

Pet Projects

From Carers to Careers - Going from Play to Pay

Since the creation of Urban Animal, we've been fortunate to come across some fascinating individuals who have created unique products or services within the pet industry. In talking with many folk, we were intrigued by how their businesses came to fruition. Many came up with ideas by discovering 'holes' in the market for their particular product or service to become a valuable niche. Some developed their ideas through lifestyle change; others just wanted a change from their normal 9-5 daily grind. All share unique and dynamic personalities yet there is one commonality amongst these 'entre-Pet-neurs' - they all share an enduring and loyal love of animals. We're featuring three in this edition and three in the following. We hope you enjoy getting an insight into their journeys and are inspired by their accomplishments as well as how they have overcome adversity.

Milly Parker from 'Happy Yappers' dog treat company

Milly Parker runs 'Happy Yappers' from her home in Newport, Melbourne with Chef, partner and co-developer Tony Panetta. Their range of dog treats can be found in pet stores and some online pet boutiques. The best seller in their range of delicious treats is the Doggy Donuts that come in a pack of six donuts dipped in carob and pink and white yoghurt toppings. Other fun and tasty items include the 'Hollywood' and 'Party Packs' that come in a range of shapes from dollar signs to hearts and stars.

When we heard about Milly and her business we were bowled over by her story of how 'Happy Yappers' was conceived. As Milly says, "Ten years ago, I was a front seat passenger in a car that ran off the road and hit a rather large tree. One of my injuries and the most life-altering was an acquired brain injury. My life changed dramatically, instantly. Overnight I went from being a gregarious 21 year-old student with a social life that would stagger Mick Jagger in his prime, to being too afraid to cross the road on my own. After going through rehabilitation, left with permanent injuries and dealing with debilitating depressions, I had to try and figure out what my new role in society was to be."

Riley Mae, Milly's much loved Golden Cocker Spaniel was the initial inspiration for 'Happy Yappers'. Riley Mae's brand of dog love also had another benefit as Milly remembers, "Riley had no idea that I had a brain injury or that I had a disability. She loved me for exactly who I was. She helped me to integrate slowly back into society by attending puppy school, dog obedience classes, having puppy playmates at our home, meeting other dog owners. I slowly began to socialise, but I had Riley as the focus, not me or my injuries. I also found that I was more comfortable when I was out walking her, as opposed to walking by myself."

Tell us what 'Happy Yappers' is all about.

'Happy Yappers' are biscuits for your Pooch! Our bickies are dog treats made from quality human grade ingredients, with no added salt or sugar. They have no artificial flavours, colours or ingredients and are made only with free range eggs from 'Happy Hens'. Quality restaurant (human grade) stock is made and used for the flavouring. This is overseen by Tony, a qualified chef. Tony also has a 'day job' as Executive chef for a private conference facility.

How did you get the idea for starting 'Happy Yappers'?

'Happy Yappers' started when we noticed that after we gave our pooch, Riley Mae, commercial pet food treats, she would drink heaps of water. These are the treats readily available on the market in larger stores. The excessive intake of water indicated to us that these treats were full of salt and probably weren't as healthy as they could be. Tony and I have a background in the hospitality industry - previously as part owners in a restaurant and as caterers. We set about making up our own recipe for dog treats. We wanted them to be free of artificial colours, flavours and preservatives. We created recipes that have no added salt or sugar and we would only use eggs from 'Happy Hens' - not ones trapped in cages. I also wanted them to be presented as being fun, quirky and colourful. We told the guy at our local pet shop, he bought some and they took off. I'll never forget the feeling of his purchase of \$15.00 worth of 'Happy Yappers' it made me smile on the inside in a way that I hadn't done in years.

When did 'Happy Yappers' actually start out on the market?

We started on July 1st, 2002. This was after around six months of solid research that included creating recipes, looking into labeling laws, coming up with the name and logo. Protection of our product, logo and name was also something that we researched thoroughly. From there we made lots and lots of batches of biscuits and tested them out on the locals - pooches and kiddies from up the road!

I called the Small Business Counselling Service and through 'Women in Business' seminars I was accepted into a mentor programme. This was all free. It had to be, as we had no extra money for advertising and marketing. Having no money for advertising and promoting our new product made me very inventive.

What have been some of the challenges that you've encountered in setting up and running 'Happy Yappers'?

All of 'Happy Yappers' biscuits are made by hand, which is very labour intensive. We do everything ourselves - from reducing the stocks, making the dough, cutting out of the biscuits, baking, decorating, packaging and distribution! However this keeps costs down and allows us to pass savings onto our customers. We've had a pretty good run with everything really - no real complaints apart from lack of time in the day!

It's great that I can work from home with a kitchen that is just like a commercial one (Tony HAD to have that when we renovated). We've also got great contacts in the hospitality industry which has helped us with suppliers, equipment etc. We have basically combined 'what we know' with 'what we love' - food and pooches. Working from home is also a negative sometimes being that you never leave work, it can be hard to switch off thinking all the time 'I'll just do this...'

What's the best thing about running your business?

We absolutely adore pooches I just never realised how much! Our house is on a corner across the road from two huge ovals and a block or so away from the water. The amount of people and pooches that Ruby (our 14 month old Cocker Spaniel) knows amazes me. We often give away bickies to pooches that we get chatting too. We have even heard of a spoodle up the road that ran away from its house and the owners found it sitting patiently at our gate! Meeting all of the different shaped and sized pooches and hearing all the lovely, yet wacky stories from their gushing companions gives us something special in our day.



Milly Parker from Happy Yappers

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After my accident I wasn't able to work a 'normal' full-time job. Being able to work from home and to contribute to society again after I was left with Acquired Brain Injury (ABI) has restored my self-esteem and then some. I also have been helping out Seeing Eye Dogs Australia and this has been very rewarding. We're selling biscuits below cost to SEDA and we're hoping that one day soon, we would have sold enough to pay for the raising and training of a Seeing Eye Dog. The estimated cost in raising one of these puppies is \$25-30,000.

The amount of support that we have had from all sorts of business people, media and friends has been amazing. We could not have got this far without the kindness and support from so many wonderful people. Networking opportunities have been unbelievable and I love chatting to and meeting all sorts of people—and of course their pooches.

The topic of pets opens up opportunities to communicate with people you possibly wouldn't talk to in a normal day. A big burly bloke will gush

over his little Pomeranian, knows all its little quirks and would even tell you that he gets pushed out of the bed by it.

Is this business the only business you have or do you still have to supplement income with another gig?

No this is it! We made a decision very early on that 'Happy Yappers' had to be able to fund itself or had to shut down. However, I've also been a member of the Disability Advisory Committee at the Victorian Transport Commission for the past two years. This has been great as I've been able to contribute to laws being changed. The other benefit is that I've found this to be a great learning environment which has benefited the business of 'Happy Yappers'. I'm now on the Committee of Management of HEADWAY Victoria, which helps people with Brain Injury. It's also a great way to see how the organisation is run. I also regularly give speeches to all sorts of groups from disability groups to Women in Business meetings.

Where do you want your business to be in terms of growth over the next few years?

We've grown every year so far and I would hope for that to continue. We're always looking at new and different things to try and do. My brain injury has left me with a short attention span and believe it or not that is great for creativity. I just have ideas rolling out of my head. Poor Tony is always trying to keep me in check.

Our dream is to get a bigger house and have a larger work area for the production of 'Happy Yappers'. It would be great to have a space where I could close the door at 6:00pm.

Exporting our product might also be some thing to aim for as we constantly get asked about export opportunities. I figure its better to stay at home (Australia) until we are ready to do it ourselves—we love doing things the hard way. I'm a bit of a control freak, but only because I want the best possible product to bear our name and logo. After all it has my name and Riley's logo (a little R on a cloud with a halo in the right hand corner) on every packet.

Happy Yappers
PO Box 212
Newport VIC 3015
Phone: (03) 9391 5252
Email: happyyappers@bigpond.com
Web: www.happyyappers.com.au



Box of Happy Yappers

"No one appreciates the very special genius of your conversation as a dog does."
Christopher Morley

Lisa Wolfenden from boutique dog specialty shop 'Dogs And The City'

Nestled in the leafy and luxe shopping district of Double Bay is a bright and breezy shop catering to dog lovers. 'Dogs And The City' is the brain-child of Lisa Wolfenden who had a long history in retail whilst running a pet photography service. She also has a solid background as a dog trainer and designs dog jewellery (or 'dog-bling' as she likes to call it). 'Dogs And The City' doesn't sell puppies or dogs and the store stocks colourful toys, grooming products, treats and up-market accessories.

If running a busy retail outlet wasn't enough to tackle in a day, Lisa also runs puppy pre-school and consults on behaviour problems and takes clients through dog training. She's a delightful person who always has a cheerful greeting as you enter her well-appointed store. It's a shop that you keep going back to as she always stocks new and innovative products, all presented in clever ways with ever changing window displays.



Lisa Wolfenden from Dogs In The City

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Tell us about 'Dogs And The City'?

Dogs and the City is a boutique style retail outlet for dogs, and also a puppy pre-school, behaviour counselling and training service. What sets us apart from other pet stores is our knowledge base, allowing us to not just sell product but to ensure that the right product is sold. Through working in the shop, I often meet people who are having problems with their dog, generally through their lack of understanding of the breed and behaviour. I freely give advice and counsel to customers and make them aware of the products available and what is the most suitable in their particular circumstances.

When did you get the idea to start the business and what initially spurred you on to create such a store?

The idea of having such a store started a good ten years ago. I've always loved animals, especially dogs and have had a long standing desire to work with them. I had a pet photography business in the early '90's, which I ran in conjunction to my day jobs in retail—my retail experience spans 25 years.

I had a bit of a career breakdown in 1997 and went and lived in Los Angeles for about five months. When I was there I looked into the pet trade and it was an eye-opener as the pet business is huge in the US. After having a wonder-

ful five-month party I found myself needing to come home and get my life into gear. I made the decision to ignore all those people who suggested that working with animals was not a legitimate job. Most consider that this has no potential to make money and have a normal lifestyle. Money or no money, this feeling was in my blood so I set about creating a career with animals.

Part of what motivated me was that I've always been distressed at the number of dogs that are destroyed because of a basic lack of understanding by their owners and the need for behaviour training. I became an Accredited Delta CGC Instructor, and studied animal behaviour from 1998-99. After my Delta course I looked into getting a higher qualification in animal behaviour. In Australia the only way to do this is to study Psychology at university, as this is all animal based study. I completed my four-year study of Psychology at Sydney Uni, focusing on learning and motivation, developmental psychology and counselling from 2000-03.

I paid my way through uni by working as a dog trainer as well as keeping my hand in retail. Marrying my retail experience, love for dogs, tertiary education and training just seemed logical.

Apart from the people who said you couldn't do this, what have been some of the biggest challenges you have faced to get 'Dogs And The City' running?

I wanted to sell products that were different to the basic line of pet accessories available on the market. There were carriers, clothes, collars etc, but they were what I refer to as 'cheap and cheerful' and not the quality I wanted for the shop. Having done a lot of research in the US and on the web, I knew that quality and variety was out there—it just needed to be found and brought in to the country.

As my vision for the products were slightly more expensive than the readily available lines, I realised I had to find a shop front in the right area. It needed a demographic that would not only pay a little more but that would be interested in buying it in the first place. I also needed a slightly bigger area than most for my training facility.

I had two major hurdles finding a commercial rental property that wasn't going to be a financial stretch, but also a landlord who didn't have a phobic reaction to dogs being on the premises. It took me eight months of knock backs before I found my premises in Transvaal Avenue. This was helped in part by a friend who knew the landlord.

What's the best thing about running the store and operating your own business?

Apart from cuddling every dog that comes in the shop, and playing with puppies at pre-school, I get great satisfaction from relieving stressed-out clients who are at the point of giving up their dogs. My counselling education is of great help with this. Many people just don't understand what is going on with their dogs, or they have brought home a puppy and they are finding the challenge a bit beyond their capabilities. I seriously have had people in my shop crying and shaking from the stress of this. So I sit quietly with them and empathise with what they are feeling.

It's a huge responsibility for someone to take on a dog and some feel inadequate or like failures because they are confused and distressed about their dog's behaviour. There is a lot of information flying around out there and people feel everything should be easy and simple. It's not.

Rick Evans from specialist pet minding and grooming service 'Your Critter Sitter'

We first met Rick one hot December day. He rang about advertising in Urban Animal and thought he had missed the deadline for the January issue. He sounded relieved about the extended ad booking deadlines, but rather than wait until the artwork was due, he raced over to our offices within the hour to deliver the finished art. It was here that we got an insight into the kind of services he provides and why he started out on this venture. His rapport and genuine respect to animals was obvious as the office dog and parrots all wanted to make their acquaintance. Jackson (our Eclectus) made this affection obvious as he flew from his cage to land on Rick and a few minutes later Jackson delivered his special brand of love—a nice gob of regurgitated food. As an experienced 'bird-man', Rick took this as the ultimate compliment.

Tell us about 'Your Critter Sitter' and the services you provide?

I established 'Your Critter Sitter' in Sydney's central suburbs as an intimate and holistic home pet minding service. I've had feed-back from people who've been less than happy with the care and attention given their pets when they've had to have them in a temporary homing facility. I've always had the opinion that pets cared for in their own homes are most happy if they get the personal attention they need—they continue to eat properly, stay healthy and remain in their regular routines—in essence a much happier pet.

I endeavour to provide people with peace of mind when they are away from their family pets—whether it be for business or a holiday. I have trained staff that will take the time to make sure everything is okay when you are away. Our service is much more than just collecting the mail, feeding the animal and then leaving. What we provide is some real face-time with your pet which includes cuddles, exercise, play and over-seeing their general well-being.

I've had a lifetime in animal care as an avian and aquarium enthusiast and years of experience with WIRES (the Wildlife Information and Rescue Service) as a ranger and foster carer for native animals. I have worked both as a qualified hairdresser and animal groomer, and I love working with a huge variety of wonderful animal companions. I've worked hard at making this business that has a corner stone of supplying quality care, strict ethical guidelines and integrity for customers with two legs, four legs, fur, feathers and fins.

When did you get the idea to start the business and what initially spurred you on to create an at home pet care service?

Dogs are intelligent beings with needs and anxieties just like us. It's the people who feel the stress that will probably be the best owners, because they feel how important it is for them to get it right. They just need to talk to someone who understands and who can tell them that they should just relax and enjoy their pets, to take it easy and get a little bit of advice about their dog's needs.

Some people have sought advice from trainers and just aren't compatible with the advice they have been given. That is another way my psych training has been invaluable. You have to evaluate the client before you can give advice about the dog. There has to be a good fit between the two.

Relieving someone's stress and watching the relationship build between them and their dog is the best part of the business. That's why I went into the whole training side of things in the first place, to stop dogs being put down merely because people didn't understand what was going on.

What would your dream be for the future - growth or just to continue enjoying what you're doing?

Success for me would be financial stability, being able to take on some staff and bring more training into the business. I need variety, so I'd love to stay in retail and offer advice to the customers. As my training activities are after hours I need to have some time off or I'll dissolve. If I could afford staff and work the training into the daytime trading hours I could do both and this would be brilliant. It's early days, I've only been open now for 6 months and have had a few too many potholes in the road to feel overly confident just yet, but I'm a fairly stubborn person and it takes a lot for me to give up.

Dogs And The City
15a Transvaal Avenue
Double Bay NSW 2028
Phone: (02) 9363 4560
Email: lisa@dogsandthecity.com.au
Web: www.dogsandthecity.com.au

The grooming side to my business started years ago—I'm a qualified hairdresser and I had a major 'high-fashion' burn-out. I needed a change and through the process discovered I much preferred grooming animals rather than people.

The home minding side of my service came from my love for a naughty and demanding Conure called Orlando. You see I got tired of trying to make my friends become 'Parrot People' every time travel took me away. Birds require special care and there were many times when I felt uncomfortable about leaving her in the care of someone that, albeit generously, gave their time but didn't have a clue to her daily needs—like playtime, special diet and comfort. That's when the idea of 'Your Critter Sitter' came into my head. I needed a person or service that knew all about bonding between pets and their owners and could provide cuddles as well as food. And I thought that there was a gap in the market that I could fill.

When I originally got the idea I was living in the Northern Rivers district and I decided that surely a service which provided specialist care and grooming service would work well in the inner city suburbs of Sydney. So I packed my bags and moved back to Sydney. The next six months were spent doing market research—mostly investigating what was available to people wanting 'at home pet-minding'. I discovered that many businesses provided single services; some of them even combined kennelling and grooming but no one provided a service that could cater for all the pets needs under one roof—in the pet's home. I completed a small business course and that knowledge I gained has become invaluable. I also give credit to a wonderful group of friends who I laugh-



Rick Evans from Your Critter Sitter

ingly call my Board of Management. They've been fantastic in helping me plot business plans and assist with marketing and administrative aspects of the company. I believe you have to do a lot of planning before you can successfully call yourself a pet practitioner.

I registered the business name in September 2004 and then got my purpose-built, mobile grooming van. From there I've been very busy looking after the needs of all creatures great and small.

What are some of the biggest challenges you have faced so far in setting up and running 'Your Critter Sitter'?

The greatest challenges so far have been allowing time and process to give the business strength. I've always been a bit impatient when it comes to growth—both personal and career wise. It's been hard to keep a healthy cash-flow in the business and the first year feels like all your input and money is going to infrastructure and implementation costs. It's been a little like juggling chain-saws and pussy-cats, things can get messy if not enough attention and focus is placed on the business side.

What's the best thing about working for yourself and starting this business?

The best thing about working in my own business, is that itself—just reaching a mature time in my life where I am comfortable and confident with my skills and to know what makes me happy. After being a qualified hairdresser for 15 years and growing up breeding and grooming my own dogs, it was a natural thing for me to progress into. It just took many years of being ready to leave the security of a permanent job and a secure way of life. I guess making the move to the Northern Rivers district from Sydney was when I realised I could take risks—this period was really the beginnings of the turn-around in my life.

What would your dream be for the future - growth or just to continue enjoying what you're doing?

I am totally self sufficient in regards to financial sustainability. Although I have only just given up the supplementation of a second job that saw me through the first six months of the business. I'm really happy that this only took six months and my

client base is growing at such a healthy rate that I am proud to say 'Your Critter Sitter' is here to serve and support the community of Sydney. In the beginning the second job was vital to have, but it meant VERY long hours and not much of a social life during this period. Working up to 50-60 hours between two jobs and seeing most of the money going to the tax man, was a little discouraging not to mention TAXing on the body. It was very important for me to remember three things each day 1: My objective and end goal, 2: My attitude at work while my attention was divided up in to two jobs, 3: To have fun while I was creating a future for myself and be honest in my passion for what I was doing.

In regards to where I see myself and 'Your Critter Sitter' in the future, it is important to have business goals let alone personal ones... This is why I spent a great deal of time in developing a strong business plan before I started and it has been a true friend when in times of question about where the next step might be to take. With very little capital funds in the beginning (just a very good friend who believed in me and knew what I was capable of achieving) a small loan was secured and I plotted along the path of my business plan. In being true to the process of business development one has to keep pushing forward to see growth in the life of a small business. Although we are a micro business at the moment it is not unforeseeable that things may grow to the point of managing the business to operate from outer suburbs of Sydney in the near future and will look at franchise opportunities once we have a very well established operational system that has been tested in time and reputation within the industry. To use a quote that helps me enjoy my journey and where the business is right now instead of just projecting or expecting what it will give me in the future is: "The past is history; The future is a mystery; Today is a gift; That is why we call it the Present."

Phone: (02) 8399 3121
Mobile: 0414 268 102
Email: rick@crittersitter.com.au
Web: www.yourcrittersitter.com.au

In our July 31 edition, we will profile three more extraordinary individuals—Luciana of Sassy Treats, Susie from Herb Doctor and Vicki from Mammoth Mutts.

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