



Start a Farm-sitting Business: What It Takes

Learn a little more about the pros and cons of running a farm sitting business--and find out if you have what it takes, too.

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No job is perfect, of course. Christina cites the long hours as her least favorite part of this profession, while Kathy feels less than thrilled about farm sitting on frigid, winter days.

"This past January, one of my clients went on a 10-day cruise and it was very cold," she recalls. "I froze my fingers and toes while cleaning stalls and paddocks. Their water hose froze the first day and I had to haul buckets of water to the tank. Lots of buckets. I got through it, however, and my clients were thrilled when they returned to happy, well-fed horses and a clean barn."

Keep in mind, too, that pet sitting isn't a 9-to-5 job with free weekends, paid holidays and sick leave. In fact, holidays rank as the busiest (but most lucrative) times of the year for pet sitters.

"Holidays are a beast!" Kathy warns. "Right when you think people might stay home for Thanksgiving or Christmas, they slam you right and left, and usually at the last minute. I had so many sits last season I wasn't able to cook anything for my own family Thanksgiving or spend much time at home opening Christmas gifts. This year I'm only going to take a couple of clients at each holiday and the rest of the time will be spent with my own loved ones."

Taking Care of Business

Do you have what it takes to be a pet sitter? Sure, you love and respect animals, a definite prerequisite for this career, but a good pet sitter needs other important skills and attributes as well.

You should be honest and patient with both animals and people, says Christina.

According to Kathy, a pet sitter must possess good organizational skills and the flexibility to juggle time, miles and schedules.

"You also need to understand animal behavior and first aid," she stresses. "You may have to tend to a pet that requires medication or special handling, or deal with a very picky eater." Or even give the Heimlich maneuver to a sheep, as Christina found herself doing on one occasion.

If you think becoming a pet or farm sitter sounds like the right job for you (and that you're the right person for the job), here are a few pointers for getting your business off the ground. Do your homework.

This may sound like a no-brainer, but before you embark on a business venture, it pays to learn everything you can about it to figure out if this is something you want to do.

"The first thing I did was get on the Internet," says Kathy. "I found Pet Sitters International and got on a group list where other pet sitters could ask questions and give advice from their past sitting experience. I was able to research the business end of it as to how to set pricing, establish insurance and bonding, and when or if to charge a travel fee."

Obtain any needed permits, business licenses, liability insurance and bonding.

Check with your state, county and city offices to see if you require a business license, as rules vary from place to place. Kathy, for instance, discovered that in her area she only needed a business license if she carried or stored inventory, or operated any type of boarding facility at her home. She also learned that, while she did need insurance, bonding wasn't necessary since she wouldn't be hiring employees.

Conduct market research and decide how your business will be different.

Find out how many other pet or farm sitters operate in your area and what services they provide. Talk to pet owners, farmers, veterinarians and sitters to determine whether a market exists for your business. When questioning other pet sitters, be honest about who you are and what you're doing. Then ask yourself how your business be different from theirs.

For example, Christina stresses the personal touch with Town & Country Farm & Pet Sitter; with a kennel capacity for only about 15 canines, she and her husband can give plenty of attention and playtime to each dog. Kathy chose to specialize in livestock (mostly horses) because she knew so many people in the boarding kennel business and didn't want to step on any toes.



Figure out the extent of your service area.

How far are you willing or able to travel to visit clients' homes and farms? What areas do other sitters already cover? What kind of vehicle do you drive and what are the gas prices in your area?

"We've had to reduce our service area drastically because of the gas prices," notes Christina. Adds Kathy: "I drive an F250 diesel truck and though I charge a travel fee for clients 10 miles outside my service radius, I just can't make enough money to pay for the fuel plus the other fees that constitute the 'cost of doing business.'"

Get your paperwork ready.

Oops, did you think this would be a paperless job? Think again. You'll need a service contract that at least specifies the dates your clients will be gone, the services provided, the owner's contact information (cell numbers, hotels, etc.) and emergency contacts.

In the service contract or on a separate form, you should also obtain as much information about the animals (name, age, breed, color, etc.) and their care as possible, including diets, exercise requirements, behavioral quirks and health history.

Here's another crucial form: the Veterinary Release or Permission to Treat form covering each animal in your care and signed by the owner.

Christina learned about the necessity of this piece of paper the hardest way.

"We had an emergency with one of our client's dogs at 8:30 on a Saturday night," she says. "We took the dog to an emergency vet clinic and they refused to treat it without the owner's permission. The owner was in Jamaica and by the time we got a hold of him, it was too late. Now we always get permission to treat and we also have clients pick out someone who can act as an agent on their behalf, someone they know and trust."

After Kathy's "lightbulb moment" led her to the career she adores, she hoped that farm sitting would in turn lead her to someone who would make a trustworthy sitter for their own animals, allowing her and Bob time to get away themselves. Alas, the right person has eluded her.

On the bright side, Kathy says she no longer feels such an insatiable desire to acquire new animals for their farm. "I just schedule my client's pets and that seems to satisfy my need for something new."

And by the way, she did get her ducks.

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About the Author: Cherie Langlois is a Washington-based hobby farmer, freelance writer, and former zookeeper who enjoys doing a bit of farm and pet sitting on the side for friends and relatives.