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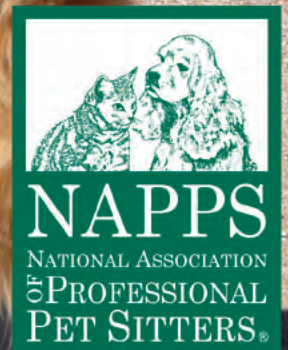
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MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

It's Not Just WHAT You Know . . .

By Steve Milano

Success in the pet sitting business depends not just on what you know, but who you know, as well.

At least that's the philosophy of Kara Jenkins, owner of TLC House & Pet Sitting Service in the Phoenix metro area.

For most of her 10-year-career, Kara has been building relationships with other pet sitters, groomers, veterinarians, kennels, trainers, pet stores and anyone involved in the pet care profession. She belongs to both local and national pet sitter associations in order to meet and learn from others. She attends the NAPPS annual conference not only to listen to the speakers, but to meet other pet sitters from across the country, as well.

Through her careful and continual cultivation of professional contacts, Kara has built a business which today has 10 pet sitters and more than 500 customers.

Growing up in Bartlett, Illinois; Jenkins had many pets as a child, including dogs, birds, fish, gerbils and cats. She rode horses her family owned, and took up animal photography.

Her mother bred champion Golden Retrievers, and Kara was a junior show handler from age nine to eleven, traveling the Midwest showing dogs.

During her college years, Kara majored in special education and minored in exercise sport science at the University of Arizona. It was during college that Kara was first asked to pet sit by a classmate, and she began sitting for fun, making apartment visits and overnight stays. During her time back home,



she worked at her mother's boarding and grooming business.

After college, Kara worked with children who were disabled. It was during this time misfortune struck—Kara's hearing, damaged in a skiing accident age 16, began to worsen and left her hearing impaired in her right ear.

She left her job to find work she could do with her hearing loss, but was unsuccessful in her search, and eventually enrolled in vocational rehabilitation. After taking a variety of tests to determine what type of career would be best for her, Kara realized the right path for her was to start her own business. She began working on creating a pet sitting business, attending classes, working with counselors and developing a business plan.

In 2001, after 18 months of working on her business plan while also working part time, Kara was ready to launch her pet sitting service. She began building her business primarily through word-of-mouth customer referrals and networking with other pet professionals in the Phoenix Metro area. She joined a local pet sitting association which sponsored monthly meetings with guest speakers and offered other support. This allowed her to obtain additional business via other local pet sitters who had no backup when they went on vacation. Building trust through verbal agreements not to "steal" her competitors' clients allowed her to build her network of contacts.

Kara continued to improve her business skills, turning to her family for more business

advice, working with a financial consultant and building a network of contacts in the pet care profession.

Like all successful entrepreneurs, Kara grew by trial and error, learning from early missteps. One lesson she learned as she began to grow her business was not to service too large an area in order to chase more dollars.

"I provided service in a very large area to reach more affluent people, but it was more travel and work," she said. "Now, I keep the business close to home."

Today, TLC operates within a 20-30 mile radius of its home base and her business strategy is growth by increasing local market share. The business serves mostly dogs, cats and small pets. In order to build its business, TLC has made contacts in the offices of the many local apartment complexes in the area, where office managers and concierges recommend pet sitting services to their tenants.

Pet sitting Web sites were not standard for the pet sitting profession when Kara formed TLC, so Kara supplemented her word-of-mouth marketing with flyers (which helped) and coupons (which didn't). TLC now has an expansive Web site (www.tlcpetsitter.com) and sends an e-newsletter to its clients.

Because TLC is not a full-service pet sitting business, Kara prices her services in the mid-market range to attract more business. TLC provides daily, mid-day and overnight visits, but does not offer transporting, grooming, or live-in services. As she started her business, Kara collected payment at the time of providing service; today, she collects payment in advance.

As part of her initial business plan, she had made plans for when and how to add contractors as TLC expanded. Within two years, she began hiring, and retained a consultant to help her hire her first contractors. She has received as many as 150 responses to an ad for help, and has set hiring criteria for contractors (available for viewing at TLC's Web site).



Some criteria include:

- Volunteer and/or other pet care industry experience with local vet clinics, animal shelters, groomers, pet stores, etc.
- Experience in the administration of injections for both cats and dogs
- Pet CPR and First Aid must be completed within 120 days of hire
- Ability to pass a background check and have excellent references.

Each potential hire is first screened on the phone before qualifying for a personal interview. Contractors are expected to sign a no-compete clause.

For those interested in getting into pet sitting, Kara suggests getting some free, hands-on experience, first.

"Go to work at a kennel or the humane society," she recommends. "You get to learn breeds and behaviors and reactions. You get to see aggression and fear in the animals. It's important to see those," she said.

To broaden the services you can offer your clients, she suggests educating yourself on pet health and maintenance. "Most clients are grateful for your advice."

Not content to coast on her current success, Kara is continually looking for ways to build her knowledge base and network.

"I can't say enough about how helpful NAPPS has been," she said. "I use all the NAPPS tools, like the business forms and NAPPS Chat and teleconferences. I've reviewed my contract because of what I learned from NAPPS. I realized I needed business hours and I needed time for myself, after talking with Candance (Labane-Godfrey, NAPPS past president who conducts the monthly mentoring teleconferences)."

Kara is participating in this year's NAPPS Presents 4 Pets program and will be going through NAPPS's online certification program.

Kara is now at a point in her career where she wants to give back to the profession. She has taken on the vice presidency of the Arizona Professional Pet Sitters Association and serves on the Membership Committee of NAPPS, reaching out to new members.

Whether you are a veteran in the pet sitting business or just starting out, Kara suggests a path that has served her well.

"Building relationships is very important," she said. "Get to know the local veterinarians and groomers. Join your local pet sitter association. I would advise anyone who wants to be a pet sitter to join NAPPS. NAPPS is wonderful. It has changed my life," Kara said, and she invites any NAPPS members with any questions she may be able to answer to contact her via her Web site.

Based on Kara Jenkins's history of getting involved with others in her profession, NAPPS members can expect to see more of this committed pet sitter involved in NAPPS—learning, expanding her professional network, giving back and increasing not only what she knows, but who she knows. ■