

Enterprise: A Successful Couple Finds Going to the Dogs Rewarding

Business Opportunities Are Plentiful as Demand Booms for Pet Services

By Riva Richmond, The Wall Street Journal
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DOGS HAVE ALWAYS BEEN Martin and Cindy Madden's best friends. Come November, dogs will be their lifework, too.

Like entrepreneurs across the country, the San Diego couple -- who have owned several award-winning dogs -- are seizing on a boom in demand for pet-care services. The Maddens are letting employees run the restaurants and other small businesses they own, so they can focus on work they love: running a luxury dog and cat resort they're building in the tony Palm Springs area of Southern California.

Guests will be able to relax in front of TVs in private rooms or frolic in the swimming-pool waterfall. There will be massages, hydrotherapy and time to get one's hair done. Pet owners with separation anxiety can go online to see just how much fun Fifi and Fido are having via Web cam. Mr. Madden says he and his wife are investing nearly \$1 million, raised through the sale of a home, in Camp Paradise Pet Resort Inc.

"The clientele is wealthy. Their kids are grown and gone, and what they care about are their animals," says Mr. Madden. "We get to take care of their animals, and that's how we want to live out the rest of our lives."

The Maddens have discovered a booming niche, as demand for boarding, grooming, dog walking and all kinds of pet services are on the rise, thanks to growing pet ownership in the U.S. and owners' increasing willingness to spend on their animals' well-being.

Americans will spend \$36 billion on their pets this year, according to the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association, more than double the \$17 billion spent in 1994. Some \$2.4 billion will be spent on services other than veterinarian care this year, the association estimates.

Meanwhile, many animal-loving entrepreneurs are seeing in pet services a way to escape desk jobs for what they hope will be more fulfilling careers. These newcomers are bringing skills from their previous careers to the table, along with professionalism and, in many cases, considerable capital, says Caroline Roden, a former kennel owner who now gives seminars on how to get into that business.

Among the biggest consumers of pet services are young professionals who have delayed having children, and baby-boom empty-nesters, two groups with considerable disposable income. Their high-end tastes and desire for hands-on, personal care has made pet services an ideal place for small-business people, says Bob Vetere, managing director of the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association. But succeeding still requires the right approach.

"If you are a new guy trying to get into this, you've got to find a niche," Mr. Vetere says. "Know what you're doing. Know who your clientele is. Fit it better than a megacompany can."

The hunt for the perfect niche with a luxury twist has made for a flurry of creative new businesses in recent years. Along

with resorts, there are day spas and companies that make weekly visits to dog owners' yards to collect and remove poop. Car services such as Los Angeles Pet Taxi charge \$65 and up to take busy owners' pets to the vet, the groomer or the airport -- and sometimes even the crematorium. In New York, there's even a dating service called Leashes and Lovers LLC that pairs up dog owners.

Inspired by the growing popularity of various home services on the West Coast, and a love for dogs, Donna Sheehey and Doug Oakley opened Zoomin Groomin Mobile Pet Spa in Norwell, Mass., in April 2004. Both were looking to get out of the corporate world; Ms. Sheehey owned a beverage-marketing company, and Mr. Oakley worked for Pfizer Inc. selling consumer products.

Today, Zoomin Groomin has two vans and four full-time groomers who wash and style dogs in customers' driveways. It has attracted 1,500 customers in 15 months, 70% of whom are repeat clients, and takes appointments two to three weeks ahead. The company will add two more vans soon.

Zoomin Groomin is also expanding by franchising. Ms. Sheehey and Mr. Oakley have been contacted by 75 to 100 potential franchisees a month since they began offering franchises in January, Mr. Oakley says. Many applicants are groomers or entrepreneurs looking for a business opportunity that won't require an expensive real-estate investment. So far, Zoomin Groomin has signed on three franchisees, all in the Boston area, who each operate one van. It takes about \$55,000 to get started, including the cost of the vehicle, insurance and an initial marketing budget, Ms. Sheehey says.

There's also a market for alternative health services for animals, such as massage, acupuncture and homeopathy.

Lyn Kamer and her sisters Candy Giordan and Cherry Reed operate horse massage-therapy businesses under the Healing Touch name in southern New Jersey, South Florida and Alabama, respectively.

Ms. Kamer, who has been a competitive long-distance trail rider since 1961, says she became interested in horse massage after seeing how it helped her own horse. Today, she treats performance horses -- a full-body massage costs \$70 -- and dogs and also trains other massage therapists.

"It's tremendously rewarding to take an animal that's broken and fix it, to offer them relief," she says.

Some other practitioners take alternative medicine even further. In her company, Anima Mundi Inc., Penelope Smith of Point Reyes, Calif., says she has used telepathy to communicate with thousands of animals and help owners address health and behavior problems. She is a speaker and writer on the subject, and teaches other communicators how to ask animals what's wrong, much as a physician would do with a person. The field has "taken off," she says, driven by people's interest in holistic medicine, personal growth, spirituality and environmentalism.

A New York City business, Blue Sky Dogs, has also seized on people's desire to connect with their pets and with nature. Owner Tammy McCarley, a former sports marketer, has built a busy business in the past two years taking dogs and their owners on day and weekend excursions. Last month, she took a group of dogs and owners to the Catskill Mountains in New York state for the weekend, and this fall she will take another group upstate to Saratoga Springs.

During the week, Ms. McCarley takes groups of dogs, usually six to eight at a time, on hikes outside the city. "It's real nature, letting them off the leash, letting them swim and play with other dogs," she says. "A good dog is a tired dog."

The growing business is giving Ms. McCarley, a marathon runner and triathlete, a workout, too. She hopes to hire someone to help this fall, if she can find the right person. "I could go out five days a week easily," she says of the demand for her services, but for now she limits her work to three or four days a week. "It's just my ability to keep up with it."

E-mail questions or comments about small business to Wendy.Bounds@wsj.com

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