

Become A Bird Sitter

Success in the pet sitting business depends on marketing your services, meeting the needs of your clientele and having a thorough understanding of the industry.

By Rebecca Sweat

Interested in getting into the bird sitting business? Before you quit your present job and dive into pet sitting, do your homework. Learn all you can about the business, and see if it is really right for you: Buy a book(s) on the subject to use as a reference. Talk to large, multi-employee pet sitting services and boarding facilities, as well as smaller, one-person operations. Ask what they believe are the positives and negatives in this type of work.

What Type Of Service Will You Offer? Will you care for birds only or others animals as well?

You'll be more marketable if you open up your business to all types of pets, because some clients will have multiple pets and will want you to care for all of them. Pet sitters who specialize in birds are most successful in large metropolitan areas, where there are large numbers of pet birds to support a bird-only type of pet sitting service. Will you board birds in your home or only care for people's pets in their homes?

If you board at your home, make sure you have the room to do so.

Check with your city and county offices to see if there are zoning restrictions prohibiting home-based businesses and if a business license is required. If you will be driving to clients' homes, how far away will you drive? Will you rent an office or run the business from your home? Do you want to care for the animals yourself, or will you hire employees to do this while you manage the business?

Get Accreditation

These organizations offer pet sitting accreditation programs: National Association of Professional Pet Sitters (NAPPS) (www.petsitters.org)

Its home study course covers a variety of topics, such as how to recognize the symptoms of illness, how to administer medication, dealing with behavior problems, how to handle emergencies and the business aspects of pet sitting. Once the course is completed, students take a test and, if they pass, they can apply to become NAPPS-certified. Pet Sitters International (PSI) (www.petsit.com)

Its accreditation program consists of three home study courses. The first one is to achieve the level of pet sitting technician, the second course is to become an advanced pet sitting technician, and a third course is taken to earn the credential of master pet sitting technician.

Both organizations offer other educational opportunities to their members as well. NAPPS and PSI each host annual conventions offering seminars and workshops on a variety of pet care topics. PSI publishes a bi-monthly magazine, and NAPPS produces a quarterly newsletter, both of which are filled with tips and articles relating to the pet care industry.

PIJAC — the Pet Industry Joint Advisory Council (www.pijac.org)

The PIJAC certification program is designed for pet store retailers, veterinary care staff, breeders and other pet care professionals, and offers courses in avian, canine, freshwater fish, reptile and small animal. The avian course covers the proper care and handling of birds, dietary needs of a different avian species, environment and sanitation standards, and the identification and treatment of common disorders. Students are awarded certification as a certified avian specialist (CAS).

Market Yourself If you've achieved PSI certification, list yourself on the PSI website and/or list your service with NAPPS (NAPPS certification is not a requirement). On either website, pet owners type in their zip code and are given a list of pet sitters in their area. Take out an ad in the Yellow Pages, place ads in "shopper" or other free newspapers. Post flyers or print up business cards to leave in pet stores and veterinary clinics. Send out press releases to the local paper about your new business. Send pet owners a thank you note after they've used your service, offering a discount on future care for each referral they send your way.

How Much Will You Make?

The amount of income you can expect to make depends on how hard you market yourself, your level of professionalism, whether you are working alone or have employees working under you and where you live. A large metropolitan area will obviously provide a greater number of customers than a small town.

1. Come up with a total for how many half-hour visits your service can reasonably handle per week, and then multiply it times 52 for an annual figure.
2. Figure out how much you can realistically charge for each half-hour visit. The national average is \$12 for each half-hour visit. Call pet sitters in your area to find out the going rate in your community. Multiply your price by the number of visits your service will make each year to arrive at estimated gross annual revenue.
3. Estimate your annual expenses. You'll need to pay for liability insurance and a dishonesty bond. You'll also need business cards and stationery printed up. Figure in advertising expenses and hands-on supplies like pet food, cages, travel carriers, gloves and first-aid supplies. Estimate the annual salaries for any employees as well. Add up your total annual expenses, and then subtract that number from your gross revenues to determine the annual net income.

If you just want to work part-time and earn a little extra income for the household, depending on where you live, you could net as much as \$10,000 or \$15,000 a year. The full-time business owner with one or two employees may make \$50,000 a year or more.