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## Getting started: Pet sitting

Job demands devotion, but the career's rewards are both financial and spiritual

NEW YORK (CNNfn) - Pet owners are the first to tell you that on some nights, after a long thankless day at the office, all they really want to do is head for home to cuddle up with their pets. Who, after all, doesn't love the kind, fluffy face of a grateful cat or dog?

That is, in essence, the lure of opening up a pet sitting business. Ask those who've been in it for a while and they agree.

Becoming the trusted caretaker of other people's dogs, puppies, cats and kittens holds both spiritual as well as financial rewards for those who are truly devoted to the animals. Professional pet sitters like Lorraine Zdeb, a 10-year veteran of the infant industry, says the work is akin to being a guardian angel for animals.

"I'm honored by being chosen to help people raise their animals," said Zdeb.

But there is more to this job than petting sweet little critters on the head, feeding them, playing with them and tucking them in at night. Every pet sitter must love animals. That, clearly, comes with the territory. Love alone, however, isn't going to have clients banging down the door paying you top dollar to look after these very cute members of their family.

### SNAPSHOT: PET SITTING

Barriers to entry:	None.
Start-up cost:	Approx. \$2,000-\$5,000
Average pay:	\$12.50 per visit
Drawbacks:	Holidays are busiest time. Work is not steady. People don't think it's a 'business.'
Benefits:	Spend time with animals. Self-employment.

### A little business sense

The trouble most aspiring pet sitters have, according to Zdeb, is they either love animals and have no head for business or they are people with business backgrounds who know nothing about the proper care of animals. Without planning it, Zdeb is one of the lucky few who had the right mix of business and pet care experience when she started Love Your Pet in Somerville, N.J., in 1991. She studied business management in college, but later abandoned business to pursue her passion for animals. After working for the Humane Society and later a boarding kennel, Zdeb got her first pet sitting client, a referral from a veterinarian friend.

In the past decade her business has grown steadily to 900 clients in the towns surrounding her five-acre ranch.



Understanding that this is a business venture, Zdeb insured and bonded herself to protect against liability. She also drew up contracts that had to be signed by clients. And immediately, she got herself on the local 4-H fair circuit and set up information booths at street fairs in towns within a 10 to 15-mile radius from her home. Given her prior jobs, she was also able to tap into networks of vets and animal rescue groups for referrals.

Zdeb spent “very little” getting the business up and running. The major expense was insurance and bonding, which costs about \$400 a year, according to Pet Sitters International. She also had to make business cards, brochures and contracts.

**Charlotte Reed, who runs Two Dogs and A Goat in New York City, is one of those who started with a background in business and pursued pet sitting when she tired of working on Wall Street. Determined to provide the best service in New York City, Reed became a certified dog trainer and studied both dog grooming and veterinary technology to prepare herself for the business.**

### **Hard work can pay off**

While some expect the work of caring for animals to be peaceful and soothing, pet sitters will tell you the truth is that it can be a grueling job if you are committed to providing top notch service.

Pet sitters are always on the go. During the busiest times of the year, summer time and the winter holidays, many start their rounds at 6 a.m. and don't make it home until 9 p.m.

“It can be really hard to have a life as a pet sitter,” said Zdeb. “You are literally holding that animal's life in your hands so you have to make a very strong commitment.”

**Reed, six years after setting up shop in her midtown Manhattan apartment, is still working 12 hour days. Reed now limits herself to grooming and training the animals and has passed off the dog walking to her 25 part-time employees.**

**“It's like any other business. You are dealing with schedules and constantly working at getting new clients. There is always a project going on,” said Reed.**

For those starting out, being a pet sitter means walking dogs in downpours and snowstorms. It means dragging yourself out of bed even when you have a head cold and a fever. It means postponing your own plans to look after an animal that gets ill while under your care.

It is difficult work. But a strong commitment can hold financial rewards.

The National Association of Professional Pet Sitters said most pet sitters can expect to earn between \$45,000 to \$50,000 after being in business for two years.

Zdeb remembers that she was earning in that range after being in business for two years. Today, she has seven employees, the business is growing, and Zdeb is still putting in the long hours.

Is it worth it? “I'm like a pig in mud,” said Zdeb.

