

Isabel Alvarez awarded NAPPS 2012 Business of the Year
Entrepreneur continues to expand, grow market share, educates public, and carries on family tradition to help homeless animals

Since she was born in Ecuador Isabel Alvarez has always moved north. And soon she's northward bound again as she continues to expand her professional pet sitting business, The Wag Pack, from Alexandria, VA to Maryland and into the Nation's capitol.

Moving from Ecuador to Florida at the tender age of 4, Alvarez learned at an early age the true meaning of being an animal advocate from her mother. As a teenager in South Florida, Isabel received an eye-opening education on domestic pet overpopulation issues that existed in shelters and the startling difference between no-kill and kill shelters. In 1997, Alvarez's mom, who works in mortgage banking, was compelled to assist a rescue organization purchase land to house its facilities.

"Mom and me went to the facilities and visited the pets so that we could learn more about the problems they face and support the organization's efforts," says Alvarez. That's where she met and adopted her first rescue -- Baci. "The experience has inspired every single animal welfare volunteer effort I've ever been involved with. My family is devoted to animals and always has been. It wasn't until this experience that I realized I could really make a difference on behalf of homeless animals."

When Alvarez began to look for business schools, her journey again led her north to the University of Maryland where she received a degree in International Business and French. Wanting to perfect her new founded trade, Isabel made the decision to go abroad. "I wanted to perfect my French so I moved to Montargis, a small, quaint town southeast of Paris," says Alvarez. "The year I spent there allowed me to truly grasp the language and I was also able to visit family in nearby Spain."

After a year Alvarez returned to the states as a sales executive in the mortgage industry and then moved in to the hospitality industry. But her entrepreneurial spirit continued to almost haunt her. This is when Alvarez's spirit and need came together as one.

"I was working fulltime selling conferences in the hospitality industry and needed a dog walker for my puppy," says Alvarez. "I felt that the existing businesses were not focusing on the quality of service they provided, rather the volume of customers they engaged. I saw this as an opportunity to start my own business, offering outstanding service and peace of mind while focusing on quality care."

The basic business philosophy that mediocrity is not acceptable soon sprang life into Alvarez's pet sitting company, The Wag Pack, where there is only one priority -- quality service.

“We work to consistently provide outstanding service to our clients and the community and take pride in the work that we do and the way in which we do it. Everything I do reflects my undying commitment to my staff, clients and the animals for which we care,” continues Alvarez. “The only way to foster a successful business is to do it with passion and dedication to quality; I strive to pass on my love of service to everyone I meet every single day.”

This strong commitment to the pet sitting profession is just one reason The Wag Pack earned the National Association of Professional Pet Sitters (NAPPS) Business of the Year Award for 2012. This prestigious award is presented to a member who has demonstrated outstanding business practices and vision in maintaining and growing their business.

“My staff shares my passion for pets and this has been our recipe for success,” says Alvarez. “I grew my business not by focusing on volume, but rather by delivering personalized service. I am inspired when I see positive things happening in my community and I enjoy contributing to that good by offering peace of mind to our clients, providing loving care to their pets and working with local organizations to help animals in need.”

As an animal advocate, Alvarez has spoken at many events promoting animal rights and protection. She’s very active in the community which is evidenced by the involvement with the Humane Society of Fairfax County where she speaks regularly before varied audiences of potential volunteers and patrons. Alvarez’s passion for animal rights has also spread to the Homeless Animal Rescue Team (HART) through fundraising efforts during its Annual Art and Silent Auction and their Walk for the Animals. However, she just doesn’t stop here and continues to take on challenges.

“I recently joined the Lost Dog and Cat Foundation’s 5K Series, which was a huge accomplishment for me personally because I have never been an avid runner.” Alvarez continues, “I loved the idea of challenging myself while contributing to the betterment of the lives of homeless animals. It was a wonderful experience and plan to join again next year.”

There is no doubt that Alvarez inspires everyone she meets and even her staff of 11 employees can’t help but catch on to the fun of volunteering. Last year the team participated in their first NAPPS Presents for Pets program and brought in donated items for the Humane Society of Fairfax County and Hart. One of her staff members even volunteered her home so that they could host a Presents for Pets Kick-off Pool Party.

“We had such a wonderful time and helped many deserving animals in the process,” says Alvarez. “Everyone is looking forward to next year’s P4P Kick-off Party.”

Her dedication to the community was brought to the attention of a local newspaper. They were so impressed with Alvarez's active approach to helping animals and knowledge, that they felt she would be an excellent fit for a monthly column. Hence, *Pet Matters*, was born and enjoys a great response from *The Alexandria Times* readers.

"The topics of my columns vary monthly and range from encouraging pet owners to spay or neuter their pets to highlighting the dangers of the overweight pet epidemic. I thoroughly enjoy writing these columns and get great fulfillment from knowing that I'm slowly but surely making a positive impact in the lives of animals through my always passionate and sometimes silly writing," says Alvarez.

While The Wag Pack enjoys a healthy and seemingly smooth business operation, there were obstacles to identify and overcome. The largest challenge for Alvarez was finding the appropriate staff who embraced her business model. The mentality calls for more than just kissing kittens and petting puppies.

In the area that Alvarez services, the cost of living is astronomical and the job market is highly competitive. Also, her clients, who are young professionals, move frequently within a tri-state area because they test the waters by renting, then buy a home and move within the area.

"The reality is that we have clients that move within this area and we want to keep these clients," explains Alvarez. "And, I wish to keep these clients without sacrificing quality.

"We have triumphed over this obstacle by creating effective marketing strategies that grow our business within adequately staffed service areas. This way, we continue to build our business while seeking new staff. By being selective in our hiring process and strategic in our scheduling and marketing, an amazing team has come together and a reputation for providing consistently outstanding service," concludes Alvarez.

Having a positive standing in her marketplace has yielded more than excellent results in the area of hiring. Business continues to grow healthy through two main avenues: referrals and online marketing.

Referral business is fostered by maintaining mutually beneficial relationships within the community such as local pet professionals, residential communities and rescue organizations. Alvarez makes it a habit to visit, partner with them and refer business to them as well. Current clients are encouraged to refer others through an established Wag Pack Referral Rewards Program which rewards clients with a credit on their account.

Business growth through online marketing is another key source of new business for The Wag Pack. Alvarez does share that online marketing can only be nurtured by establishing an effective brand presence online.

“Our online marketing plan is based on the quality of our business name, logo, and website. We worked very hard to create a brand that appeals to potential clients, conveying our passion for pet care and dedication to quality. Our branding efforts have been very successful and our online marketing campaigns have reaped great results for our company,” concludes Alvarez.

When she first began investigating the world of marketing, Alvarez found a lot of free information on the internet that easily applied to her pet sitting business. She also freely admits that she’s a big fan of the “Dummies Books” and still educates herself in the world of marketing to gain the most effective way to get her brand in front of potential clients.

With the advent of social media, Alvarez takes full advantage of what Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn has to offer and personalizes each post. Her most effective weapon? Humor. “I use humor so that followers will share each of my posts,” smiles Alvarez. By sharing her humorous posts the Wag Pack reaches perspective clients that normal marketing routes would not.

One common theme runs through each post – drive potential clients to the Wag Pack website. By doing this, the online presence is strengthened. Alvarez also believes that less is more when it comes to a website.

She also shares industry knowledge and updates through social media which clients and staff have access and this also spurs mini training and education sessions for both. Alvarez also gains knowledge through reading books and articles and attending the NAPPS Annual Conference.

“The knowledge I gained from attending the NAPPS Conference was invaluable and I am very much looking forward to another successful conference in January,” claims Alvarez. “This is one of the ways that I can stay abreast of developments in the industry and become familiar with training, pet care techniques and do some networking with real professionals.”

Most pet sitters oftentimes feel that the general public doesn’t understand what it takes to be a professional or even why anyone would choose this vocation. The day in the life of a professional pet sitter encompasses wearing many hats and being prepared for almost any scenario. From hiring, scheduling, payroll, taxes, phone calls, driving a lot, walking a lot and dealing with bodily fluids A LOT; the professional pet sitter just never knows what will happen. Alvarez is no exception.

“Yes, I could be sitting behind a desk, working a corporate job, enjoying my evenings and weekends off, and aspiring to earn some fancy title. However, I would miss out on long walks, fierce games of fetch, shared downtime on rainy days, tricking cats into chasing laser pointers, interacting with various species discovering their quirks, and, my all time favorite, sunbathing with a furry companion.

“I’ve learned to be prepared for anything. I roll with the punches, leave extra time for the requisite wrong turn and fear nothing. I talk about poop all day, bake hundreds of peanut butter treats every year and negotiate with squirrels on a regular basis. I manage a fantastic staff, help people raise their puppies, care for aging pets, offer support to devastated pet parents when they have lost a beloved fur-relative and practice the art of the belly rub daily,” smiles Alvarez.

It’s very obvious that Alvarez considers herself to be in the right place, doing the right job and experiencing some big payoffs.

“I’m a very lucky human to be surrounded by unconditional love all day while others fight battles with office politics, terrible bosses and demanding clientele. Not every day is easy and I have my fair share of battles, but I couldn’t be happier with my career choice. At the end of the day, I always know that my clients are happy to see me and, award or no award, it doesn’t get very much better than that,” concludes Alvarez.

Just how far north will Alvarez’s journey continue? Only time will tell. But one thing is certain; that this young entrepreneur will continue to promote animal welfare to everyone she encounters, while sharing her passion and enthusiasm for delivering quality care above and beyond clients’ expectations.