

# STRATEGIES

## THE CAT'S MEOW

RAFAEL MITTFELHLOT | CONTRIBUTING WRITER

**T**he first thing she does is talk to the cats.

"Oh, my God, who are the cutest girls in town?" she calls out immediately as she walks in the apartment.

Two small Bengals, perched side by side atop a 6-foot play tower, watch Dr. Cecilia Burnside curiously as she sets down her things. But not for long.

Within seconds, they're back at play — zooming around, chasing each other and trying to hide in Burnside's old-fashioned doctor's bag.

Burnside is one of the few doctors in town who makes house calls — but only for cats.

Today, however, she's not here to see the Bengals, but their roommate.

Her patient today is Precious, a 13-year-old Siamese with skin problems, who is meowing sadly from the bedroom where she's been quarantined.

Burnside launched her mobile vet business, Cats Love Housecalls, only a year ago after moving to Austin from Orange County, Calif., where she practiced veterinary medicine in a stationary clinic for more than two years. About a year into her clinic work, she began thinking about opening a mobile vet service back in Texas, to be near her family and boyfriend.

"Cats are great creatures of routine," Burnside says, and taking them out of the comfort of their homes often frightens or angers them.

### LESSONS LEARNED

**TIME MANAGEMENT:** It is easy to work 10 to 12 hrs a day when dealing with your own business, but it is important to take time for yourself. You owe it to your clients to be at your best, fresh and energized.

**PROFESSIONAL CONTACTS:** I regularly introduce myself to other veterinarians in the community so they know who I am and about the services I provide. This has been a great way for me to generate referrals. I also work in conjunction with many vets on cases so the cats received the best possible care.

**OUTSOURCE:** I focus on being a feline veterinarian first. When I need a service or have a problem with my business, I try to find an expert in that field to solve it, such as tax preparation, car repair and computer problems. It can cost more that trying to fix the issue yourself, but in the long run it saves time and worry.

Many of her clients complain that the car rides to the vet or the unfamiliar smells in the clinic upset their cats.

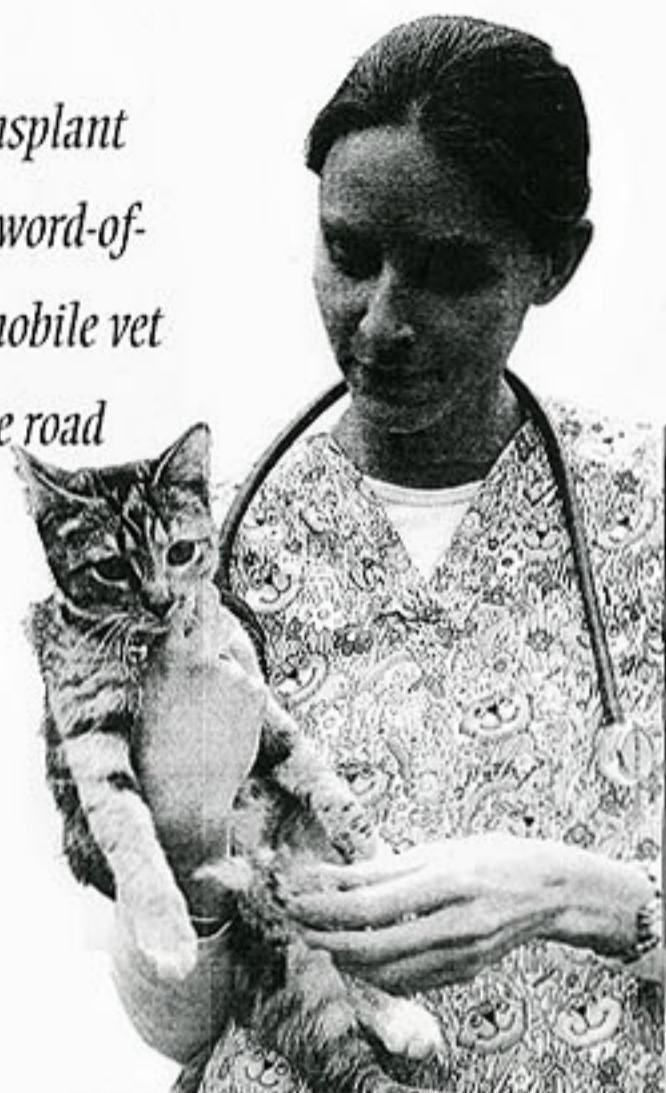
Precious is a great example. She's blind, but still has a great sense of smell.

During one vet visit, the cat began growling and hissing the moment she stepped inside and smelled the clinic.

"People took their dogs outside to wait until they could bring them back in," says Rachel Treuting, Precious' owner. "It was the most embarrassing thing ever."

At home, things are different. While

*California transplant uses referrals, word-of-mouth to get mobile vet business on the road*



Dr. Cecilia Burnside tends to Call during a recent visit.

Precious is unhappy with her quarantine — her skin condition is potentially contagious — she's calm and polite as Burnside examines her, collecting fur samples with a toothbrush.

The tests last only a few minutes, and Burnside and Treuting return to the living room to talk.

Here, the doctor-client relationship is more blurred. In fact, if not for the old-fashioned doctor's bag and the trademark cartoon cat smock, you'd think they were old friends.

And that's just how Burnside wants it. "Obviously, I want to continue growing my clientele," she says, "but I'd like to keep it very personal."

She says you don't get that as much at a stationary clinic, because the environment is much more hectic and not as intimate. House calls, Burnside argues, also keep cat owners more relaxed than clinical visits normally do.

As Burnside and Treuting chat, the conversation runs from flea preventatives to laundry to backyard alligators.

"Do you do dogs?" Treuting asks at one point. "Because a friend of mine is so interested in that concept."

Burnside shakes her head. Cats only. But she does give Treuting a referral to Dr. Libby Hays, owner of Mobile Cat and Dog Vet.

Hays, one of Burnside's classmates at Texas A&M University, where they both earned veterinary degrees, launched her

SEE VET, PAGE 30

page 1

## VET: Austin is home to more than half a dozen mobile animal care businesses

mobile vet business at the same time, and the two often refer patients to each other.

"Referrals from other vets have been a big part of my clientele," she says. That was a lesson she learned early on. "When I first came to Austin, I wasn't a known vet."

She called a friend in Florida who had set up his own mobile vet business, and asked him how to get started. He told her she should be spending her money sending introductory letters to other vets and having lunch with them.

She did, and clients started calling. Getting her name out was a turning point for Burnside.

In fact, though she advertises in about four neighborhood newsletters, she still relies most heavily on referrals for her business.

Dr. Jan Allen, an Austin mobile vet who launched in 1985, also believes in the importance of referrals. She agrees with Burnside's observation of the overwhelming sense of cooperation between veterinarians, and says most vets are helpful and share referrals.

"I would say that's particularly true with younger veterinarians," she says. "Some of the old-timers, I think, wanted to be friendly, but only as long as the nearest vet was ten miles away. The younger vets don't seem to have that issue."

She says there is less animosity among vets in Austin now than when she started.

Things have also changed on the business side since the 80s. At that time, Allen's biggest challenge was dealing with too much business.

Being the only one vet of her kind, Allen had to travel all over Austin to meet appointments. Nowadays, at least six mobile vets work in the Austin area.

Burnside's biggest challenge was getting the business to find her, a problem that mostly took care of itself once she started networking.

In addition to networking, Burnside also tried meeting with Renee Trudeau, owner of Career Strategists, a consulting company that offers advice to novice businesses.

Trudeau introduced Burnside to another small business owner, Colleen Dieter, and the two now meet regularly to discuss their businesses and share strategies.

Even better, Dieter has two cats, both of which are terrified of going to a clinic.

Having only been operating a year, Burnside said it was hard to estimate revenue. Like many small businesses, her first two months saw a negative income.

"I started going meagerly positive by April," she says. "It's been getting better



Trudeau

every month."

Based on the last few months, she estimated an income hovering around \$40,000, but hopes that number will grow as her business finesse improves.

Burnside spent between \$5,000 and \$8,000 launching Cats Love Housecalls, notably less than it takes to start many small businesses. That, combined with the fact that she has no clinic upkeep, made the launch simpler than that of a traditional vet clinic.

However, there are extra costs involved in making house calls.

To offset the time and travel overhead, Burnside charges a house call fee, which varies by Zip code. The further a client is from the Arboretum area, the higher the house call fee.

For now, Burnside is very happy with where Cats Love Housecalls is going. She loves being her own boss, and she loves the intimacy her business affords her.

"And I love cats — I'm a cat nut," she says. "I love seeing cats every day and educating people about cat health, so that their cats can live the longest life possible."

### CATS LOVE HOUSECALLS

**WHAT IT DOES:** Provides compassionate veterinary care for cats in the comfort of their homes

**EMPLOYEES:** 2

**REVENUE:** Less than \$100,000

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