



When sh*t hits the fan



STRATEGY
PLAN

8 Steps

to taking back control
of your business

when the unexpected happens
& preparing for the future



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MINDSET

When something unexpected happens like the Covid lockdown or an unexpected injury that stops us in our tracks, please know that it's **ok to have a wobble!** You're not a bad business owner for having a bit of a panic.

What I learnt from the Covid lockdown though is that panic does not help us in the long term. Yes things are overwhelming and scary, and out of our control sometimes, but what we **can do** and what we **do** have control over is the ability to chose how we go forward, and when we're prepared in advance unexpected emergencies are easier to deal with.

We can either chose to give up at the first hurdle OR focus on growing and maintaining our businesses so that we can pick up where we left off if something stops us in our tracks AND probably be **stronger for it.**

So how do we change our mindset from fear and panic to calm, focused and positive? Here's some suggestions for you:

Taking IN the positive and blocking OUT the negative.

For me I love to listen to motivational podcasts and YouTube videos that I know are gonna get me in the mood for being productive, proactive or relaxed.

Apps like **Calm** are perfect for me as they have so many meditations that you can listen to, from calming anxiety, getting rid of negative thoughts to just giving you a moment to breath. It's a great way to start and/or end your day.

For you it may involve a morning exercise, stretching, or going for a run to blow away the cobwebs. Whatever works for you.

MINDSET

Remind yourself of the awesome stuff

I always recommend **creating a 'happy board'** either physically with a cork board or scrap book, or digitally on Pinterest or Canva. Go through all your lovely reviews and anything that makes you happy when you look at it and pin them to your board or stick them in a scrapbook. It seems weird at first but getting into the habit of looking at these things and reminding yourself of the good stuff can really change our whole outlook and mindset.

Focus on what you DO know right now and not the unknown

- **Your business is still there.** Yes you might not be making any money right now or very little, but it is still there waiting for you to start up again.
- **Your clients haven't left you.** Maybe you've had to stop working at the moment but most clients are loyal and will be there waiting for your return.
- **You can use this time to attract new clients.** If you can't currently work physically you can still use your time to work on the behind the scenes of your business. Carry on posting on social media, show 'em what your made of and you may even increase your client base when you're ready to go back!

FINANCES

When something like an injury or health issue happens that stops us being able to work or maybe a vehicle breaks down and we can't get to our clients, our first initial thought is probably how this is going to impact us financially.

The **key is to not lose focus** and to actually look at your financial situation factually. These actions may seem common sense but when you're overwhelmed and stressed it can be really hard to think straight so I've broken it down really simply.

FIRST ACTION

How much do I actually have?

Seems obvious but it's easy to overlook when you're overwhelmed. Look at your bank account, Paypal balance, and write down exactly how much you have right now.

SECOND ACTION

What will be coming out?

Again common sense, but do you know **exactly** how much is coming out and when, for essential bills like utility or phone bills.

After these two steps you should be able to see more clearly what your financial situation **really is**, and possibly be a little relieved that things aren't as horrific as you imagined and you can manage in the short term.

THIRD ACTION

Am I owed any money?

Make sure all of your clients are **up to date with payments** and even if your usual agreement is to be paid at the end of the month, there is no harm in asking for that money to be paid earlier if you need it.

FINANCES

NEXT ACTION

Have you been paid for a service that's now had to be cancelled?

If your clients had already paid you for a pet sit or service that was due to take place, discuss whether you can keep that payment for now rather than giving it back to them, and keep it on record for when they re book their holiday in the future. This way you're not having to give back money that you could really do with right now!

I've also seen businesses **offering vouchers** that can be bought now to be used in future which may allow you to generate a little extra cash.

WHERE CAN YOU SAVE

Is there anything you can pause or cancel for now until you're back earning money?

These steps may seem obvious but I've seen (particularly during covid) business owners panic so much in the moment that they closed their business without thinking it through properly and factually. You may not need to do anything that drastic just yet.

ADAPTING

If you know you'll be out of action for a long period of time you may need to think about adapting your services. For this step we need to think outside the box. Having a physical service based business doesn't necessarily mean that we can no longer serve our clients or get paid from home. It also doesn't mean we have to leave our old way of working for good, we can go back to that eventually, but it's about doing what you can to adapt your skills and services for the time being until you can get back out there.

Here's some examples of Petpreneurs using their skills to make money from home

One dog trainer in Bristol started offering **online one to one's** via Skype or Zoom, she checks in with clients regularly and keeps them motivated to carry on with their training.

Another trainer and behaviourist in Essex created some **online courses** for dog owners but also for dog walkers to brush up on their canine body language skills.

Not only can they keep making money this way but it keeps their clients happy and their businesses remain active even when they couldn't physically go and see their clients.

A dog groomer in Devon started giving paid **workshops** on how dog owners can groom their dogs from home.

But what if i'm a dog walker or pet sitter and can't take my business online?

If a course, workshop or online training isn't really something you can do you **STILL** have things you can offer that will help people right now, although you're not charging for it, you will see the benefits from the value you give now in the future when people CAN start paying you for your services.

ADAPTING

How?

- **Adapt your content**
- **Show what you can do**
- **Give value**

Turn your content into almost like a show and tell. Really we should be doing this anyway but ramp it up a gear! Here's what I can do, this is what i'm made of, i'm not 'just' a dog walker I can do xyz...

Giving **amazing free value** is so beneficial for you, your current clients and potential clients. For example you could:

Show pet owners how you create fun interactive games with your own dogs

How you keep them happy and calm

What you feed them to keep them healthy

Tips and tricks you've picked up while dog walking

....the possibilities are endless.

The key is to show what you're capable of and give so much value that potential clients see it and think wow she's good! You could end up with even more clients than you had before when you get back to it!

Of course you may decide to take some much needed rest instead of trying to adapt your services, and that's ok to.

TAKE ADVANTAGE & GROW

We all know this isn't the way we'd really chose to work on our businesses or take time out but if you find you have some forced free time on your hands you might as well use it to your advantage. If you need a break and are long overdue time out away from your business, then DO IT. If you'd rather use this time to chill with your family and get work done on your house DO IT. I speak to so many Petpreneurs who are burnt out and need a rest so if that's you don't feel guilty about it.

However if you do want to use this time to work on your business then read on.

Working ON your business rather than IN it means looking at the things that you do behind the scenes rather than the actual physical side of walking or pet sitting.

Critical things that people often overlook

From my experience these 4 points are vital to the smooth running of your business AND your sanity but we often don't get the time to think about them and in my experience are the main reasons we get overwhelmed, stressed, burnt out, confused and drained.

- **Creating Boundaries**
- **Creating processes & policies**
- **Being clear who we are serving**
- **Being clear why we do what we do**

Obviously we can be doing other things too like updating our website, admin, or doing our tax returns etc but i'm going to go through the 4 points above in more detail here.

GROW

Creating Boundaries

I learnt the hard way that having zero boundaries will negatively effect your life and your business in the long run.

By boundaries I mean rules or guidelines that you and your clients stick to.

So for example, I would have customers calling or texting me at 2am booking dog walks for the next day and wanting an immediate response AT 2AM. Being annoyed if I couldn't work on a Sunday because I had personal plans. Even customers tracking me down through my personal Facebook account while I was on holiday because I wasn't responding to their texts (because I was on holiday!)

Let me tell you, it was a nightmare. BUT it was partly my fault. I realised that i'd never actually set any boundaries at all and I was expecting my customers to just know that it wasn't ok to be contacting me while I was away because I wouldn't do it myself.

So we have to set our boundaries and rules from the get go ideally. If you've not put boundaries in already now is the time to do it so that when you go back to work you can start a fresh.

What are some boundaries you can put in place

1. Decide and tell your customers your working hours e.g 7am - 6pm mon - sat or whatever suits you and make sure they know that you won't respond outside of these hours. Being available constantly can lead to burn out quickly as you'll feel like you're on call 24/7.
2. Have a separate work phone so that you can literally switch off and make sure they know that you are not contactable while on holiday. If you don't have one already you could use your time off to research options.

GROW

3. Have clear payment procedures and cancellation policies in place.

Creating Processes & Policies

So like boundaries, having clear processes & policies in place for things like cancellations and payments, will make a huge difference to the smooth running of your business and be less of a headache when you return.

I'd say the main processes & policies you want to get clear to yourself and your clients are:

1. **Payment process**
2. **Booking process**
3. **Cancellation process**

There's no right or wrong with how you want to do this but just make sure you're clear in your own mind how these processes are going to work, and what exactly your policies are, write them down and most importantly **stick to them**. You can either have these in your terms and conditions for your clients to read when you meet them or if you're implementing them afterwards send them a letter explaining the new processes or policy in detail so you both know where you stand and there's no confusion.

Having everyone stick to the same process e.g. everyone paying you on the same day, same method, and sticking to your policies e.g. cancellation notice, is a lot less stressful and confusing.

GROW

Being clear who we are serving

It might seem obvious, well i'm a dog walker therefore i'm serving dog owners.... but being super duper clear EXACTLY who we are serving can do a few things for us:

- **Help us with our advertising**
- **The wording we use on social media**
- **Attract the RIGHT people**
- **Save us time and stress on social media**

So have a think and write down exactly what sort of person **needs and would use your services**. You'll soon get a clearer picture of the type of person you want to be attracting.

Here's some questions to ask yourself.

Where do they live?

What age range are they?

What are their interests and hobbies?

What do they do?

What problems do they have that I can help them with or solve?

Where would they likely see or hear about me?

GROW

Being clear why we do what we do

When we're busy and rushing from one job to the next, replying to messages, carrying out meet and greets, creating adverts etc etc it's easy to completely forget WHY we're doing this.

Sometimes when we're stressed and tired we even ask ourselves why we're doing this! So having your why written down clearly to look back on is so beneficial.

Your why will be totally different to others and personal to you. It could be that you didn't like your boss, you want to work outside and not stuck in an office, it could be that you had a bad experience with a pet care professional yourself and so it's prompted you to become a trusting and caring pet care provider.

Whatever your why is, write it down. You can even use it to help you write social media posts, your bio's and descriptions and in your 'about me' section on your website.

MAINTAIN & NURTURE

It's massively important to maintain our businesses and nurture relationships with our current clients during unexpected time away from your business (unless they know you'll be taking time away for health reasons.)

What does this mean exactly?

- **Not letting our social media accounts go stale**
- **Staying visible (even if we want to hide right now!)**
- **Don't go quiet**
- **Keep in touch with our clients**

As well as working on some of the behind the scenes stuff, it's important to remember we need to still be visible and not hide under our duvets waiting for the day we can go out again. Trust me I know its tempting and there's no harm in having duvet days and eating chocolate all day, but if we want a business to go back to and to pick up where we left off, we need to maintain the 'shop window' and stay connected with our clients.

Now this doesn't mean posting on your Facebook Page 5 times a day every day (because that's not sustainable) it just means don't go completely silent to the point that new people think you've closed down.

For example, I saw a dog walker on Facebook put a post up literally just saying "We're closed and won't be checking any messages".

To me personally if I was one of their clients I would be a little disappointed with that. Do they mean closed permanently or just for now? I would feel like they weren't actually interested in keeping in touch with me, not that bothered about my dog and aren't available for me to ask any questions about when and if they'll be opening again, or do I need to look for another dog walker?

Also it's quite impersonal and a blanket post like that might not actually be seen by all of your clients.

MAINTAIN & NURTURE

What can we do to stay connected and nurture those relationships?

I would highly suggest contacting all of your clients individually whether that's by text, whatsapp or giving them a quick call. Your clients will be so pleased that you care enough about them and their pets to get in touch directly. A personal message goes so much further than a standard social media post. By all means do a Facebook or Instagram post too but try to speak to as many of your clients directly as you can to keep them in the loop and give them timescales if possible.

Show an interest in their pets and ask how they're getting on. Let them know you're missing them and can't wait to see them again soon.

Ask them to send you photos and / or tag you in their photos. I mean as pet owners there is nothing we love more than someone asking to see a photo of our pet is there?? If they don't mind you sharing the photos on your social media it's also a great way to show **potential** clients 'look at the great relationship I have with my clients'.

Remind them that you appreciate them. As I said, this is where personal messages go a long way, it makes them feel appreciated and let's them know that it's not just the money that you're interested in.

Why not send a little hand made card or a note to say 'thank you for your support during this time'. A little gesture goes a long way and you'll probably find those clients will then tell all their friends how lovely and thoughtful you are.

The way we act now shows what we're like in a crisis

As I said in step one, it is totally normal to feel fear, worry and have major anxiety when something unexpected happens. BUT after that initial reaction, the way we act can really increase our clients faith and trust in us (or not!). For example going back to that dog walker I mentioned, what does their reaction show to their clients and any potential clients?

MAINTAIN & NURTURE

That they're possibly not great in a crisis? That they're not good under pressure? Or that they are very quick to close and cut off contact with the people who have been paying them at the first sign of trouble?

I'm sure that person just panicked and was a little hasty, but it will cause their clients to think, Is this person going to panic if there was a problem with my dog? Are they reliable? Can they cope with issues that come up? Not the sort of questions you want your clients asking themselves!

What impression do we want to give off?

Even if we are worried and panicking on the inside, we still want to show that we got this, we are in control of our businesses, we're not gonna let a little thing like a pandemic or a flat tyre stop us! In other words, we are trustworthy, reliable, we don't give up under pressure, we can cope with any issues that come our way and we care about our clients.

SOCIAL MEDIA

As I said in the last step, it's important to keep our Social Media accounts going and not just letting them go stale.

Don't forget the whole point of our social media accounts (for our business) is to **attract potential clients and to point them in the direction of our products and services.** So the fact that we're not actually walking dogs or pet sitting right now doesn't matter, we can still be attracting potential clients.

What can we be posting right now? Here's some examples:

- **Introduce yourself with a photo of you**
- **Photos of your own pets**
- **Screenshots of your reviews**
- **The story of how and when we got our pets**
- **Our background - why we started our business**
- **Mention any training we've had**
- **Any interesting facts about us**
- **Reword some of our older posts**
- **Tips/tricks you do with your own pets**
- **Old photos of your current customers**
- **Introduce or profile your furry customers**
- **Ask questions so people can reply and engage with you**
- **Remind people what services you offer**
- **Tell any funny stories or explain a funny photo that you took**

Before you post, ask yourself, is this going to attract potential clients? Remember you're not there to entertain people but to show what you can offer, why you're awesome, why people can trust and use your services and to show that the pets you already look after love being with you.

SOCIAL MEDIA

There's no right or wrong as to how often you post and actually posting too much can become annoying and cause people to stop looking or ignore your posts. But just don't let 3 weeks go by without posting anything at all.

When it comes to updating our clients, as I previously mentioned, I would contact them directly but it's a good idea to keep people updated on your pages too.

There maybe potential clients watching from the sidelines!

If you'd like a more in depth social media guide specifically for Pet Business Owners like you, I also have a comprehensive Guide that covers everything social media and has tonnes of content ideas you can use. Available to purchase on the website www.sassypoodlestationery.com

PREPARING TO RE OPEN

If you've been off for a long period for instance with a health issue and you're now planning your return to business as usual, here's what I suggest you do.

Talk to your regular clients individually

So hopefully you are already keeping in touch with them so when we do get some kind of timescale or date that we can start working again it won't be a huge surprise for them.

Speaking to them individually means you know where you stand, what their situation is and you can work out when's best for you to start visiting or walking their pets again.

Send out a letter or email with your plans

Even if/when you've spoken to your clients about re starting services and you've verbally decided on a plan with them, I would still highly recommend sending them a letter or email officially informing them of the dates and any information they need to know.

Not only does it look professional, it saves any confusion and mix ups with dates and plans. If it's written in black and white there can be no confusion either side.

PREPARING TO RE OPEN

Let them know of any changes

As I said in a previous section, if you need to make any changes to your business such as the payment or cancellation processes, **now is the time to do it!**

It's the best opportunity you're going to get to start a fresh or re think your policies and to implement them.

For example if you were stressed with chasing late payments before, you could implement a new payment policy and inform your client that after spending some time working on your business at home you've decided to implement a new system whereby payments must all be received on the first day of every week, month, whatever suits you.

Get them to sign a new contract

If you do make changes to your Terms & Conditions or policies, I would update your agreement form and get them to sign the new one. Don't forget if they don't 'officially' agree to your new terms and conditions they can just turn round and say they didn't know or never agreed if any issues were to come up in future.

By getting them to fill out and sign a new form is also a good way to make sure all of the pets records and info are up to date too.

These forms may not be legally binding, but the intention is more to make sure your clients know your rules, policies and procedures and prevent confusion in the future.

PREPARING TO RE OPEN

So now your regular clients are informed and up to date you can post on your Social Media accounts to let the wider audience and not so regular clients know that you are back, let everyone know what your plans are and if any changes have been made.

Here's a few ideas of things you might want to mention. Not necessarily all in the same post.

- Official start back date
- Any changes that need to be mentioned
- How happy you are to be back and how you've missed their pets
- Your contact info if anyone wants to ask a question
- Whether you're taking on new clients at the moment
- What you've been upto at home
- Mention any training or online learning you've been doing to improve your knowledge and skills

And make sure you post a nice smiley photo of yourself! :)

PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

I think we can all agree that the crazy situation we found ourselves in during Covid was something none of us would ever have imagined or foreseen happening. Hopefully it won't happen again anytime soon either!

But there are other emergencies and situations that may well pop up in the future that we **can** prepare for 'just in case'.

Things like:

Loss of earnings due to ill health or injury
Unforeseen family situations
Urgent repairs needed to our equipment or vehicles

Here's my tips to dealing with these things:

Always have 3 months worth of savings

I've always advised those just starting a business that they should have **at least 3 months worth** of savings in the bank to allow for the gradual process of growing your client base. It can take a while to gain a regular income and solid client base especially from Dog Walking and Pet Sitting so having the money in your bank to cover your essential bills takes the pressure off those first few months.

Now after Covid it got me thinking maybe we should be trying to ensure that we **always** have at least 3 months worth of savings in the bank for those essentials so that we don't have that initial panic of OMG how am I going to pay my mortgage, rent etc.

Easier said than done I know, but maybe something to think about.

PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

Separate accounts for emergencies

Following on from the first point, I remember watching a You Tube video by Muchelle B about how she **created different accounts** for different emergencies. The idea was to have a 'car fund' and a 'if I lost my job fund' etc and have enough money in each so that she knows that if her car needed expensive repairs or she needed a new car altogether, she has enough sitting there to cover it immediately and doesn't have to scrape around trying to get the money together.

I speak to lots of Dog Walkers who are stuffed without their vehicles and from personal experience, not having my car even for just a week was a nightmare!

I know, again easier said than done but it's an option worth thinking about if it's something you can afford to do.

Insurance Policies

How many of you have fallen over, hurt your arm or leg and even in pain have carried on because you can't afford not to work? I'll put my hand up!

A fellow dog walker shared that she fell over and broke her wrist, resulting in an op which meant she couldn't work for 5 weeks and I remember badly hurting my shoulder but carrying on through the pain and ended up making it worse because I didn't want to take time out to rest it.

I then discovered you can take out a **'Loss of Earnings' insurance policy** which can cover you if you are ever injured and can't physically work. I paid around £10 a month for this so it didn't break the bank and could be a lifeline if you're unable to work for a while.

PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

Increasing your prices

Now if you don't earn enough to do any of the above, maybe you need to think about increasing your prices. Or do you need to be **decreasing the distance** you travel if you spend far too much on fuel.

I think your clients will totally understand now more than ever if you need to increase your prices to be able to save and cover your outgoings.

Obviously I wouldn't go from £10 to £50 for example as that's too drastic but really have a think about what others charge, and if your prices are too low.

Charge what you are worth not what you think people can afford.

If you're a new dog walker it doesn't mean you have to charge less than everyone else and if you walk one dog at a time, really that's a specialised service which you can charge more for as the dog is getting your undivided attention and a one to one service.

Retainers

A retainer basically means that your regular clients still pay you as they normally would even if they go on holiday and don't need you to walk their dog during that time, or if they're a teacher and only need you during term time, they'd still pay you during the holidays to keep their dogs walking slot with you.

It's not something I see many dog walkers offer but it kind of makes sense.

PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

For example a lady locally to me has all her regular clients pay a retainer fee because she only walks one dog at a time and so if all of her clients were on holiday at the same time, she would have no income.

My question to her was, **doesn't that put people off?** She said she only lost one client when she brought in the retainer and the rest were happy to do this.

If clients don't want to pay a retainer, they'll need to accept that other bookings may replace there's.

Have alternatives ready

Is there another pet business owner that you can work with who can take on your regulars should you need time off? Whether that's a one off because of a poorly child or a few weeks if you injure yourself, if you have a back up or other alternative to offer your clients, these situations don't feel as stressful when they occur.

Above all - don't panic, don't be hasty to give up and quit, and make sure you have things in place before these situations arise and you'll find your business is much stronger and can come back from any unexpected situations that come your way.

Rachel x