

BOARDING AT THE MILTON PET SPA

“Hello, Mrs. Jones, how is Fluffy today?”

“Twyla, you know she is coming for two full weeks this time. I remember telling you when we were here just a month ago.”

“Of course! We’ve reserved the medium luxury suite for her, we know that she loves the one with the futon, not the one with the regular bed.”

“I brought her favorite VCR tape - Animal Planet takes a European vacation - and she wants to watch it each night prior to going to sleep. I want her to go hiking at least twice while she is visiting and she wants swim time daily besides. Oh, and don’t let her hear this - on August 15, could you please have a little party with one of those cute cakes you make for her with the friends she makes while she is visiting?”

“No problem at all. As she is such a wonderful guest, we are going to also give her, at no additional charge, a complimentary bath before she leaves and some additional pamper time just as a thank you for her being so well behaved when she visits us.”

Sound normal? It is a routine conversation for my staff at the Milton Manor Pet Spa and Resort located just outside of Saratoga, New York. I came up with the idea about fifteen years ago when I decided I wasn’t comfortable boarding animals in the my veterinary hospital. Every vacation, when all the local boarding facilities were full, my clients would call and we would somehow find space for their pets. However, I disliked having sick and healthy animals together for any length of time, so I decided to use one of the other buildings on my property for pet boarding.

I did my best to put together a boarding facility that would offer quality boarding at reasonable prices for my clients. It took a while for the idea to grow, but it did. Every year, there was a need for more kennels, and before long we were receiving requests for additional services. Eventually, I decided to go all out and add a luxury addition to the regular kennel comprised of twenty suites of varying sizes, all with heated floors both indoors and out (in the Northeast, this is a very special treat); large beds or futons; doggy doors that allow round the clock in-and-out movement; televisions with VCRs, so clients can bring tapes for the pets to watch, and every a la carte option I could think of, including pamper time, play time, hiking, swim time in the fiberglass pool, bathing, grooming, training, and special diets and treats from our in-house bakery. We are presently in the process of adding webcams to our a la carte selection. It was something I wanted but because our facility is out of town, but we didn’t have access to high speed internet until just recently. Our clients will soon be able to pull up their pets’ images at any time of day, no matter where in the world they are. We also offer boarding for birds, chickens, hamsters, rabbits, snakes, iguanas and a variety of other species. I have been surprised by the large number of clients that take advantage of our services, and by how many clients the hospital has gained who began as boarders.

Now, when clients need to call months in advance to reserve our suites and the boarding facility brings in more gross and nets me more than my hospital, I wonder why I didn’t start doing this earlier. They also provide a built-in financial stabilizer, as owners are most likely to board their pets at the same times they are least likely to bring them to the

hospital. As I go around the country as a veterinary consultant, I spend many hours discussing the benefits of luxury boarding. Many of my colleagues, however, are reluctant to invest their time and money in building a kennel, worried that it will result in added stress in the form of more problems, more paper work, and more complaints.

At this point in the process, the most common complaint we receive from owners is that the pets don't want to leave! There couldn't be a better way of convincing the owners that we take excellent care of their animal, and a better way of convincing me that I did the right thing.

A well designed facility takes time, money, and careful planning. But when it matures, it becomes a fabulous adventure that says thank you daily through its profits. And I haven't even touched upon all the free advertising you and your hospital will receive from local papers, cable, radio stations, and word of mouth once the public begins to learn about the uniqueness of your boarding facility.

I wish I could say I did everything in the right way, but I made plenty of mistakes. In my next article on this subject, I will discuss the major pitfalls I encountered and how best to avoid them