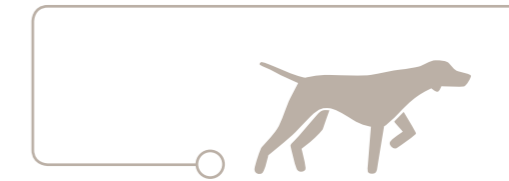


Stroke of GENIUS

Our four-legged companions inspire us in many ways – from living in the moment to savouring the simple things in life. But for some owners, their dogs have sparked a whole new career and taken their life in an entirely new direction. Meet the six entrepreneurs who took a leap of faith and set up their own business, inspired by their faithful friend.

Diana Stevens and four of her nine Labradors: "The hardest thing about the job is that training my own dog now feels like a chore!"



WYLIANBRIAR GUNDOG TRAINING

When her gundog training 'hobby' started to eat into her full-time job, Diana Stevens knew it was time to take the plunge and launch her own business. Two years on, she's never looked back...

"I've shown and worked with Labradors for 22 years – and I did it as a passion, not as a profession," says Diana. She began sharing her knowledge and offering gundog training lessons in the evenings and at the weekend. Then about five years ago, she switched to working part time so she could offer afternoon classes too. "But demand started rising, and the mobile wouldn't stop ringing when I was meant to be importing wood from Malaysia [Diana was marketing manager for a timber company], so I took the plunge," she laughs. "I drew up a programme of events, people liked it, and, more importantly, started booking."

Having a marketing background helped, says Diana (although she is very modest): "People like a bit of humour and being part of a group on Facebook, as they feel more involved than if they just have the one session a week." She's also clear that her business is about 'fundogs and gundogs': "Pet owners think gundog training involves guns and birds and all that stuff. 'Fundogs and gundogs' makes it suddenly not so scary," she says. And the skills gundogs learn in class – being calm, steady around other dogs, and obedience – are certainly invaluable for any dog owner.

Proof that Diana made the right career decision is in her expanding client base, which has snowballed through friend recommendations and her Facebook group. While her mainstay is beginners, for those who get hooked, there's the chance to move up into more advanced classes. Diana's also found a real appetite for tackling problem areas, such as heelwork, and she runs the odd one-to-one session too.

Finding the time to fit it all in has been a challenge though. "I didn't realise it'd take over your life 24/7. When the business started, I'd sit in bed at night answering texts and emails, checking Facebook... and then checking Facebook again!" she jokes. "But you have to learn to chill a little bit. I'm still not there – some days it does swamp me, and, as a trainer, it's very difficult to switch on and switch off. You get attached to the dogs, and you feel quite personally involved."

Diana continues: "But the hardest thing I've found when you do this job full time is that what used to be an enjoyable hobby – working my own dog – now feels like a chore." She laughs: "When you've finished five hours' work, you want wine, not to go back into the field with dummies to train your own dog!"

But Diana is adamant that she made the right career move. "I still feel passionate about the business – probably more now – because I have all these ideas for new things to try, gaps in the market or gaps in the understanding of gundogs I train," she says. "I definitely see myself working with dogs for the rest of my life."

"The mobile wouldn't stop ringing when I was meant to be importing wood from Malaysia, so I took the plunge"

Feature

Dog entrepreneurs



Rikke with Aston, the chocolate Labrador, that sparked her Eureka moment



"Creating a place online for owners and dog lovers to meet would make so many people and dogs happy"

BORROW MY DOGGY

With two parents as entrepreneurs, it was perhaps inevitable that Rikke Rosenlund would follow in their footsteps. But she wasn't expecting to find her new business idea right on her doorstep...

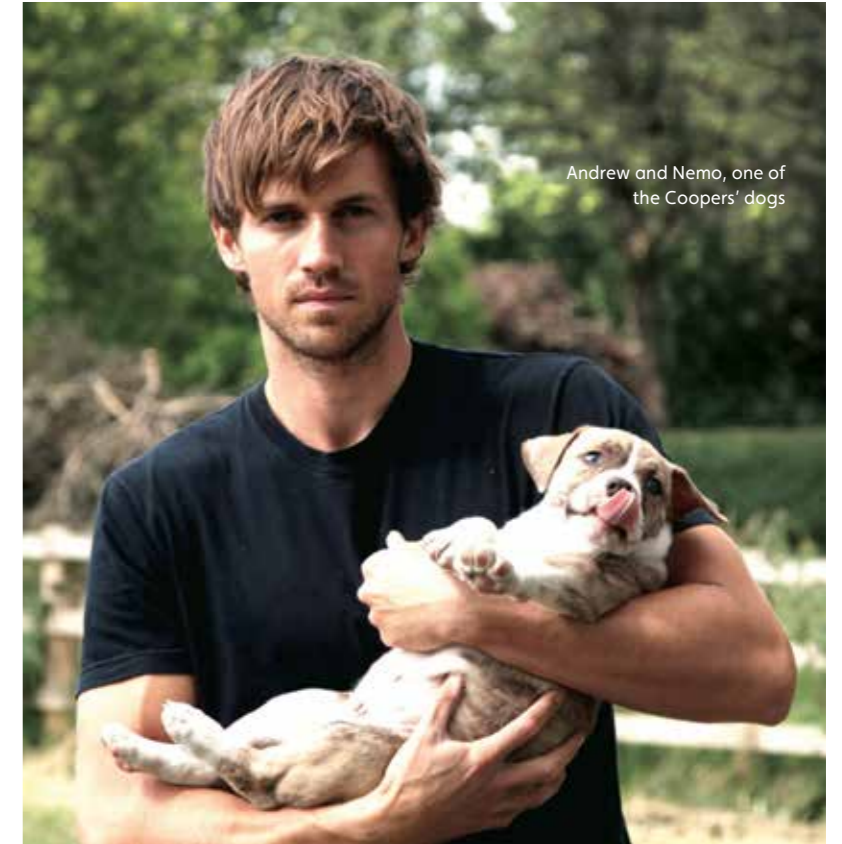
It was while helping out a neighbour, by dogsitting his chocolate Labrador, that Rikke first had the idea for BorrowMyDoggy (www.borrowmydoggy.com). "Instead of spending the day stuck indoors, Aston (the loveable pooch in question), went for several walks in the park, attended a garden party and chilled with some new friends. I remember thinking, 'Why are people paying so much money for dog walking and kennels when I'd love to take care of someone else's dog for free?'" she says. "I said to the friend I was with, 'There should be a website connecting dog owners and dog lovers who would love to take care of a dog for free. By creating a place online for these people to meet, it would make so many people and dogs happy.'"

Rikke was still working full time in financial services at this point, so BorrowMyDoggy began life as a "spare time project". She enlisted co-founder, Les Cochrane, who built the website, and the first landing page went live in October 2012. Within three days, 85 people had signed up. The site now has about 2,500 fee-paying members joining every week, nine full-time members of staff and they're about to launch a mobile app.

"It has been quite a bit of work, but as we both care so much about it, it's a passion project," she says. "It's amazing to work on something that makes a difference to people's lives. One of my early favourite matches was somebody who'd just had a baby and needed a bit of help exercising her dog. A few streets away lived a woman with a five-year-old son, who was begging her for a dog but they weren't ready to do so. So the two women met on the site, were verified and arranged a 'welcome woof', which is a meet and greet session. They then met up with the dog for a walk in the local park. They got on well, did house visits and over the last year, they've had a routine with the lady and her son coming over to help the other lady out.

"People become friends," continues Rikke. "They come together over their shared love of dogs."

Andrew and Nemo, one of the Coopers' dogs



"I never thought this is what I'd end up doing. But if you can do something you're passionate about, that's brilliant, isn't it?"

WILDWASH

You might not recognise the co-founder of Wildwash with his clothes on: Andrew Cooper, the co-founder of new pet shampoo business, Wildwash, is most famous for flashing his pecs in last year's Diet Coke TV advert.

"I never thought this is what I'd end up doing," says Andrew about Wildwash, an organic and tailored range of luxury shampoos for dogs and cats. "But if you can end up doing something you're passionate about, well, that's brilliant, isn't it?"

It all began with 11-year-old Missy, an American bulldog, explains Andrew, who combines the new business with running The Mutz Nutz pet boutique in London – and a global modelling career. Andrew and his wife and business partner, Jane, fell for the breed after meeting one of the dogs in the street. "Like many young couples," laughs Andrew, "When we got Missy, we treated her like our baby." The logo of The Mutz Nutz, which opened in 2003, is based on their beloved pooch.

But Andrew's modelling was also an influence. The job involves a lot of travel to the US and Andrew was impressed with the way Americans cater for their four-legged friends. "Back when we opened, we were the only cool pet shop in London," he says. "And it's a great credit to my wife. I may have lots of ideas, but she was the one with the skills and the drive to make it real."

The shop expanded to offer spa services to its furry clients and developing the Wildwash shampoo range was an obvious next step. Particularly since Andrew and Jane had struggled to find the right shampoo for Missy, who would get very dry skin after bathing. So they sought the expertise of the UK's leading apothecaries to help develop their own range with ingredients including lavender, aloe vera, lemongrass and ginger to cater for different needs, from dry skins to white-coated dogs and puppies.

In just 18 months, Wildwash has been a colossal success, and now exports as far afield as Australia and Korea – helped by Wildwash's eye-catching advertising featuring humans with extravagant canine hairdos (to emphasize the human-grade quality of the range.)

Is Andrew still excited by it all? "I can't lie, it's a lot of hard work," he says. "And with fragrances, candles and other ideas in the pipeline, it's only going to get busier. But that just increases my passion for the business massively."



Feature

Dog entrepreneurs

PET ORGANIC

The decision to make dog food wasn't an obvious one for Annie Radzinowicz, founder of Pet Organic. But then her career path has never followed a logical path either – the one constant has been the family dog.

"I started off as a professional musician – a flautist – and toured with various orchestras, including the London Symphony Orchestra," says Annie. "Then I gave that up because I felt I'd gone as far as I could and I was mainly on the road." So she put aside her flute and entered public relations, working on high-profile accounts for the likes of Heinz and Nestlé. Her career took a break when she married her husband and started having children. Then it was while running exercise classes for mums that she came up with her next business idea: Annie's Nannies. "The mums were pinching the nannies I'd got to look after the kids in the crèche, so I thought, hang on, there's something in this," she laughs. She sold the business 14 years later and went into publishing, before a stint running a branding agency with ex-Dragon James Caan.

"I learnt a lot from that experience, but I decided it wasn't for me, so I resigned about a year and a half ago," she says. It was while mulling over what to do next that Annie began to question the quality of the food she was feeding Charles, her wire-haired Miniature Dachshund puppy. "I started looking into it, and I realised there was nothing out there that I felt was really brilliant."

So she put on her apron and began concocting a tasty range of organic dishes for dogs – such as lamb hotpot, kedgeree and Cumberland pie – that are good enough for humans to eat. Annie consulted with the Royal School of Veterinary Studies in Edinburgh to ensure they're all nutritionally balanced, and in 2013, they first went on sale.

There are now five people working at Pet Organic – including apprentice Phillippa Ratcliffe (pictured, with Charles) – and the dishes are stocked in over 200 independent retailers, as well as www.petorganic.com. Earlier this year, Pet Organic launched a range of treats with tantalising flavour combinations, such as lamb and pear, and duck and carrot. And in an interesting twist, they're now developing a brand of snacks – this time, for humans – for organic supermarket, Planet Organic.

The one constant is the brand's integrity: not only are the products made with real, nutritious ingredients, but this also extends through to the transparent recycled plastic packaging. It's partly what attracted Phillippa to working for the brand, "Everything is transparent in what we do, I admire the brand's integrity." And it's what makes Annie more passionate about this business than all the others that have gone before: "The type of food we're producing is radically different, and there's a necessity for it," she says.

"The type of food we're producing is radically different, and there's a necessity for it"

Image: Cory Eastwood: www.garyeastwood.co.uk



Pet Organic apprentice, Phillippa, with Charles, chief tasting officer and Annie's wire-haired Miniature Dachshund

Feature

Dog entrepreneurs



POOCH & MUTT

When vets told the Blaskeys that their Labrador pup, Cookie, would need a new hip by the age of three, the family refused to accept it. Instead, Guy Blaskey was inspired to start his dog supplement company, Pooch & Mutt.

Cookie is now nearly nine and “runs about everywhere” says Guy. “She never did need that hip replacement.” Guy recounts how the family put the sprightly Lab – diagnosed with the genetic condition, hip dysplasia – on a joint supplement intended for horses, adapted by Guy’s mother who runs a horse feed company. It was so successful that Guy began hatching a business plan: why didn’t these supplements exist for dogs? So Pooch & Mutt launched its first canine health supplement – for joints – in 2008. It now sells a range of supplements and health-benefiting treats in Waitrose, Pets at Home and all over the world.

Product development is helped by the newest dog in Guy’s life – Pepper, the Cockerpool. “For the first few years we didn’t have an office dog,” says Guy. “And the change has been instrumental in the business’s growth.” Not only is Pepper good for workplace morale, she also features heavily in Pooch & Mutt’s social media streams and is, of course, the company’s chief product tester. “She helps us to create products that dogs actually want.”

A recent example was the supplement Pooch & Mutt developed for canine dementia. “It was scientifically excellent,” says Guy, “But Pepper wouldn’t eat it. She directly influenced our business decision not to produce it.” The company instead developed a brain training treat based on the learnings from Pepper.

Guy says that starting the company has had many positive effects on his life. “Without Pooch & Mutt, I would probably still be in advertising,” he says. “But running the business has put me in touch with some fantastic dog charities and enabled me to become a board member for The Dog Rescue Federation.”

So what’s next for Pooch & Mutt? Guy is excited about their new food range, out in June, as well as more opportunities to support charity. “Our mission statement reflects our dual approach to help dogs lead happy, healthy lives – through our products and also our support of charity,” he says.

“We want to help dogs lead happy, healthy lives”



“It started off as a hobby and then grew, and grew. I’m delighted, but I didn’t expect it”

DOG FRIENDLY

Frustration at not being able to take their three large dogs on holiday with them, led Steve and Linda Bennett to start up their Dog Friendly business 11 years ago.

How many of us have lain on the beach and fantasised about starting up our own business? For Steve, it was frustration at not being able to enjoy an idyllic holiday with his brood that led to his Eureka moment. He explains: “My wife, Linda, was working at Woodgreen Animal Shelter, so we ended up with three large rescue dogs. We wanted to go on holiday but we couldn’t easily find somewhere that would accept the dogs. Then while we were on holiday, we didn’t know which beaches would welcome us, which pubs, days out and so on. On the way home, I said, ‘There ought to be something on the Internet that you could search to find out how dog-friendly places were’, and that’s how it all began. It started off as a hobby and then grew, and grew.”

And grow the business certainly has done. Dog Friendly began with the website (www.dogfriendly.co.uk), which now has 60,000 members and lists over 30,000 businesses. The Dog Friendly *Out and About* magazine launched in 2010 and is now published six times a year, while three books come out annually, and there’s also a mobile app. There are six members of staff – including Steve and Linda, who joined them as full-time employees last year when they launched their second dog-inspired business, Woof&Brew. Yes, you read that right... a second dog-inspired second business and yes, it’s making tea for dogs.

“Don’t laugh,” says Steve. “I was investor in a teashop (dog-friendly, of course) and we were talking one day to a vet about the health benefits of loose leaf tea for humans, and debating whether it would work for dogs. We ran some tests and the results were very successful. So we now have seven blends, sell online through www.woofandbrew.com, and are stocked in about 200 or so pet shops.”

So does Steve, a former marketer for an insurance company, now see himself as an entrepreneur? He starts chuckling: “I never saw myself doing this. I’m delighted but I didn’t expect it.” He’s certainly passionate about the business – in fact, more so than ever. “It’s our main form of income now, so it has to work,” he admits. “But also we’ve seen the value of what we do. Ten years ago, our members might have put their dog in kennels, now they can go away with their dogs. We’re selling something people actually want.”