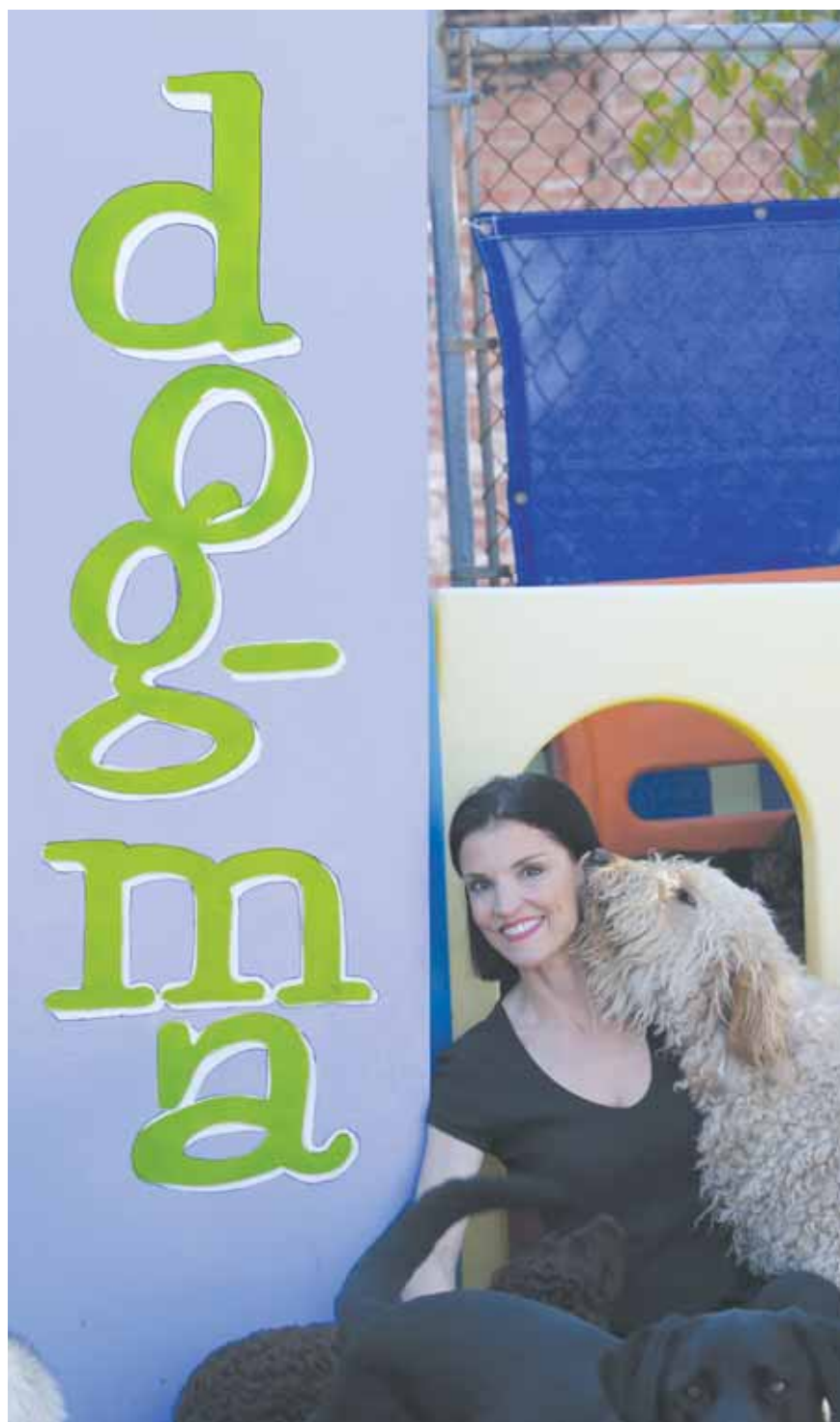


# Rebecca Bisgyer

## From the Corporate World to Creating Dog-Ma

BY PETER SHERER, PHOTO BY ANDREW LIGHTMAN



**F**or over twenty years Rebecca Bisgyer was a senior executive in sales and marketing for various industries including hotel, software, and finance. Her final job working for other people was corralling Fortune 500 companies that wanted to buy millions of dollars in foreign currency. This is the story of how she traded her business suits for blue jeans to serve four-legged clients at her own doggy daycare company, Dog-Ma.

### Selling For a Living

The youngest of four girls, Rebecca Bisgyer is a native Washingtonian with all the local schools to prove it. For college she set off for The Bauder Institute of Design where she studied fashion illustration. After design school she came home and was recruited into her first job in operations for the Jefferson Hotel. In the early 80's, Rebecca moved to Omni Hotels and worked her way up directing sales and marketing efforts for hundreds of hotels across the United States.

Over the next decade and a half, she sold and developed software for the hospitality industry, did freelance business development, and then took a job as Director of Sales for Ruesch International, a currency trading firm, where she soon became Vice President of Development, handling three divisions with 80 employees in five offices across the world.

### The Transition

Then in the late 1990s, Rebecca began looking for a new creative outlet. "I wanted to do something

that was meaningful to me personally. I wanted to take on an issue that I cared about as opposed to just making a comfortable living." The one deeply felt concern that followed Rebecca throughout her job transitions was that she hated to leave her dogs Morgan and Sam at home as she left for work. "Despite having a dog-walker, I always felt so guilty—and I knew I wasn't the only busy professional who hated leaving their dogs at home unattended all day." Dog day-care, which is based on the concept of a cage-less, interactive environment where dogs can be with other dogs and people during the day, was in its infancy. Rebecca conceived of business, and then found that it already existed in other cities. She spent months talking to the few people around the country who had established day care centers for dogs.

Scouting locations, talking to reluctant bankers, facing the tightest labor market in decades, Rebecca researched the concept, created projections, and received valuable information from the original dog day-care center run by the ASPCA in San Francisco and others in New York City. "I became obsessed with making this dream come true," she said. Knowing that without an existing business model, banks would likely turn her down, she spent her savings to get started. That meant renting space at 821 Virginia Avenue, SE, just below the SW Freeway, building two enormous dog runs, hauling tons of stones to create an outdoor play surface that would drain and could be disinfected, and negotiating permits. Then the real effort began: educating potential

clients, complimentary pet product/service providers, and the press about the concept and the benefits of doggy day-care.

Opening a new business in 1998 on the south side of the expressway was a challenge. "I felt like a true urban pioneer. The immediate area was a bit dicey, and I often worked quite late. I witnessed every variety of illegal transaction while walking to my car at night, but luckily, I was always in the company of at least two dogs!" Rebecca soon realized that she needed to provide overnight boarding as well as daytime care, and after doing some limited boarding for favorite clients at night in her home, eventually expanded Dog-ma's services to include 24-hour onsite care. "At first, I couldn't afford nighttime help, so I slept in the office for a year. Needless to say, there was lots of activity inside and out! I learned to live on 3 hours sleep." Living in the office had its cash flow benefits, but having to leave to take quick showers and drinking gallons of coffee to stay awake became old very quickly, plus the schedule was putting a strain on her marriage. Luckily, her landlord had an adjacent property with a house next door, and Rebecca was able to eventually hire live-in caretakers to manage the evening routine.

### The Next Ten Years

There was a steady increase in demand as people experienced the difference Dog-ma could make in their dogs' and their lives. In the second month, Dog-Ma showed a slim profit, almost unheard of in a start-up. "The name Dog-Ma came to me in a dream, actually, perhaps because, like my sisters, I was so dog-oriented...and none of us had any two-legged children." The business model seemed to resonate and people quickly came to see Rebecca as a trusted resource.

As the labor market eased, Rebecca was able to hire additional staff to help take care of the dogs during the day and continued to refine her business model and services. Rules about what dogs had to do or avoid in order to safely stay and play paid off. Owners could feel their dogs were with "family" given how well the staff knew them and how carefully the "pack" was supervised at all times.

Unsurprisingly, Dog-Ma's most regular customers are frequently single professionals or "DINKS" with very demanding schedules. The day I visited, I saw a parade of extremely well-dressed people picking up their dogs at the end of a long and busy workday. There was lots of happy barking, and dirty paws on clothes were ignored with customary good humor.

I asked Rebecca to share some of the lessons learned both as an entrepreneur and someone who had made a major transition out of the corporate world. She reported:

You have to be obsessed. It is hard to start a new company and you had better love it and believe in it.

You will need appropriate start-up capital, whether it's yours or an investor's, which could mean sharing control. I was lucky enough to make all of my own decisions as a single owner.

Be prepared and enjoy talking about your business all the time. In my case, this was easy, since I am endlessly fascinated by and constantly talk about dogs (much to the annoyance of my friends!). Luckily, our customers can see that we share a passion for their pooch.

Be prepared and flexible enough to make changes that might be required, even if they differ from your original plan.

Do what it takes to be in it for the long haul.

*If you are interested in thinking through a transition of your own, you can contact Peter Sherer at Peter@expmatters.com, by calling 202-210-5587 or by visiting his website at [www.expmatters.com](http://www.expmatters.com). ★*

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