


An Old Dog Lea



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For someone who is an innovator, helping pioneer the pet sitting profession in the 1970s, adopting new technologies for business as they evolve, and keeping up with the latest developments in Internet marketing, Jeffrey Lauterbach is old-school when it comes to the core business philosophy he adopted when he began pet sitting more than 30 years ago.

"I imagine if it were my home and my pets and what I would want someone to do. When we're done we want it to look like they just came back from a trip to the store or from work," says Jeffrey. "We haven't changed the basics of what we do in 30 years."

Jeffrey is the president of Critter Sitters, which has 30,000 clients through its 150 pet sitter licensees, serving 19 counties in the greater Atlanta area and The Golden Isles region on the Georgia coast. With most of his life spent in the pet sitting industry, the 61-year-old licensed attorney and business consultant is one of the pioneers of the profession.

After graduating from law school, Jeffrey decided to do something other than practice law, and he and his wife began looking for a business opportunity. He saw an ad in the newspaper placed by a man who was advertising his pet-sitting service—a relatively unheard of business back in 1975.

Jeffrey contacted the man and asked if he would be interested in a partnership. The three met, discussed the business and the skills the Lauterbachs could bring to help the company, and the three created a partnership.

At that time, pet sitting visits were only \$3.00 per visit, but, as with many other pet sitters back in those years, the entrepreneurs were making things up as they went. After two years of growing the business, the original owner decided to move on, and Jeffrey bought him out.

One of the unique aspects of Critter Sitters is the fact that the company is comprised completely of owner-operators, running their own pet-sitting businesses under a smaller group of area managers who are also independent. Everyone uses a shared-service model of business operations. For example, each contractor has their own territory,

rens New Tricks

works directly with their clients, collects money for services directly from the clients and deposits those fees into their own business accounts. The contractors then pay a portion of their fees to Critter Sitters, based on a sliding scale. This money goes to support the company's marketing, voice mail system, Web site, training and other services.

"They can't duplicate the services we offer for what they pay," says Jeffrey. "All of our printed materials are first class, which is an area I see other pet sitters try to save on. We provide everything the sitters need to be pet sitters except their cars. This includes a voice mail system which gives each contractor their own unique code that allows clients to call and leave messages directly for the sitters. The sitters retrieve their own voice mails without the expense of receptionists handling almost 10,000 calls per month.

"We are an early adopter of new technologies," says Jeffrey, who said the company began using automated answering systems when they debuted in the late 1980s. The company does have one person who qualifies potential clients who call or e-mail as a result of the company's marketing efforts. Any leads who qualify to become clients are sent to the contractor in those territories. One of the veteran area managers handles day-to-day office responsibilities.

The company spends considerable time maintaining and improving its Web site, spends more than \$1,000 per month on Google AdWords marketing, and provides and distributes high-quality marketing brochures. "You can't scrimp on your image or your brand," advises Jeffrey. "That's not wise anywhere, whether it's brochures or your Web site."

This concept of owner-operators has served Critter Sitters well during the last four decades. "People are their own best bosses," Jeffrey believes. "If I tell Mr. Smith I'll look in on Fluffy at 3:00 pm, I'm going to do it. If the company has told Mrs. Smith we'll take care of Fluffy at 3:00, I might be late. Our people are self-motivated, and we reward them with appropriate incentives."

Critter Sitters licensees are not orbiting completely in their own universe. The company produces an internal newsletter and hosts an annual meeting, with more than 75 contractors attending each year. Topics presented by a variety

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of speakers include holistic health care, taxes, marketing and training on the company's 60-page operating manual, first published in 1982.

The pet sitting business has evolved in a variety of ways, says Jeffrey. Where the Yellow Pages used to be the #1 source of business leads, it produces few today, with the Web site now the top lead generator. As people work longer hours, creating more disposable income but less personal time, the dog walking aspect of the business has grown significantly.

Critter Sitters offers full-service visits, including taking in the mail, watering the plants and attending to the pets—the way Jeffrey believes anyone would want their home and pets treated. The company's prices are listed on its Web site and there is no negotiating. Jeffrey estimates that 90 percent of their clients are women, and so they market in places where women congregate.

Critter Sitters has been a member of NAPPS since 1988, when a fellow pet sitter contacted Jeffrey about helping the growing organization move to the next level in its development. With his legal, financial, non-profit and consulting experience, Jeffrey donated his time to the organization, soon becoming its president and negotiating the contract which brought Association Headquarters on board as NAPPS' association management company.

"One of the big things we did was to work hard on making the member benefits free," says Jeffrey. "Once you pay your membership, that's it, in terms of what you pay for the benefits." That change in direction helped NAPPS grow to its current 2,000+ membership base, with higher member loyalty and retention rates.

He points to the myriad benefits the association provides to both new and seasoned pet sitters as one of the ways the organization has become a respected industry leader. "If someone is new to pet sitting, they should be using the incredible benefits NAPPS offers. It's a wealth of experienced people's best ideas."

By Steve Milano

In addition to encouraging their licensees to join NAPPS, Critter Sitters has an extensive interview process, including a period during which potential pet sitters must ride with area managers so the company can see how the pet sitter works. In addition to seeing the potential sitter's enthusiasm, work habits and ethics, the managers look to see how animals react to the potential new hire.

"The pets will tell you a lot if you listen to them," says Jeffrey.

If you are new to pet sitting, Jeffrey's biggest piece of advice is to be realistic in your business growth plans and to have patience. While you will not need to spend lots of money upfront, especially on print, radio or television advertising, because your business will grow based on promotions, word of mouth and referrals, you should expect to take up to two years before your business will provide you with a solid, full-time income.

Jeffrey now lives back in his home state of Pennsylvania, working for Critter Sitters in the areas of strategic direction, branding, finance, marketing and product development for the business. He believes the pet sitting profession has a great future, and along with it, NAPPS, as it continues to help members fulfill their business needs and dreams.

While clinging to the same customer-service roots he planted more than 30 years ago, Jeffrey Lauterbach has contributed to helping his fellow pet sitters and their profession evolve in new and exciting directions. ■

