

# The Record

FRIEND OF THE PEOPLE IT SERVES

www.northjersey.com

The Record SECTION B

HIGHEST MONEY MARKET YIELD 6 THE WEEK AHEAD 7

## Business

Sun. 05.24.09



**YODER & SON:**  
Your turn:  
Readers  
sound off  
on recent  
columns.

3



**SMALL BUSINESS:**  
Chris Rago  
found his  
niche in  
dogs — and  
their  
wastes.

7

### His latest shot at success is picking up

Company started with dog waste, never looked back

By CAROL FLETCHER  
STAFF WRITER

Entrepreneur Chris Rago started a pet-waste removal business two years ago to give an unemployed friend a job.

Twelve weeks later, his friend thanked him by quitting. Rago, 28 at the time, found himself without a partner to run Doggy Deuce Removal Service LLC in Oradell to clean homeowners' yards of dog waste.

Rago refused to close after already investing \$25,000 to start the venture — money he earned bartending, cooking and catering meals, and from other small businesses he had opened and closed.

"We had to be successful," said Rago, "and that's how I still feel today."

Despite struggling to build a customer base the first year, Doggy Deuce's success surpasses Rago's past endeavors. By April revenue was up from the same time last year and the business has grown to 150 accounts, Rago said. It has expanded to include other services such as pet-stain removal and dog walking, and Rago is considering opening a boarding kennel.

Working outdoors and interacting with dogs has liberated Rago from being tied to a computer.

"It has definitely uplifted my life," said Rago. "Every day is fun, even when it rains and snows."

Rago said he knew Doggy Deuce would flourish after reading success stories on pet-waste removal businesses in Tennessee and Florida. He checked around Bergen County and found none.

"I thought it made sense," he said, "because there's always going to be dog waste on the ground with dogs."

The first year Rago spent developing a method to clean up yards by breaking them into grids and figuring out needed supplies, such as pooper scoopers, bags and gloves. He advertised in local newspapers and magazines and on Craigslist, the Internet site that lets consumers post classified ads for free.

His customers are homeowners with yards who let their dogs out to eliminate and his Bergen County base extends now to include Rockland County, N.Y.

A first-time cleaning takes about an hour and costs \$50, but varies with the number of dogs and yard size. His most extensive cleanup took four hours because the homeowner hadn't picked up after her two dogs for two years.



AMY NEWMAN/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Chris Rago, left, owner and founder of Doggy Deuce Removal Services, and Julian Link, director of operations, have added dog walking and exercising, pet-sitting and pet medications in a separate unit called Pet's Best Friend N.J.

"There was no grass, just waste," said Rago. "She can now enjoy her back yard."

He said 97 percent of his customers use his service at least once a week. Once he noticed customers' lawns with burn spots from urine and stains where dogs eliminated on decks, concrete sidewalks and patios, Rago began offering cleaning, disinfecting and lawn treatment.

When Rago started Doggy Deuce he had little experience handling dogs. But he and his staff now train with animal behaviorist Janice Wolfe in Wyckoff, a relationship that enabled him to add dog

exercising and pet-sitting. Those services have generated \$15,000 to \$20,000, said Rago.

They implement Wolfe's methods to have stable, healthy and under-control dogs through exercise and by teaching dogs to recognize his staff as leaders. The employees then pass these techniques to families with troublesome dogs.

"Bringing harmony into the pack is what it's all about," said Juliana Link, director of operations, "so a dog is not creating his own rules."

Another key relationship Rago formed was hiring a veterinary technician part time in November to add pet health serv-

ices such as tick removal, ear cleaning, nail trimming and application of flea and tick medication and eventually grooming. Those haven't brought in much revenue yet because they're new, said Rago.

Waste removal accounts for 60 percent of the business, said Rago. He has decided to separate the waste removal and cleaning services from the pet maintenance services and offer those through a new division, Pet's Best Friend N.J.

Rago is starting to gain customers by word of mouth after spending \$80,000 advertising in newspapers, magazines, on supermarket shopping carts and in diners. His new approach, which he attrib-

utes to hiring a public relations firm, will be participating in community events, partnering with pet stores and doing a direct mailing to homeowners in Alpine where he has no customers.

Rago also is looking to expand geographically and has his eyes on a building in Fort Lee to use as an overnight boarding facility to establish a presence in that town. From there, he wants to make the jump into Manhattan.

"Being an entrepreneur, I'm always looking for what the void is," he said, "and basically I found the void."

#### Doggy Deuce Removal Service LLC, Oradell

- **Founded:** 2007
- **Owner:** Chris Rago
- **Employees:** five
- **Revenue:** about \$115,000
- **Web site:** doggydeuce.com
- **Advice:** Rago says when it comes to advertising, "be more hands-on and reachable" to your target audience. Looking back to his first year, he said he wished he had joined local business groups, found his target audience by buying the town's list of licensed dogs, and partnered with pet-related businesses such as pet stores. He recommends hiring a public relations firm for strategies to publicize the business in ways other than paid advertising, such as joining or hosting community events on your own or with related businesses.

E-mail: fletcher@northjersey.com