If you spotted the above ad in the Help Wanted section of your local newspaper would you laugh, "Too good to be true"? But it is true! Have you always said, "I'd never have the money or the skill to start my own business." But you do! One of the easiest businesses to start and operate requires very little money. The only necessary skills are patience, time, and lots of love. The business? Pet-sitting!

Jackie McDonald owner of Jackie's Pals in Houston, Texas, started her pet-sitting business after working eight years in a doctor's office. "I wanted to do something I enjoy," she says. "I love animals and I find this work is very calming." McDonald spoke with other pet-sitters in her area and discovered how busy they all were. She felt her neighborhood could support another pet-sitter. She was right. McDonald just completed a very busy and successful holiday season.

Pet-sitting involves going into someone's home and caring for a pet when the owner isn't available. The service can include plant watering and mail and newspaper pick-up. The focus, however, is on the animal. Pet-sitting saves a client and the animal the aggravation of dealing with a kennel. Clients expect a variety of services: feeding, watering, litter box cleaner, pill giving, and especially some Tender Loving Care for a lonely animal who misses its master.

ADVANTAGES, DISADVANTAGES

Owning a pet-sitting business has many of the same advantages of owning any business - you are your own boss, you set your own hours (depending on the number of clients you serve per day), and your paycheck will be limited only by your willingness to work. McDonald especially enjoys the flexible hours. "I also work out of my home," she says, "and that's a big advantage." Another advantage of pet-sitting is the opportunity of getting to know some real characters: Missy, the cat that only eats facing north (a real example, believe it or not), or Rufus, the blue-footed Amazon parrot who refuses to stay in a cage. Your list will be endless. McDonald describes the pleasure she finds in meeting both pets and their owners, "Ninety-nine percent of the people are very nice. Most are concerned about their pets or they wouldn't call me. And the animals love me no matter what."

As with any business, pet-sitting has a few disadvantages as

well. If the business is to succeed, long hours and hard work is necessary. "this is not a get rich-quick scheme," McDonald says. Holidays will be especially busy. Servicing fifteen pets, each two times a day is not an unreasonable expectation. This doesn't leave much time for football viewing on New Year's Day. Unless you're a real animal lover some of the tasks can be unpleasant: Who wants to clean a litter box twice a day for two weeks? But that wildly wagging tail or the purr of a lonely animal that greets you at the door does make it worth the trouble. So do those paychecks at the end of the Christmas holidays. "you must truly love animals," McDonald advises, "or you won't enjoy this business."

START-UP COSTS

Start-up costs for pet-sitting business are small. Expenses can be divided into three categories: marketing, insurance, and transportation. Initial outlay can be as little as \$200 or as much as \$300 if you choose to pay for a visit to an accountant. That isn't a bad idea. An accountant can explain tax laws and policies governing this type of business. In some states, for example, he or she will tell you not to charge sales tax because you perform a service that is not taxable.

Although most clients will come your way by word of mouth, invest in a few marketing tools. Business cards are essential. Costing anywhere from \$25 to \$50, business cards can be placed anywhere pets are found - pet shops and vet clinics. Because most vet clients have kennel facilities, some may not allow you to place your card with them. Establish a relationship with a vet in your area, though, and he or she will begin to recommend you when the kennel facility is full. Design a flyer and place copies on community bulletin boards, church bulletin boards, at the grocery store, and any other place you can think of. "Welcome-to-the-community" associations may be willing to give your card to new residents, too. Keep trying to get your business known. People will be delighted with this service when they hear that you are a top quality pet-sitter. If you can afford it, buy an answering machine. Once your business is booming, you'll need one to take all your business calls.

Clients will ask if you are bonded. This means that an insurance company finds you trustworthy and is willing to put this in writing. An insurance policy protects the homes you enter. If something is broken while you are there, your policy will cover it. Being bonded, however does not protect against damage to pets while in your care. With this type of policy, your premium increases as your business increases. Initially your coverage cost \$100 per year. As you client list increases, you can pay as much as \$500 per year. Being bonded, however, is worth the expense. Clients are more likely to use your service if they

know you're backed by an insurance company.

Keep a log of business miles traveled in your car. Also keep track of gas and auto expenses. These are all tax deductible.

OPERATIONS

What are the mechanics involved with pet-sitting? When a client calls, arrange a meeting before his departure. This gives you an opportunity to see the pet, familiarize yourself with the routine, and get a key. The client also gets to check you out and give instructions. Appear professional. Have a printed instruction sheet ready for the client to complete. Include space for emergency phone numbers and vet information. Also include a section on pet preferences. A pet whose routine has no disruptions is a much happier one when his master returns. The master will be satisfied and you'll reap the benefits by gaining a repeat client.

"Suggest that clients limit changes to a pet's routine," McDonald advises. the pet will be happier and easier to care for. Provide references to all clients who ask. When you're just starting out, ask a neighbor whose cat you've fed once or twice if she'll be a reference. Most clients won't call references, but will be wary if you've got no one to vouch for you. An important note here: ask clients to be specific about when they'll returning. Have them call you when they do get home. Avoid the disaster of one pet-sitter whose client was three days delayed and whose cat went unfed for that time. When you return your client's key, you pick up your payment.

WHAT TO CHARGE

Determining a fee is a personal matter. McDonald consulted other pet-sitters in the area to determine an appropriate charge. Fees range anywhere from \$5 to \$10 per visit. Some pet-sitters charge more for initial visit and less for subsequent visits. The fee will also depend on the number of pets involved and the amount of trouble they will be. Obviously the household with three cats, a turtle, two birds, and a hamster should be charged more than the one with a single dog. Decide in advance what your limits are, too. If you don't care to feed, water, and brush a horse each day be prepared to say no. Once your business takes off, one turned down request won't affect you.

A wide variety of people will use a pet-sitting service. Certainly vacationers will be a number-one market. Therefore, holiday times will be extremely busy. Some people own pets but have little time to spend with them - couples who both work full time, and singles who travel.

A few words of advice and notes of caution:

Be prepared for a mess. Bored animals are messy little things. They knock over plants, break vases, and chew furniture. Although yours is not a house-cleaning service, your clients will appreciate your efforts to tidy things up.

Follow your client's instructions to the letter. Even if no one but you knows Fido ate exactly at 6 P.M., do what is asked. Owners can detect when a pet's routine has gone awry.

Pregnant women should be aware of a condition known as toxoplasmosis. Caused by a parasitic organism found in cat feces, toxoplasmosis can cause severe damage to a fetus. Pregnant women should use extreme caution when disposing of cat feces or else wait until after the baby is born to start a pet-sitting business.

Expect a few complainers. Most clients will love you. Some, however will be annoyed that Fifi's nails grew too long while she was in your care, or that Bucky seems listless since their return.

A pet-sitting business is an easy one to start. The only requirement is a real love for animals. You will find that people are quite interested in your service and are more than willing to pay for it. McDonald sums it up this way: "this is a very time consuming business. But I really enjoy it and I've learned from it. You're certainly compensated and it is very satisfying."