

New leash on life for dog walkers

As the US economy improves, young professionals are spending more for pet services and TLC while they work, travel



JESSICA RINALDI / GLOBE STAFF

Dogwalker Kai Hsieh with (from left) Tucker, Bogey, and Beau in South Boston.

By Hattie Bernstein | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT DECEMBER 04, 2015

Five years ago, when Josh and Elisabeth Parra opened Petiquette Pooch Concierge in South Boston, they were one of about five dog walking and pet sitting businesses. Then came a building boom, an influx of young professionals, and suddenly Southie became the mecca of dog walking, with more than a dozen companies — and enough business for everyone.

Petiquette, for example, said its annual revenues have nearly tripled over the past five years, although it declined to provide figures. When the company launched in 2010, it was just the Parras, doing about five walks a day. Now, with 11 employees, the company does more than 100.

“The number of walks says it all,” said Josh Parra.

Dog walking and other pet services are booming in Boston and elsewhere across the country as the economy improves, incomes grow, and more people look for love from four-legged friends. Sales of pet products and services are expected to reach \$60.6 billion nationally this year, up from \$45.5 billion in 2009, according to the American Pet Products Association, a trade group in Greenwich, Conn. Pet services alone are expected to generate \$5.2 billion in sales in 2015, up more than 50 percent from \$3.4 billion in 2009.

Yvette Gonzales, president of the National Association of Professional Pet Sitters, an industry group in Mt. Laurel, N.J., said activity slowed during the recession as many people lost jobs, cut expenses, and had the time to walk their own dogs.

But as the economy strengthened, said Gonzales, “they called us back.”

Katherine Heatley, owner and operator of Kat’s Dog Walking in South Boston, said her sales have climbed about 20 percent over the past three years. She said she averages one to three requests from new clients every week and now employs five part-time dog walkers.

She said she also has long wait-lists — up to six months for a place in a play group, an activity that involves picking up the dogs, usually six or seven in total, taking them to a dog park, playing ball, distributing treats, and driving them home.

“Southie is crazy for dogs,” Heatley said.

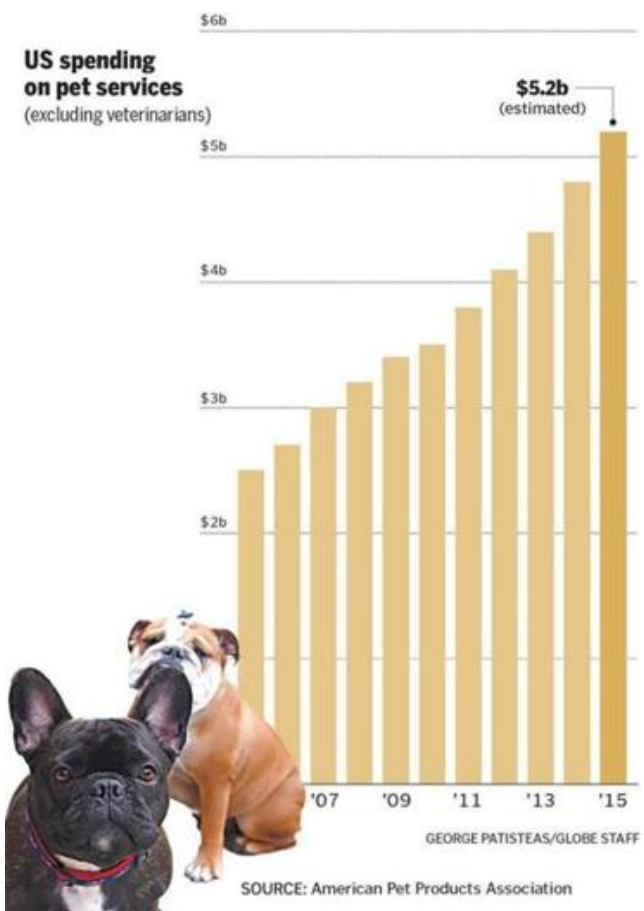
South Boston, in many ways, captures the trends driving sales of pet products and services higher. As the neighborhood gentrifies, it includes both young professionals who are taking on pets as a way to meet people or provide a test run for parenthood — a “gateway into human relationships,” according to a pet service provider — and older residents seeking companionship and a way to stay active.

Nicole Protz, who lives in South Boston, has had her black Labrador retriever, Vince, for eight years. Protz, who is in her 30s, works long hours as a recruiter for information technology jobs and she needed help caring for her pet. So she turned to Petiquette, which walks Vince twice a day at \$16 per walk.

“I don’t have family [here] to fall back on for a support system,” she said. “My dog is like my kid.”

Kai Hsieh, 36, owner and operator of Happy Paws, left a 10-year career in medical sales to launch her business at the end of 2013. Happy Paws caters to clients in South Boston and the Seaport District, mostly young couples ranging from the mid-20s to late-30s, she said.

Her company averages between 100 and 150 dog walks a week; it also provides cat-sitting services. Hsieh said sales have doubled since she opened, and she expects them to grow another 50 percent this year.



She's also having fun.

"I wake up smiling every day and feeling appreciated doing what I love," she said, "What could be better than a big lick from your boss every day?"

South Boston, of course, is not the only place where dog walking is in demand. In Cambridge, Elliot's House Pet Care has doubled its clients to 1,000 from 500 over the past three years, according to operations director Taghi Shaw. Elliot's, which has seven employees, walks dogs in Cambridge, Somerville, and downtown Boston.

A key factor in the company's growth has been the construction of 18 pet-friendly apartment buildings in Greater Boston — 5,000 luxury units managed by Bozzuto Management Co. of Greenbelt, Md., near Washington, D.C. In addition to welcoming pets, Bozzuto caters to them, said Nancy Goldsmith, a senior vice president who oversees the company's Northeast operations.

It sponsors Yappy Hours, mixers for pets and owners at its properties, offering pets treats and owners another gateway to human relationships. When new tenants move in, they also receive a guide that lists local pet services, including dog walking companies such as Elliot's House Pet Care.

"We've had an influx of clients from the new buildings," said Elliot's House owner Carol Lindenmuth. "The running joke is we're always hiring."



JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

Katherine Heatley with great Dane Titan and other dogs she exercises at the Channel Center Dog Park.

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