

# DOG WALKERS: COMMON START-UP MISTAKES

In the early days of business, it's very common to find yourself making work decisions that you will later come to regret. Many take on clients that are too far out, take solo walks in the middle of lunchtime, agree to pet visits at set times, and puppy appointments that you know in your heart will not convert to group walking when the dog is old enough.



## Why do we do it?

We have an inherent fear that this is the only work we will be asked to do. We think that even though it's not ideal, it might be the last booking we ever receive and we are driven to accept it based on that fear.

## Where does this fear come from?

- Fear of missing out
- Lack and of business plan or confidence in business plan
- Short term gain but long term pain or cash in hand
- Lack of experience (travel distance and time)
- Fear of negative feedback form client

## What does this lead to?

- Problems fitting in group walks over lunchtime which is the core of your income
- Growing costs that exceed the fee paid for the booking
- Diminished margins as profits are eaten by fuel costs and
- Large gaps between services due to travel time (dead time)
- Burnout while trying to fit everything in and earn enough to survive

## What do you do?

- Go back to the business plan. Review it and trust it.
- Don't be afraid of vacancies. Better to hold out for the right work than take the wrong work and start a cascade of concessions.
- Draw up a sensible daily schedule with a couple of overspill gaps in case of traffic or another delaying factor.
- **Support 4 Pet Business** can help you draw up a manageable daily schedule if you are not certain where to begin.

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## Review your customer base

Review your customer base and highlight the customers that you probably should not have taken. They are either too far away, or you have agreed to a low income service in a premium time slot that should have been reserved for group walking (for instance, lunchtime). Assess each customer against their annual earnings and decide if you can continue to offer the service to them.



These are likely some of the first clients that you took on. Resist the urge to try and accommodate them out of a sense of loyalty, because as you get busy, they are going to experience you arriving late and struggling to fit them in. It is better to be in control of any changes than to be told by the customer that your services are no longer satisfactory and they are giving notice.

## The "High-Mileage" Outliers

Identify clients located on the fringes of your service area. Calculate the "Dead Time" (travel to and from) plus fuel costs. If a 60-minute walk requires 60 minutes of driving, you are essentially working for half your hourly rate. If they cannot be grouped with a neighbour, they are no longer viable.

## The "Prime-Time" Bargains

These are likely your legacy clients, the ones who supported you at the start but are now occupying your most profitable windows (usually 11:00 AM – 2:30 PM). Here is the conflict; if you are doing a solo walk for £18 when you could be doing a group walk for £60 in that same hour, you are "paying" £42 a day to keep that client. Move them to a non-peak slot (early morning or late afternoon). If they insist on midday, they must transition to the group rate or accept a premium solo rate which is at least 1.5 x the group rate.

## The Annual Earnings vs. Effort Assessment

Review the total revenue each client brought in over the last 12 months. Compare the earnings to the difficulty.

Is the low-earning client also the one with the difficult dog or the complicated collection requirements? Do they frequently cancel on arrival? Low-income, high-maintenance clients should be the first to go.



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## How To Transition

### Talking to customers

Face to face is best, followed up with a written confirmation of the conversation if necessary. Give notice of the change. Explain the change. Find a way to explain why you need to change things without appearing to be 'all about the money'.

- *"To ensure I can maintain the **punctuality and high level of care** your dog deserves..."*
- *"I am streamlining my routes to provide a more **reliable and consistent service** for all my clients."*

It is fine to tell them that you are a new business and still learning the best way to work.

### Consider repricing or moving the customer to a different time slot



It may be that you have a dead spot in your daily schedule where you could offer the service without losing income in peak times. It may require the dog to be walked solo rather than in a group. Talk through this with the customer and see if they would agree to a change. If you want to keep the client, charge for the time and fuel.

*"I am reorganising my schedule to ensure that dogs are in my vehicle **for the shortest time possible...**"*

### Give notice to the client

If nothing else is an option, you will need to give notice. Explain the notice, find a way to tell them, without appearing to pass your "income problem" onto the customer.

- *"To ensure I can maintain the **punctuality and high level of care** your dog deserves..."*
- *"I am streamlining my routes to provide a more **reliable and consistent service** for all my clients."*

You could offer to help with this so that you part ways on good terms. Offer to continue services for a reasonable period while they find an alternative service, so they are not left with a gap in care and a problem to solve.



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## Advertise The Vacancies In Your Schedule

- Make clear the **coverage area** for each vacancy.
- Make clear the ROUGH time of day for the vacancy (never give exact times).
- Use pet owner groups on social media to advertise on the days that adverts are permitted. Incentivise your customers to help recommend you with a free walk if someone they send to you becomes a new customer.
- **Only advertise one or two vacancies at a time.** Multiple vacancies leave customers wondering what is wrong with your service.
- Imply that you are busy even if you are not. Fake it before you make it. "I have a rare space in my early lunchtime group walk".
- Adverts need 1-4 photos of HAPPY dogs. Clear photos. Sharp photos. This subconsciously indicates that dogs love being with you.
- **Be mindful that the customer you just gave notice to may see your adverts.** Make sure to give clear coverage areas and requirements so they do not think you gave notice for any reason other than those you talked about.

## Do not repeat your mistakes

### Tighten Your Service Area

Avoid the "High-Mileage" trap by strictly defining your boundaries on your adverts and website.

- **Micro-Targeting:** Focus on specific neighbourhoods rather than entire postcodes. Proximity is crucial for building a successful, efficient route.
- **Density over Distance:** Prioritise new clients who live close to your existing regulars to minimise travel time.
- **Travel Surcharges:** If you do take someone slightly further out, include a travel fee in your initial quote to cover fuel, wear and tear, and travel time.

### Implement "Peak" Time Slots

Stop letting customers control your peak hours.

- **Midday is for Groups:** Reserve the 11:00 AM – 2:30 PM window exclusively for high-volume group walks.
- **Premium Pricing for Primetime Solos:** If a client insists on a solo walk during your busiest hours (and you want to do it), charge a significantly higher "premium" rate to compensate for the lost group revenue, at least 1.5 x the group rate.
- **Time Blocks, Not Exact Times:** Offer clients a "time window" (e.g. early lunch walk, late lunch walk) rather than a specific minute. This gives you the flexibility to manage traffic or route changes without being considered late.

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## Calculate Your Minimum Viable Rate

Don't pull numbers out of thin air; base them on your actual costs.

- **Factor in "Hidden" Time:** When setting prices, remember that a 60-minute walk takes longer than an hour when you include pick-ups, clean-downs and drop offs. 4 dogs at £15 each earns you £60 for the hour walk, but the actual time the walk takes includes all periphery activities, and with 30 mins before and after the walk for collections and drop offs, you are earning £60 for 2 hours, £30 an hour.
- **Avoid the "Bargain" Brand:** Pricing too low attracts "flaky" customers looking for the cheapest option rather than the best care. They are not loyal and will move in a heartbeat to save £1 if a new business opens. Quality clients are willing to pay for expertise, such as pet first aid or training certifications.

## Use a "New Client" Checklist

Vet every enquiry against your new business model before saying yes.

- **The Fit Test:** Ask yourself: Does this dog fit into an existing group? Is the owner's house on my current route?
- **Boundaries from Day One:** Be transparent about your cancellation policies and working hours during the initial "Meet & Greet" to set healthy expectations.
- **Learn to Say No:** Declining a client who isn't a good fit frees up space for a much better one later.

## Saying No

If you feel pressured to set up meetings if a potential client calls you, make a habit of sending them to voicemail and listening to their message before talking to them. It is perfectly reasonable for a pet business to be unavailable to take a call right away, you are caring for animals and that is your priority. Listen to the message and if you feel that they are a good fit, call them back. If not send a message.



## Standard Messaging

Prepare friendly, helpful rejection messages and save them in your notes. Suggest social media groups that might be useful for finding alternative pet care, or other businesses if you know that their service is good. This saves a lot of time when answering if it is a 'no', you can copy and paste your response message to save time.

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## Repeat Annually

This is the golden rule of scaling a service business. It's easy to say "yes" to one outlier in a slow month, but three years later, you realise you are working for almost nothing. To turn this into a bulletproof **Annual Audit Habit**, set a recurring date in your calendar (January or the start of the financial year) and run these checks:

### The "Geography" Check

Map every client. If you see a "lone star" far away from your clusters, they are costing you money. Give them the option to move to a day when you are already in that area or refer them to a walker who lives closer to them.

### The "Efficiency" Check

Look at your 11:00 AM – 2:30 PM window. Is there a solo walk in there? If a solo walk isn't paying at least 1.5 x your group rate, you are behaving like a hobbyist and not a business. Move them to an off-peak slot (9:00 AM or 3:00 PM) to free up that prime slot for a group of four or five dogs.

### The "Inflation & Value" Check

Is a client still on the rate they started with three years ago? Annual reviews are the perfect time for a standard price increase. It feels less personal and more professional when it happens every year across your entire roster. You are doing customers no favours skipping the increase for a year as next year the raise will feel like a big jump to them and even if your rate is comparable to others, it feels like a blow from the customer perspective.

### The "Joy" Check (The Silent Profit Killer)

Which client makes you sigh when you see their name on the calendar? Whether it's a difficult dog, a rude owner, or a nightmare parking situation, "dread" leads to burnout. Replace one "high-drain" client per year with a "high-joy" client. Your mental energy is a finite resource so don't waste it on customers who are a poor fit.

Pro-Tip: Keep a wait list of ideal clients (local, good temperament, flexible times). Having a backup ready makes it much easier to pull the trigger on letting a sub-optimal client go during your annual review.

## Further Information

If you are not sure about setting up a schedule, I can help. I offer mentor services as well as Meet & Greet checklists to help you make good decisions when building a customer base.

**For further details, and to purchase the document templates mentioned in this Help Sheet please go to [www.support4petbusiness.co.uk](http://www.support4petbusiness.co.uk).**

## Sources

Article written by [www.support4petbusiness.co.uk](http://www.support4petbusiness.co.uk)