

STARTUP

Good dog!

COMPANY: Michael's Pack
LOCATION: Mineola
FOUNDED: May 2012
FOUNDERS: Michael Schaijer
EMPLOYEES: 4 full-time
PRODUCT: Dog training services
LAUNCH INVESTMENT: \$40,000, for renovations and materials
FUNDING SOURCES: Self-funded
MAJOR CHALLENGES: Converting at-home customers to in-store customers
PRODUCT STATUS: Open for business

It took more than 20 years for Michael Schaijer to realize his real estate career was for the birds. As it turns out, Schaijer is more of a dog person.

Five years ago, he sold his real estate company to one of his agents with one goal in mind: to train dogs professionally and somehow make a living doing it.

After training under another professional dog trainer and becoming certified, he began training dogs out of his home. In early 2012, he came across an opportunity to take his training academy, named Michael's Pack, out of the doghouse and into the big time.

"I had one person contact me after I put an ad in the newspaper," Schaijer said. "He said, 'I'm a veterinarian and I have a brand-new puppy, but I've always had lousy dogs.' He asked me to train his dog, which, luckily, I did well. Afterward, he told me he was opening a new location in Mineola, but didn't need the whole space."

That led to Michael's Pack opening a 1,200-square-foot location on Jericho Turnpike next to the vet's office — a partnership that's boosted both businesses.

The office lets Schaijer, 61, conduct group classes, typically involving three to eight puppies at a time, in the same period he would have only been able to see one client previously. Classes are offered in five-block sessions for beginner, intermediate and advanced training levels, starting at \$250 per dog for the five sessions.

The most common issue clients want Schaijer to fix: jumping on people, biting, pulling on leashes and, of course, peeing



MICHAEL SCHAIJER: Positive reinforcement is the secret to his dog-training success.

Dogs: He's their best friend

From 12A

on the carpet.

But Schaijer confesses he doesn't train dogs at Michael's Pack; he gives owners the tools and skills they need to turn that couch-eating fleabag into a loyal and obedient family member — using only positive reinforcement in the process, whether it be treats, praise or the always-coveted squeak toy.

"Unless I move into my clients' house, I can't train their dogs," Schaijer said. "The follow-through has to be on the client's end."

Private training is still offered, both at Schaijer's Mineola office and at a client's home, although there's a price increase associated with each service.

"It's much more cost-efficient for me to have six to eight clients at a time, so that's why it's more expensive for individual training," Schaijer said. "The most I can do is six homes in a day."

Despite the higher prices, though, Schaijer said up to 75 percent of his revenue is still coming from in-home training. That's making it hard to commit as much time to growing the actual facility — a goal squarely on Schaijer's mind.

The real prize for Schaijer is incorporating a boarding and daycare center into his business, creating an all-in-

one center for dog needs.

"I get so many of my clients who are happy with me and ask me to watch their dog," he said. "I'd like to be able to do that in the near future. My goal is to have it up by June, but I'm not sure if that's realistic."

It might be, but it would most likely require Schaijer to find a new space to incorporate all of the offerings he envisions, including dog grooming and a small retail center where he could sell Michael's Pack-branded dog training tools and equipment. It would also mean hiring more than just the three employees he currently has — two additional trainers and an administrative assistant — to man the shop 24-7.

Still, Schaijer's well on his way, posting a 50 percent revenue increase between 2012 and 2013. And with U.S. consumers spending \$52.87 billion on their pets in 2012 — up roughly \$2 billion a year annually since 1994, according to data from the American Pet Products Association — Schaijer's bet looks like a safe one.

"The more I get into this, the more it's clear that people are insane for their dogs," said Schaijer, who has two dogs of his own. "I've trained dogs all my life, and I've always loved it. I did real estate for 20 years and didn't really love it. I love what I do now."

— John Callegari

See DOGS, 50A

