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NEWS & EVENTS

Student Startup to Provide In-Home Pet Care

Wendy Evans and Kaitlin McDaniel took a business concept to the 2017 Student American Veterinary Medical Association (SAVMA) Symposium and came home with a second-place finish and \$5,000 in seed money.

Evans and McDaniel, third- and second-year students, respectively, at MU's College of Veterinary Medicine, presented their concept for a business venture they call House Collars Concierge Vet Techs during the Idea Competition at the symposium, hosted by Texas A&M University.

House Collars plans to offer skilled, professional home care for companion animals. The concept and business model for House Collars revolves around a medical bag, the historic symbol of a medical professional who becomes part of a community by going into its neighborhoods to provide care.

"The idea of the medical bag is why our name is House Collars," McDaniel says. "It's kind of an homage back to the origins of veterinary medicine when everything was a house call."

The business will serve as an adjunct to the veterinary practices that oversee the care of client pets.

"If a veterinarian diagnoses an animal with diabetes, for example, the pet owner would pick up the syringes and insulin, and then our technicians would administer it," Evans explained.



Wendy Evans (left) and Kaitlin McDaniel, from MU's College of Veterinary Medicine, present their plan for House Collars Concierge Vet Techs during the Idea Competition at SAVMA Symposium 2017.

The two partners are working on their doctors of veterinary medicine, but have always been interested in the business world.

"I just woke up one day and said, 'I'm going to go to vet school,' but I've always had an inclination for business," says McDaniel, a native of Marshall, Missouri. "I worked at a pharmaceutical research company, which allowed me to combine project management skills with learning about medicine. That prepared me to try veterinary medicine. Once I got here, Wendy and I both quickly became involved in the Veterinary Business Management Association (VBMA). We each served a year as president of the business club here."

"Kate is also the current national vice president of the VBMA," added Evans, who hails from Springfield, Missouri.

"We worked on this almost a full year," Evans said. "We first heard about the Idea Competition before last year's SAVMA symposium. We started brainstorming ideas then, submitted our idea in June 2016, and continued to work on it up until this year's SAVMA in March."

"When the Idea Competition presented itself, we talked to a lot of clinicians here at school, asking, 'What are some gaps that you see in veterinary medicine? What are some problems or obstacles that maybe we can help ameliorate when we enter this competition?'" McDaniel explained. "We had a lot of different perspectives."

A visit to Evans' parents in Springfield provided a moment of clarity.

"Her dad said, 'So, it's like an ambulance for dogs,'" McDaniel recalled. "Then, he said, 'That's too complicated. Why not just do nail trims?' I thought that made sense. We listed tasks that the everyday pet owner can find arduous or cumbersome: nail trims, anal gland expressions, eye and ear cleaning, and things of that nature. Those responsibilities are more on the wellness side. Then, we worked up to things like after-care for more clinical or post-operative services. When a dog may be going through a traumatic accident or a major surgery, they need a lot of follow-up care; we can provide that kind of in-home service."

"Even pets that are on metronomic chemotherapy," Evans adds. "Say, their parents are going away for the weekend and they can't find somebody who is comfortable handling chemotherapy drugs. There are many applications."

"People who invest a large amount of time and money and effort into their pet's health, whether that's through surgery or other treatment, we want to help them secure that investment they are making in their pet's health," McDaniel said. "We want to provide the follow-up care that's required to make sure it's a seamless procedure."

After outlining the types of services suited to in-home care, the partners turned their attention to identifying their potential customers.

"We started thinking about the different kinds of demographics or customer archetypes that would have struggles keeping up with their pets' health maintenance," Evans stated.

"Our core value became, 'We see the problems that pet owners face,'" McDaniel recalled. "This was from our customer validation survey."

"We had 250 responses, and Kate read every one of them," according to Evans. "We had a ranking system where they could rate their problems: appointments take time away from my schedule or veterinary instructions are not easily followed. In a busy practice, it can seem like the clinicians are saying, 'Here's your dog, here's your feeding tube, here's four pages of instructions, good luck and goodbye.' The customer may be nodding their head in the exam room, but when they get home they don't feel sure."

Home care offers obvious advantages to pet owners: they can avoid traffic, time away from work, crowded waiting rooms, and feeling like a number. Instead, they can enjoy safe and simple access to care and personalized service in the comfort and privacy of their home.

Home-care practitioners benefit too, from low overhead and freedom from the confines of an office. The House Collars entrepreneurs also see benefits — not competition — for veterinarians, citing workflow efficiency, team advocacy, a higher level of compliance and fewer chances of harmful complications.

They say veterinarians could see additional pet referrals, because House Collars will encourage

pet owners to visit a clinic, and to keep their follow-up appointments via a reminder service. Regular visits can allow veterinarians to detect diseases earlier, leading to healthier pets and a healthy pet practice with more time for other clinical services.

The entrepreneurs behind House Collars will themselves become veterinarians, but will concentrate on managing the business while registered veterinary technicians make the house calls. The business positions itself as "concierge vet techs," and the partners say the techs are another group who stands to benefit from their business.

"So many technicians don't get to work a full 40 hours and receive benefits in their clinics, so they want to have a second income," McDaniel says. "This is a way to pick up some extra cash. Any technician can sign up to be a House Collar tech, knowing that we'll handle the reservations, the scheduling and making sure the liability is covered, so all they have to do is show up at the house and provide the extra care."

"The technicians function somewhat like Uber drivers," Evans adds. "We provide a medical bag and they get paid when they take appointments."

In addition to their academic gifts and business acumen, it would seem the women possess a talent for time management.

"Coming up with the idea we wanted to submit for the competition, as well as all of the customer discovery and idea validation, that was all us," McDaniel says. "We spent months wondering, 'Is this even a viable service, would people want to buy it?' We did a lot of interviews and surveys. We talked to a lot of people. At first, we struggled a little bit to put all this together. It was a challenge to come up with a solution that satisfied all parties and covered all the necessary bases."

"To be fair, we had a lot of help," Evans admits. "Obviously, nobody can do it but you, but we've gotten help from our national mentors, and we've enlisted a couple of classes at the Trulaske College of Business. One is building us a business plan and the other one is building us a market penetration strategy. We have been in touch with the School of Journalism and they're going to make us an ad campaign in the fall. We've been using our on-campus resources."

[Return to News and Events home](#)

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