

## INSIDE BUSINESS

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Pet project turns pro  
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As a teen, Jonathan Register always wanted to own his business.

"I started working at the age of 15 for a local seafood restaurant," Register said. "After observing the owner's independence, flexibility and financial freedom gained from being successful, it made me realize that it was what I wanted to do."

Register and his wife, Jen, always struggled with finding professional pet care services for their mixed lab, Mackenzie.

"To us she is part of our family and we don't have kids," Register said. "When we would go out of town, we would have to rely on Jen's parents to look after Mackenzie."

After failed attempts at locating pet sitters, Register saw this as the perfect opportunity to open his own pet care business.

"We moved forward and created a business plan and formed our pet care," he said. "We wanted to make it our mission to exceed our clients' expectations in a fun, professional, dependable and secure manner."

Opening its doors in October 2008, ARF! Pet Care offers services including in-home overnight sitting, in-home private boarding, pet taxi, yard cleanup, home care and house-sitting.

"We offer dog walks and pet visits," Register said. "Sitters will go to someone's home to let them out and play with the animal. It's about giving their pets lots of love and attention."

ARF! Pet Care also offers in-home private boarding.

"This is where the client drops off the pet at one of our sitters' homes," Register said.

The service handles all kinds of animals including dogs, cats, hamsters, reptiles, snakes and spiders. "We will take them as long as we have a sitter on staff that has experience and is comfortable handling the pet," Register said. "We wouldn't take on a situation that would jeopardize a pet's safety."

The company is fully insured and bonded, and each employee goes through a rigorous background check. They are members of Pet Sitters International, an industry organization for pet sitters.

"In order to be in the organization, you have to agree to a higher standard of conducts and ethics," Register said. "Joining shows pet owners how dedicated we are to providing their animal with the best possible care."

Even if you don't have a pet, ARF! has sitters who will house-sit for clients when they are on vacation so their home will appear lived in while out of town.

Register is marketing the company through several online social media platforms.

"We recently began building partnerships with local businesses and organizations to add our services for an additional benefit for employees or members," he said. "We are also using word of mouth and having everyone pass on information about our pet care services. And we attend community events."

The business seems like a good fit.

"My wife and I love pets," he said. "We love having fun, and why not put the two together and create a professional and fun pet-sitting company?"



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## **In the owners' words**

**Jonathan and Jen Register talked to Inside Business about ARF! Pet Care based in Newport News, which was founded in April 2008. Serving the Peninsula and hoping to expand to the Southside, the services include dog walks, pet visits, in-home overnight sitting, in-home private boarding, pet taxi, yard cleanup, home care and house sitting. Jonathan responded to the following questions:**

**Hardest part about launching the business** The hardest part for me was always striving to be a perfectionist. It took me a year to get the business plan, log and Web site to the professional level I was satisfied with. Plus the transition wasn't the easiest. It wasn't easy going from a set salary to an unknown one. It was really tough.

**One lesson you learned that you wished you'd known before you started** I learned a big lesson when we were searching for a company to design our logo. We chose to go with a national logo design company that we found on the Internet. We did the research and read some of the good reviews on the company. After consulting with them, they came up with a disappointing logo. Realizing that the logo wasn't good enough to represent our company, we found a local graphic designer who took a look at it and make some revisions. We loved it. The lesson learned was to cut our ties a lot sooner and go with a local vendor. It allows you the ability to visit in person.

**Biggest risk you took** Starting this business was the biggest risk. After less than a year of marriage, we didn't have much savings. We knew and understood it would take a big toll on us. With that in mind, we decided to take the risk and it paid off. We found that we complement each other well when running this business and we enjoyed working together.

**Biggest obstacle you overcame** We are still trying to find sitters who can perform our in-home private boarding services. We have a few that can do it on the staff. This is where the client drops off the pet with the sitter at their home. The perfect sitter for the job is someone who is flexible, has a safe and clean house and not too many pets of their own. It's hard finding the perfect combination.

**Greatest innovation** We offer home care and house sitting services. A lot of companies focus on pet services only. It's our primary focus, but we do offer additional services for clients. This service is for clients who want to have their house watched or appear lived in while they are on vacation.

**Is the business earning a profit?** We are earning enough to cover our monthly expenses.

**Employees** 10

**Financed?** Personal savings.

**Legal structure** LLC

**How is the current economic situation affecting your business?** To be perfectly honestly, the economy scared us. We did almost postpone the opening. But my wife's support, confidence in myself and the strong belief in our business model encouraged me to move forward. Being so young and naive in this business helped me overcome my fears. Since this is my first year, I have nothing to compare it with. It's really hard to tell how it is affecting us. We are growing steadily, and that's our main goal.