

Chapter 1



The Concept of Pet Sitting

It was a proud moment in July 1997 when Random House released a revised edition of their dictionary that contained the phrase *pet sitter*. You can imagine my surprise in learning that after thirteen years of being in this career, I found it was not even mentioned in any of the English dictionaries! No wonder people hadn't been familiar with pet sitters; officially, we didn't exist!

Thanks to a letter-writing campaign conducted by Pet Sitters International, that changed when Random House added and defined pet sitter:

Pet sitter—one who cares for the pets of another, usually in the pet's home environment.

The key words in this definition are “in the pet's home environment.” To me, it is this unique concept that has played a major role in the popularity of our services. We go to the pet—allowing him to stay in his comfortable and secure surroundings. I know that some professed pet sitters have included in their range of services placing the pet in the home of another caretaker or even bringing the pet into the sitter's own home. To me, this is not pet sitting in its truest sense. Midday dog walking does qualify as pet sitting, though, because the dog walker is actually going to the pet's home to give him a daily dose of exercise and TLC. I realize that some pets do fine as visitors in another household; however, this arrangement is closer to boarding than to pet sitting.

Although the concept of pet sitting is much more widely known now than it was in the 1980s when I was starting out, I constantly hear from people who have just “discovered” the wonderful world of at-home pet care. In some instances, these calls are from pet owners who want to find a good pet sitter. Others are from intrigued “wannabe” pet sitters. This tells me that even though pet sitting has

come a long way, we still have much to do in the way of educating the general public. The United States is a huge country with many animal lovers who may not have heard of our relatively young industry, and thus may never have considered pet sitting as a profitable business venture.

WHAT MAKES PET SITTING A GREAT CAREER

Pet sitting has much to offer as a career. Whether you have just learned of this industry or have been aware of it for some time, I urge you to consider the potential a pet-sitting business can hold—potential for self-employment, for providing a needed community service, for creating the lifestyle you've always dreamed of, and for significant profits.

To start off, you'll be part of the service industry, which is expected to be a powerful economic force in the future. People today need services of all sorts. According to the United States Department of Labor, service-providing industries are expected to account for approximately 20.8 million of the 21.6 million new wage and salary jobs generated over the period from 2002 to 2012.

These figures are very encouraging to anyone thinking of starting a pet-sitting service. With your own pet-sitting business, you'll join the fast track of the new, service-oriented American economy.

If you're a female contemplating getting into pet sitting, you'll be further encouraged to know that the National Foundation for Women Business Owners reports there are now 7.95 million companies owned by women, up from 4.48 million in 1987. This 78 percent growth dwarfs the 47 percent growth for all firms in the United States.

The 2004 membership of Pet Sitters International (PSI), an educational organization for professional pet sitters, was 88 percent female. Although more and more men are getting into this business, pet sitting has been a female-dominated industry to date. Perhaps it naturally attracts women because of the nurturing involved in caring for animals (nurturing has traditionally been associated with women). Whatever the reason, I'm proud that pet sitting has provided a way for many women to enjoy the rewards, personally and professionally, of entrepreneurship. And I am glad to see many men recognizing that pet sitting is a viable and profitable business venture!

Why the Service Economy Is Growing

The following trends in today's society have made service businesses—and pet sitting—fast-growing industries:

- Two-income families have become the norm, making services both needed by and affordable to these families. Travel for pleasure is also more

affordable, which increases the likelihood that pet care will be needed during such absences from home.

- Young professionals delay marriage and/or children; many more are owning pets and taking better care of them than ever before.

- The same is true of “empty nesters,” who are getting pets and treating them as surrogate children.

In other words, the yuppies of the 1980s have been replaced in the '90s by “dinks” (dual income, no kids) and “dips” (dual income, pets). The “dips” comprise a profitable market for pet sitters!

Another trend in American society is the move toward self-employment, often in a home-based setting. More and more of us are discovering that our jobs rule our lives, and contrary to generations past, we're finding in today's world that there is no such thing as job security. Self-employment enables you to take control of your life, your career, your schedule, and your income. As a pet sitter, you are your own boss. You decide when you work, where you work, what you charge, and for whom you work. There is no one looking over your shoulder and no time clock to punch.

Perhaps due to the downsizing in corporate America, we have become a transient society. People come and go, often not staying in one place long enough to get to know their neighbors. And even if you do know your neighbors, that doesn't mean you want them in your home when you're away or that you feel comfortable requesting pet-care services from them.

Another trend in today's society that has given rise to service industries is that we're a busy society! Geez, how did we get so busy? Never have we had so many conveniences to make life easier, yet it seems we never have enough time to get it all done. Enter house cleaners, lawn services, car detailers, and, yes, pet sitters. (Oh, and let's not forget those pizza delivery people!) Convenience has become the name of the game.

A negative trend that has enhanced the popularity of at-home pet care is the prevalence of property crimes. We see and hear about crime almost every day through the media. Unfortunately, no one and no community is immune from it, and there is a great deal of public concern about crime. People love the fact that by using a professional pet sitter, their home is being checked at the same time that their pets are being cared for. While making pet-care visits, pet sitters provide a measure of crime deterrence because they make the home appear inhabited. This feature, in itself, is a real selling point for our service.

Last, but certainly not least, is the trend in America to anthropomorphize our pets. And here, for a definition, we can turn once again to the dictionary: Anthropomorphism is defined as “the attributing of human shape or characteristics to a god, animal, or inanimate thing.” This tendency has elevated the

pet to a full-fledged family member, a surrogate child—the all-important companion who has needs, feelings, thoughts, and personality traits. We talk to our pets, pamper them, and want only the best for our “babies.” The best includes a pet sitter!

So How Many Pets Did You Say Are Out There?

According to the 2005/2006 American Pet Products Manufacturers Association (APPMA) National Pet Owner Survey, 63 percent of all U.S. households own a pet (that’s more than 69 million households), up from 56 percent in 1988, when APPMA began doing its survey. The pet population breaks down as follows:

- Cats: 90.5 million in 37.7 million households
- Dogs: 73.9 million in 43.5 million households
- Freshwater fish: 139 million in 13.9 million households
- Saltwater fish: 9.6 million in 0.8 million households
- Birds: 16.6 million in 6.4 million households
- Small mammals: 18.2 million in 5.7 million households (that includes rabbits, hamsters, guinea pigs, mice, rats, gerbils, potbellied pigs, and chinchillas)
- Reptiles: 11 million in 4.4 million households (that includes turtles, tortoises, iguanas, snakes, lizards, frogs, and toads)

Figures were not available from this survey for the number of ferrets or hermit crabs kept as pets; however, these animals are found in many pet-owning households. Livestock figures also were not available, although at-home care of horses, cows, goats, pigs, sheep, and even ducks and chickens can be an important and profitable business for professional pet sitters.

ALTERNATIVES TO PET SITTING

Let’s discuss the traditional choices a pet owner has had in the past and why personalized home pet care has become such a popular alternative.

When faced with travel, a pet owner usually has called upon a kennel or veterinarian to board his or her pet. Although some pets do very well in a kennel environment and look forward to it as “camp,” many other pets find a

strange environment filled with unfamiliar animals to be an upsetting experience. Many pet owners have told me they have had a vacation spoiled by the memory of those sad and confused eyes they left behind. Some said they even had to tranquilize their pets to transport them to boarding facilities. Older pets, especially, are traumatized by a change in environment.

By calling on the services of a pet sitter, the owner can leave the pet in his own secure, familiar space. Pets are creatures of habit, just as people are; by staying in their own home they are able to follow their normal eating, medication, and exercise routines. Such familiarity contributes to the happiness and health of the pet. Plus, it eliminates the pet owners' need to worry about the welfare of their pet(s).

When using a pet sitter, the owner is not inconvenienced by having to transport their pet to the vet or kennel, nor is there the trauma of traveling for the pet. An additional benefit of staying at home is that the likelihood of exposure to illnesses is greatly reduced for the pet. Perhaps most important, the pet receives loving, individual attention from his or her personal sitter.

Another option pet owners have is to call upon a friend or neighborhood kid to care for their pets when they are away. In today's highly mobile society, many people don't know their neighbors well enough to feel comfortable making this request or just don't want to impose on a friend. What if the neighborhood kid brings in half the neighborhood with him? What if the pet becomes ill or something in the house gets broken? Such circumstances could certainly strain or ruin a friendship.

There is security in calling a professionally operated pet-sitting service that employs sitters who are accustomed to transporting an ill pet to the vet and who also are insured for breakage in a customer's home. A professional pet-sitting service has reliable, responsible, mature, trustworthy individuals who enjoy the business of caring for pets. Pet sitters can be counted on to treat each pet and home as if it were their own.

There are additional benefits to the pet owner. A pet sitter keeps an eye on each home by doing such things as bringing in the mail and newspapers, turning lights on and off, opening and closing curtains or blinds, and watering houseplants. These small services give a home a "lived-in" look while the owner is away. Such crime-detering measures result in additional peace of mind for the absent homeowner. It is a pleasure for returning homeowners to find healthy and happy pets awaiting their arrival—and their home just as they left it.

A pet sitter is also only a phone call away. Who hasn't left on vacation and thirty miles away from home wondered, "Did I turn off the coffee pot (or iron or oven)?" A phone call to the pet sitter can result in an extra visit to the home that will alleviate this nagging worry!

Expense may be the only negative for a pet owner who engages the services of a pet sitter. A pet sitter is usually a bit more expensive than a kennel (unless it's a multiple-pet household—then using a pet sitter is usually less expensive than a kennel) or a neighbor. But the number of repeat clients I have had and the feedback I got from them attests to the fact that most pet owners think the convenience and advantages offered by a pet sitter are well worth a little extra expense.

THE ADVANTAGES OF OPERATING A PET-SITTING SERVICE

It is true that there is an exhilarating independence and pride that comes from being your own boss. An added bonus is that becoming a business owner will give you an increased sense of self-worth and confidence in your abilities. I've had letters from many stay-at-home mothers who found that their pet-sitting services helped them rebuild their work skills and confidence levels while contributing to the family income. I've heard from retirees who said their pet-sitting service enabled them to remain active and to feel like contributing members of society. The self-satisfaction you'll derive is only one of the many benefits you'll experience as the owner of your own pet-sitting service. Although you may work longer hours, work usually becomes more enjoyable when you're working for yourself.

Being a pet sitter gives you flexibility with your daily routine. You'll no longer be bound by a rigid nine-to-five work schedule. Because most pet-sitting visits are made during the early morning or early evening hours, you'll have the largest part of the day free to pursue other interests or even to work another job. The flexible working hours make pet sitting an ideal part-time business or second income for many people, because pet-sitting responsibilities can be adapted to most schedules. And of course, it can be operated as a full-time business in many cities.

Another important thing that pet sitting has going for it is that work becomes fun! Many sitters have told me that pet sitting is so enjoyable that they almost don't feel like they're working. Each pet, home, and customer is different, adding variety and interest to the job.

Pets and their owners are so appreciative of your efforts, and the pets readily let you know it. Perhaps you have worked for that boss or supervisor whose praise, compliments, or positive "strokes" were few and far between—not so with pet sitting. That wagging tail or contented purring lets you know someone is glad you're there. And pets don't care what you're wearing or how you look. It's a wonderful feeling to wake up on a rainy morning, throw on jeans

and a sweatshirt, and head out the door to destinations where you'll be eagerly and warmly greeted.

You'll also take pride in knowing you're providing such a valuable service to your community. Pet owners have had few choices in the past. Traditionally, they could either leave their pets in unfamiliar environments, impose upon a friend or neighbor, or stay home. By opening a pet-sitting service, you're providing a preferred alternative for pet owners, thus enabling them to travel with the assurance that their pets and home are in good hands.

Becoming a pet sitter will provide income, too. Whether you sit independently or employ a staff of sitters, there is money to be made by providing this valuable service to your community.

THE NEED IS EVERYWHERE

One of the most positive factors to consider when evaluating pet sitting as a business is that virtually every community, urban and rural, really needs this service. Where there are people, there are pets. Recent research has confirmed the therapeutic effect pets have on people. Pets help reduce blood pressure, provide purpose, and combat loneliness. And with crime on the rise in many areas, many dogs are finding homes because of the crime-deterrence they provide. Given these incentives for having a pet, the shrinking size of the American family, and the increasing numbers of older people and unmarried adults living alone, it is safe to assume that pet ownership will continue to grow.

To determine if there is a need for a pet-sitting service in your area, check the local Yellow Pages for listings or call veterinarians, groomers, and pet supply stores to see if any such business exists in your community. If you live in a rural area, remember that farmers and livestock owners often have a difficult time leaving home, so your service could be a real godsend. If there is already a service operating and you don't live in a sparsely populated area, there's probably room for more than one pet-sitting business.

HOW MUCH CAN YOU EARN?

Although pet sitting is a terrific business idea, it takes more than a good idea to make a business a success. I'm often asked by readers, "How much can I expect to make?" This is one question I can't answer. I don't know the reader's capabilities, desires, and level of commitment.

The amount of income you can expect to make will depend on several variables. The location of a pet-sitting service is certainly a factor in income

potential. A heavily populated urban area will naturally provide a greater number of customers than a rural setting. A part-time sitting service will not generate as much income as a full-time service. And a pet sitter working alone will not generate as much revenue as would a staff of busy pet sitters.

Another important ingredient in the income potential of a pet-sitting service is the personality of the owner. A business owner who does nothing but print up some business cards and sit by the phone will find herself only dreaming of income. A business owner who commits herself to the success of her business and then actively and aggressively pursues this commitment has a better chance of realizing a high income.

The chapters in this book on advertising and public relations will provide you with excellent ways to assertively and aggressively promote your pet-sitting business; however, it is up to you to follow through with the implementation.

I can give you some information that will help you to make your own income projections when assessing pet sitting as a career. A 2003 national survey of pet sitters indicates that the national average for a pet-sitting visit is approximately \$15. Using this national average, you can determine the number of pet-sitting visits you anticipate making daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly. (If you plan to hire a staff of pet sitters, you'll need to project their visits as well.) Then, multiply this number by the average charge of \$15 per visit to estimate your gross annual revenue. Of course, you'll need to estimate expenses that will be paid from your gross revenue to determine the income you will net, but this formula will give you a way of making income projections. After estimating how many daily visits are required for the yearly income you want to make, you'll need to set your marketing goals for how to achieve this level of business. In chapters 5 and 6 I will discuss several marketing and advertising techniques that will build your business (and revenues).

Although I can't tell you with any certainty what you, personally, can expect to earn through pet sitting, I can tell you that pet sitting has been profitable for me. My experience has shown that pet owners do not mind paying for peace of mind when they have to be away from home. I also can provide you with information and tools that will get you headed in the right direction for success!

WHAT YOU NEED TO START

Unlike many other business opportunities, pet sitting involves limited start-up costs. As of this edition of this book, I estimate that a professional pet-sitting service can be opened with a \$3,000 to \$5,000 investment, depending on the cost of living in your part of the country. (If you plan to pet sit on a small scale just for additional or secondary income, your start-up costs can be much less.)

Although you can spend a lot more, it really isn't necessary. After all, there is no costly inventory required, so your primary expenses will be for liability insurance, a dishonesty bond, office equipment, supplies, and professional services. And because pet sitting is an ideal home-based business, you can save money by not having to rent office space. (The details of how to open a pet-sitting service economically will be discussed in later chapters.)

Currently, pet sitting requires very little in the way of past experience or expertise. This may change in the near future though, because accreditation and certification programs are becoming available through national trade organizations. As the number of professional pet sitters increases, the additional education and training offered by such programs may become a distinguishing factor and a competitive edge among industry members.

As of this writing, these programs are strictly voluntary and there are no specific educational background requirements for pet sitters. However, any background in working with or caring for pets (even just for your own pets) will be a plus. In addition, any prior business courses or business experience are bound to be helpful.

I would say that the most important prerequisite of a pet sitter is that he or she needs to be a pet lover. Besides this, possessing good common sense, being responsible, reliable, honest, trustworthy, and having a sense of humor are the essential qualities needed for pet sitting.

Convinced that this business is for you? If so, the rest of this book is written to walk you through opening a professional and reputable pet-sitting service. I suggest you read it through for a general overview of what the profession entails. Then go back and concentrate on specific chapters as you proceed with your own pet-sitting business.

If you're already pet sitting professionally, there is much information in this book that may give you ideas on how to improve your existing business.

