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PhilaPets.com knows who let the dogs out

Philadelphia Business Journal - by [Natalie Kostelni](#) Staff Writer

PHILADELPHIA — Though just 25 at the time, Deirdre Frey tapped her instincts and experience when she launched her own business.



Sharon Blumberg
Deirdre Frey with her
husband Zeth
Weissman and their
dog Ginger.

Frey worked at a Web development and consulting firm during the high-tech boom, but when the bust came, she decided to pursue her fondness for animals by entering veterinary school at the University of Pennsylvania.

She arrived in Philadelphia in January 2004, eight months before she was set to start classes, and looked for ways to make some extra cash on top of her part-time job as a vet technician.

"It was difficult because I would only be available for eight months," she said.

She alighted on dog walking.

Though not exactly an original idea, Frey forged ahead.

"If you have an idea, even if other people are doing it, you should try it," she said.

She had her own mutt, Ginger, whom she took on daily walks and she saw an opportunity to marry her love of animals with her entrepreneurialism. Her inspiration also came from her mother, who as a young mother of five started a nursery school. "She married her life environment with her work environment," Frey said.

From that came PhilaPets.com.

Frey signed up for trade organizations that provided her a list of other pet-sitting companies. She decided to price her services at or above the local competitions'.

"I didn't want to compete on price but quality," she said. "We serve four entities: the animals, the pet parent, the animal community and our team. Fostering good relationships with all four make us a quality organization. A lot of companies don't focus on the customer service aspect."

Armed with a stack of fliers with a photo of her sister's dog Sadie, Frey headed down to a dog park that is part of the Schuylkill River Park and handed out about 100 them. The fliers offered pet sitting with a veterinary technician on staff (Frey), and listed her phone number and e-mail address. She also put them in mailboxes.

Frey figures the two biggest initial startup costs were \$100 to \$200 on paper for the fliers and signing up for the trade organizations.

She got a call the next day. That gave her the confidence to hand out more fliers the day after.

Frey used Outlook to schedule walks and Excel to monitor payments. As business grew, Frey and her husband, Zeth Weissman, who was a Web developer, created a Web site and software to handle the company's scheduling, client information, paying and pet care needs. A client can schedule appointments and PhilaPets.com "Pet Care Specialists" can monitor when they need to care for an animal.

The company currently has three full-time employees and 50 pet care specialists who work as independent contractors. Frey, who just finished veterinary school, works as a part-time vet in Bensalem and spends the rest of her time maintaining PhilaPets.com.

There have been growing pains along the way. At times Frey and Weissman decided not to take on additional clients while they worked out some kinks. Frey also initially found it difficult to ensure quality while growing.

"It was a tough step to give up that control and put that responsibility in someone else's hands," she said. "It was nerve wracking to me."

She resolved that issue by devising some interview questions that would ferret out those not dedicated to her high standards.

The company, which ranks as No. 42 on the Philadelphia 100 list of fastest-growing private companies, went from \$228,000 in revenue in 2005 to \$600,000 last year. Frey estimates she'll rake in \$700,000 this year.

PhilaPets.com currently has 1,500 active clients and Frey figures the company will hold steady for now. The couple debates about expanding into the suburbs and even franchising by distributing the Web site software.

"It's hard to decide where we want to go next," Frey said, "especially since we're happy where we are now."