

Adding Hydrotherapy Services to your Business and New Business Start ups

Business and Financial Planning for Canine Professionals ROI (Return on Investments)

“Westcoast wants its customers to make a success of their business. And that’s where our step-by-step consultancy service comes into its own: site visits and IT-based tools to help you plan your business, advice on equipment installation and sundry purchases, and a full after-sales service. If there’s anything else we can do to help, please ask us.” Brad Smith, Westcoast Hydrotherapy Ltd.

How can Westcoast help your business?

With over thirty years’ experience, Westcoast knows it’s not enough to just supply top quality canine hydrotherapy equipment. So we also provide excellent customer service, whenever you need it, including at the all-important business planning stage.

Our team of experts can:

- give advice about running a hydrotherapy centre – everything from concept to completion.
- visit your site to advise on the best possible solution for the available space.
- put you in contact with a finance provider.
- assist in the design and layout of your premises.

Westcoast also:

- installs all equipment with minimal disruption, giving advice on its use and maintenance.
- runs a full after-sales telephone service and email hotline.

How offering hydrotherapy services can boost your turnover

Veterinary surgeries, boarding kennels, professional breeders and grooming centres can all increase turnover by adding swimming fitness and stamina sessions to their portfolio of services, which can be extended to provide rehabilitation.

Don’t miss out on any opportunities

General advice and case studies for a start-up hydrotherapy referral centre, a boarding kennel and a veterinary practice follow:

Obvious users of a hydrotherapy pool on a day-to-day basis are professional breeders’ own dogs and their puppies, grooming centres’ customers, military/police retirees’ own dogs and ex-colleagues’ working and pet dogs. It may also be possible to fully utilise available sessions by offering fitness swimming to users such as dog clubs and veterinary practices that are unable to provide this facility or veterinary practices where their own facility is already fully booked. Many vets prescribe hydrotherapy for dogs’ behavioural problems to use their excess energy.

Making the most of a start-up business' opportunities

Creating a successful start-up business is never easy, making it essential to carry out extensive research and prepare a realistic business plan before launching a new venture. Westcoast recommends getting professional advice from a business advisor, e.g. your bank manager or a professional organisation. Additionally, our marketing pack will be useful to help prepare:

- a press release for the canine trade newspapers and magazines, plus local general publications, radio and TV stations
- Social media is very important for tweeting news and Facebook notifications
- an advert for:
 - the local papers: some offer free space for words only ads
 - local veterinary practices' waiting areas
 - parish magazines
 - newsagents' windows
 - online and offline local business directories
 - flyer – local newsagents may deliver them with their papers.

The more people you can tell about your business the better, so don't forget:

- family, friends and ex-colleagues with pet dogs
- to join a business support network: you may be able to 'trade' services with other members and get referrals through them
- veterinary practices may:
 - not offer hydrotherapy facilities
 - need to outsource fitness swimming patients if their own pool is fully booked
- the armed forces and police may welcome an opportunity to swim working dogs
- to contact local dog clubs to offer fitness swimming sessions
- to arrange an open evening – including a dog swimming demonstration – and invite all the people listed above
- If you have the budget, get a professional to create a simple website and register it with one or more search engines. As a minimum you should include:
 - a brief overview of your business, with photo(s) of the equipment in use
 - contact details, including:
 - an automatic email link to your business email address
 - a map of your centre.

A start-up hydrotherapy referral centre example

Taking the plunge

After 15 years as a veterinary nurse Julie needed a new challenge. Keen to continue working with animals and, having already completed some hands-on training, she decided to open her business in Sussex, running the whole operation herself, from book keeping to assessing and swimming the dogs.

While Julie’s veterinary experience and veterinary connections – with the latter being aware of the advantages of hydrotherapy to post-op and post-illness patients – gave her a head start in building a client base, the finance companies were less helpful. “Although they were impressed with my business plan, no one wanted to help as I was starting a new venture,” said Julie. “Fortunately, my Dad managed to raise money on his property, some of which I used to pay for building work and the rest I spent on the pool. I couldn’t have got started without him.”

Then Westcoast offered some good advice that would allow the business to launch and grow without excessive pressures to meet financial repayment commitments. If Julie revised her original plan – and only bought a pool, heat-retaining cover, overhead hoist plus slings, floatation jackets and aqua toys – having established her business, she could re-approach the finance companies to fund purchase of the Westcoast Water Walker treadmill and Hot Spa.

And steady progression is exactly what Julie has in mind. “After just a few weeks trading I’ve was asked by two people if I’d be interested in taking on a partner but I don’t feel it’s the right time. At the moment, I’ve no real plans for expansion other than buying more equipment and doing some Hot Spa training. I chose Westcoast because they came highly recommended; they’ve lived up to that and been very helpful every step of the way,” she confirmed.

Developing your income

It’s difficult to predict how long it will take any business to become established and each one has to develop its own pricing structure that is:

- competitive with other suppliers in the area
- enough to: cover overheads and provide income for the operator.

NB *The examples of activities and figures used here are an illustration for reference purposes only.*

Activity	Fee per session (excluding VAT)	Number of sessions	Total income for activity (excluding VAT)
Reduced rate fitness swim for family/friends’ pets	£20	12	£240
Fun swimming for dog club (group block booking)	£55	4	£220
Fitness swim for police dogs (individual sessions)	£22	8	£176
Hydrotherapy maintenance (fitness swim, i.e. excluding rehabilitation) to meet excess demand at veterinary practices	£24	8	£192
Rehabilitation sessions [†]	£35	4	£140
Projected weekly totals	N/A	36	£968 (excluding VAT)

[†] if suitably trained

A boarding kennel with hydrotherapy pool example

Making the most of any extra opportunities

While the example used here is a boarding kennel with hydrotherapy pool, the same principles and examples of ways to increase income apply to other trusted providers of professional canine services who also have animal

hydrotherapy equipment. It's worth remembering that after the initial capital outlay, there is no stock to purchase because you are providing a service, unlike selling specialist pet food, for example.

Existing customers are a good cross-promotional opportunity as they are likely to be interested your other offerings, e.g. a boarding dog could benefit from a grooming session and fitness swims during its stay and at other times.

- Any spare capacity for hydrotherapy facilities could be offered to:
 - veterinary practices that:
 - do not have their own equipment
 - need to outsource patients because of excess demand
 - the police and military for their service dogs
 - dog clubs
 - family and friends' pet dogs.
- Fitness swimming is a good way to exercise dogs if the weather is bad or there are a large number in residence: a five-minute swim potentially expends around the same amount of energy as a 15-minute walk.

Extending your business reach

Lesley and Roger, owners of a Kennels and Cattery, were taking a break from their 70 dog- and 30 cat-bed business in Surrey, when they decided that investing in an animal hydrotherapy pool was too good an opportunity to miss.

“We were relaxing by a swimming pool discussing a US TV programme about the results of animal hydrotherapy treatment,” said Lesley, “and, as we’d already had enquiries about fun swims for the police dogs we kennel and from some owners of boarding dogs, buying a pool seemed totally logical.”

Initially, Lesley and Roger are offering fitness swimming sessions. But once its three full-time members of staff are suitably trained, services will extend to include rehabilitation, with each of the girls working a specified day every week to ensure continuity. They will be backed-up by a colleague on reception duties, who will also be able to help with any ‘difficult’ dogs, while Lesley and Roger – who have been trained at Westcoast – will manage pool maintenance and liaise with vets.

“It will make a difference to our trade because we can offer customers more,” Lesley added. “Already knowing there’s demand means that existing clients will request it as an add-on, in much the same way as grooming. And, hopefully, we’ll attract new customers that are interested in the swimming side who will want to board their dogs. It’s an extra exercise option and we take digital photos to prove they’ve been swimming. We like to think that the dogs are on holiday and having fun – they seem to enjoy swimming and are happy!”

How cross-selling your services could increase your income

NB The examples of activities and figures used here are an illustration for reference purposes only.

Activity	Fee per session (excluding VAT)	Number of sessions	Total income for activity (excluding VAT)
Reduced rate fitness swim for boarding dogs	£16	80	£1280
Fitness swim for non-residents	£22	12	£264

Fitness swim for dog club (group block booking)	£55	4	£220
Fitness swim for police and military dogs (individual sessions)	£22	40	£880
Hydrotherapy maintenance (fitness swim, i.e. excluding rehabilitation) to meet excess demand at veterinary practices	£24	12	£288
Rehabilitation sessions [†]	£26	8	£208
Projected monthly totals	N/A	156	£3140 (excluding VAT)

[†] if suitably trained

We've got our dog back

Naturally, Louise and Simon Miller were very concerned when their six-month old Labrador Millie began 'bunny-hopping' instead of climbing stairs and running around their garden. The puppy's condition improved following a seven-day course of Carprofen anti-inflammatory tablets, although an X-ray at her follow-up appointment revealed severe dysplasia of both hips, which assistant veterinary surgeon Sarah Tavener of the Stowe Veterinary Group in Suffolk hoped could be treated without having to resort to surgery. "I replaced Millie's anti-inflammatories with glucosamine, a powdered joint supplement that's taken with food, and – having seen similarly affected dogs benefit from hydrotherapy – I also referred her for hydrotherapy to strengthen her hips and muscles and to help her lose a bit of weight," said Sarah.

"Millie wasn't anxious at her first hydrotherapy session because she's a confident dog," confirmed Louise. "But it left her exhausted. And for the first couple of sessions she could hardly manage five or six minutes walking but is now doing up to 30 minutes in the pool and is able to swim 10 laps. And, amazingly, she knows when it's time to go swimming and gets very excited – she loves it!

"It's just fantastic," Louise added. "We're absolutely delighted to see the difference in Millie. Six months ago I would have thought she'd have to be put down or have an operation on both hips with a long remedial time but we've got our lovely family dog back. She's now a crazy socialite again and can walk for up to an hour-and-a-half with the children out on picnics."

We can even help you now

There's nothing like getting a head start. Your finance provider will need to see a comprehensive business plan, and that's something we can help with if you would like us to email an outline to you. A business plan would require a spreadsheet to calculate potential monthly income and expenses, an example also be sent.

Don't forget

The most important thing to remember is that the monthly income and expenses example is a rough guide only because:

- utility costs vary from one supplier to another – you will need to contact yours to get an accurate cost per unit

- all other expenses – both fixed and variable costs – also depend on individual circumstances
- only you can decide the cost per hydrotherapy session and how much to spend on marketing: while Westcoast can advise you about these aspects, unfortunately, we cannot guarantee the success of anyone's business.

Your business and Westcoast: an ongoing partnership

Westcoast will do whatever it can to help set up your hydrotherapy centre and provide the best possible customer service to support your business as it grows. To find out more, contact a member of the Westcoast team now.

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