

Daycare A Breed Apart

**Passion, research keys to success
for Montreal's new dog-boarding centre**

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Montreal Dogs owner Mina Carbone and some of her boarders relax with a Disney video at her new, 7,000-square-foot dog daycare facility.

Experts say that one of the key success indicators for small business start-ups is if the owner is passionate about what he or she is doing.

If that's true, then Mina Carbone's new dog daycare, grooming and boarding facility is going to be a smashing success.

"I love dogs," said Carbone, founder and manager of Montreal Dogs. "I have two of them myself, one, since I was a teenager. I have learned so much from them, and I want to give something back."

Carbone, an animal-health nurse by training, is only 24. But she has been planning her business for six years. She drew the original plans for her "doggy daycare" while doing a school project during her first semester of the Animal Health Technology program at Vanier College.

"Dog owners are wonderful people. They love their pets, in a way that non-pet lovers can never understand," Carbone said. "Those who work often feel terrible about leaving their dog at home alone during the day. Now they have an alternative."

Montreal Dogs' 7,000-square-foot Montreal facility is laid out like a typical children's daycare. Only it's nicer.

For one, there are three television sets to entertain the dogs.

"Almost any owner will tell you that television, especially cartoons, relaxes dogs," Carbone said. "It keeps them distracted, so they don't run to the window barking every time a car drives by."

As long as they behave, the dogs run freely around a large room, supervised by a monitor. If a dog acts up, he gets a 10-minute "time-out" in the corner.

"Dogs love attention," said Carbone. "The worst punishment that you can give them is to ignore them. After a few minutes of time out, they are usually very good."

If the dogs need to go to the bathroom, they can go outside at any time. During spring and summer months, the back door is kept open so the dogs can play in the back yard at will.

Before opening Montreal Dogs, Carbone - helped by her brother Cesare, a Concordia University accountancy graduate who has been mentoring her in business basics - researched the field thoroughly for two years.

They began by calling the other Montreal dog-care facilities to see what kind of services were offered, and then used the Internet to compare them with what was available in other cities.

"It was immediately clear that we are far behind the U.S., in terms of services to dog owners. Local facilities were much smaller, and there weren't many. I could see that there was some potential," said Carbone. "Eventually we got in touch with a daycare in Florida, whose managers allowed us to come visit, to see how they operated."

With the help of a consultant, Carbone commissioned a detailed 400-page business plan, and negotiated a \$216,000 start-up loan under the federal government's Small Business Loans Act, which, along with a "substantial" personal investment, provided the start-up cash.

Carbone also invested a lot of money in marketing, distributing flyers, taking out ads in local newspapers and so on. She also sponsors a radio call-in show about pets on CJAD. The show is hosted by Vanier College professor Dr. Amanda Glew, who, ironically, taught the class in which Carbone designed the original plans for her business.

Opened in the last two months, the daycare already has close to a dozen lodgers, paying between \$20 and \$25 a day depending on services rendered. The centre has room for about 40 dogs.

Although things are going well, it's not easy. Carbone starts at 7 every morning and she is still there when the daycare closes at 9 at night. She also often stays a few hours after closing time, either cleaning, or baking natural-

food muffins for the dogs.

"Here try one," she says proudly taking a big bite. "It's O.K., they're good. You can eat them."

If you were to ask David Rockman, a management consultant who teaches a course in how to start a small business, at John Abbott College, he would tell you that Carbone has all the tools needed for success.

"Three out of four start-ups don't make it to the fifth year," said Rockman. "The first few years are the most important. It takes time, effort, energy and money to develop a new business."

According to Rockman the keys to an effective start-up are that owners must know themselves and the industry they work in, and they must set realistic goals.

"It's also important that any entrepreneur love what they are doing," said Rockman. "Those long hours get to you after a while, and it's important to balance your family life as well."

Fortunately Carbone's social life hasn't been hurt too much. "The timing is good, because my boyfriend is away studying at a police academy for three months," said Carbone. "My friends come and visit me at the daycare. So I do have a social life. It's just that lately, it's at Montreal Dogs."

- You can visit Montreal Dogs at 7314 Mountain Sights Ave., or on the Web at www.MontrealDogs.com. Or you can call them at 858-PAWS.

- E-mail can be sent to Diekmeyer at: peter@peterdiekmeyer.com

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