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## When it's time to do business, this business goes out of its way

Philadelphia Business Journal - by [Adam Stone](#) Special to the Business Journal

Deirdre Weissman knew for years that she wanted to accomplish two things. "One was to work with animals, the other was to open my own business," Weissman said.

The two came together in January 2004, when Weissman started a small, informal pet-care service, walking dogs and feeding cats. As she headed off to veterinary school later that year, her husband Zeth took over the fast-growing operation, working with Deirdre's guidance to transform it from a hobby to a full-fledged business.



Curt Hudson

Zeth and Deirdre Weissman walk Ginger on 18th Street near Fitzwater in Philadelphia.

Today **PhilaPets.com** walks 1,100 dogs and scoops the litter for some 1,500 cats whose owners may be at work or out of town. The business will gross \$650,000 this year and could hit \$1 million next year, Zeth said. In a world of mom-and-pop dog-sitting services, PhilaPets.com brings to the table a high-tech edge and a formal business structure.

Clients can visit the Web site to schedule visits, pay their bills, update pet walking and feeding information. "This is what has enabled us to grow," Zeth said. "The reason most petsitting companies can't grow past that level of two or three people is that they can't communicate. They can't bill efficiently, they can't collect client information. They can't make sure the right people have the right keys."

Those who know the animal scene applaud the business savvy behind this model.

"They've taken technology and put it to use in the business in a way that really matters," said Sean O'Hara, a manager at Commerce Bank on Rittenhouse Square and an organizer of the annual Carnivale of the Dogs canine festival. Using the Web site, "Zeth's contractors can pick up jobs, keep track of billing, do all of that online. So now you don't have to go to an office and then run 15 miles out just to walk a dog."

The company relies on a cadre of 46 independent contractors to groom and walk and feed, and sometimes just keep the pooch company while Mommy's at work.

"Seriously," Zeth said. "We have had people call and say, 'I just want you to sit with my dog for two hours while I go to the gym.'"

That's hardly the strangest thing PhilaPets has encountered. Pet owners are, of course, part of society. "We've gone in and found pornography on people's kitchen counters. We've found drug paraphernalia. We've encountered families in divorce going through custody battles over the dog."

Most of the time, though, the work is just a walk in the park. That's how the business got started, in fact, with Deirdre encountering local dog owners on the trot and converting them to clients. While she attends veterinary school full time now, Deirdre remains much involved in the business, especially at the strategic level, working with Zeth to lay out long-range business plans and tackle emerging issues.

Among those plans is an effort to take marketing beyond the level of the doggy-park network.

The Web site itself has proven to be its own best advertising, with 40 percent of customers finding the service online.

The company has expanded its infrastructure, bringing in three managers who divide the city by ZIP codes. This helps make company representatives available at to talk in person with potential clients who may not understand the service.

"The people in Center City understand it, but now we are working on the South Philadelphia area. A lot of people have been there forever, so they have their friends and their relatives who come in and walk the dog," Zeth said. Sometimes it takes a direct conversation to convey the virtues of a professional service.

Having that layer of midlevel managers also helps to bring the company closer to its existing customers. "It is hard to remember 1,200 names, but by splitting it up you can have a more personal relationship," Zeth said.

It isn't a perfect system. Right now, each manager hires contractors to work a third of the city, so there is a lot redundant effort, Zeth said. "It might be better having one person do the hiring for the whole company."

Amid all this, PhilaPets still finds time to help others.

Melissa Levy is director of development with PAWS: **Philadelphia Animal Welfare Society**. PhilaPets has helped out on a number of animal-rescue awareness events.

"Zeth looks at PhilaPets as an important member of the community, and not just as a business out to gather clients and make money," Levy said. "That can only come back in positive ways."

### UP CLOSE

Name: Zeth Weissman  
Age: 32  
Company: PhilaPets.com  
Best business decision: To take a hobby and make it a profession  
Key challenge overcome: Helping clients to understand the services offered  
Advice to other young entrepreneurs: Grow for the right reasons