

Scott Palatnik and his  
canine dog Hunter.

# FETCHING MORE BUSINESS

A routine bed bug service call turned into a Sunday New York Times article featuring Scott Palatnik and his canine partner, Hunter, which created more business buzz

By Anne Nagro

**P**est management professionals know that not every bed bug inspection means that bed bugs are present. But an inspection can still yield something interesting—and potentially more lucrative.

Such was the case for Scott Palatnik, owner of Long Island Bed Bug Inspections, who was called to the Park Slope neighborhood of northwestern Brooklyn, N.Y., a year or so ago. When Palatnik told the customer that her home had

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no bed bugs, they continued chatting until the customer said, "I would love to do a story on you — I happen to be a writer for The New York Times."

Progress was not immediate, but a year later the phone rang. The Times wanted to schedule the interview. Palatnik recounted his and his company's story and the story of his dog, the aptly named Hunter, to Shaina Feinberg during the course of a three-hour interview. Illustrator Julia Rothman "turned me and Hunter into a cartoon," Palatnik recalled.

Three weeks later, the team appeared on page three of The New York Times' Sunday business section under the title "The Bedbug Hunter," a likely nod to his canine partner as well as his profession. The article was peppered with illustrations and lively details outlining Palatnik's bed bug inspection background, knowledge and experiences.

“They love him — people see him and fall in love,” said Scott Palatnik of his bed bug-detecting dog Hunter. Palatnik said Hunter could sign autographs all day long (if he had that ability).

**A BUSINESS BOOST.** The article has fueled some business, Palatnik said. Customers say that they saw him in The Times and want to work with him. His able and affable partner Hunter receives a similar reception.

“They love him — people see him and fall in love,” said Palatnik who added that Hunter could likely sign autographs all day — that is, if he could write. What Hunter can do is sniff out bed bugs, or provide customers with the assurance that they don't have them.

Palatnik noted that search conditions can impact a dog's ability to find the bugs, with a success rate of 75 to 95 percent, depending on conditions like airflow (including the use of an air-conditioner or

fan), the number of bugs, customer clutter, trapped versus released odors and more.

“Dogs are not *the* solution, they are part of the solution,” said Palatnik, who complements Hunter's efforts with a visual search. Between the two, he estimates his company's accuracy to be 95 to 97 percent, fueled by 12 years of experience working with both bed bugs and canines.

**HOW HE GOT HERE.** Palatnik's bed bug inspection experience evolved — as experience often does — in a rather unusual way. Palatnik, an outgoing, approachable New Yorker, described himself as a ski bum and self-taught professional chef who roamed and rambled before returning to



Continuing practice, work and learning have helped Hunter succeed as a bed bug detection canine.

New York in 2001 to work as a private chef in the Hamptons. After 9/11, he volunteered for several months with Michael Lomona-co, chef and director of Windows on the World, the restaurant atop the North Tower of the World Trade Center that lost both staff members and guests when the Twin Towers fell. Their rescue kitchen fed fire fighters and led Palatnik to a job in the East Village. But fast forward nearly a decade to the housing market crash and the successful chef found himself out of work. During this time, Palatnik got a call from his landlord, who told him his building had bed bugs.

Palatnik admits he “knew nothing about bed bugs at the time” except that they were hard to eliminate. He learned that some

companies used dogs to find the pests and, fascinated, decide to launch his own business. And so, he was off to the races or — more precisely — to North Carolina where he met Vila, a three-year old female German shepherd who was available to him through a company that trained her in bed bug detection work. The Czech-born dog, formerly used in police work, was bred for drive.

“I thought I was getting a yellow lab,” Palatnik said, noting that several guys before him did just that. But the lab earmarked for him was sick at the time, so they offered an option, “and with that they wheeled out this German shepherd, gorgeous.”

Hesitant, Palatnik was concerned that a police-trained German shepherd might in-



timidate customers, even if she knew how to find bed bugs as well. Then someone tapped him on the shoulder and said he had just gotten the best possible dog. That's how Palatnik met Joe Nicholas (a.k.a. Joe Nick), a master dog trainer who had worked with the New Jersey Department of Corrections for more than 25 years, using dogs to help find fugitives and missing people. Palatnik attests that Nicholas not only fell in love with Vila, but also became acquainted with bed bugs and bed bug detection work that weekend. The two struck up a rapport that has helped Palatnik learn, grow and become comfortable in his field.

"He has been a godsend," Palatnik said, noting that Nicholas' background in canine scent detection is "fairly unsurpassed in the United States," evidenced by his role as an expert witness in court who can separate scent detection myths from facts.

He "taught me everything I know," said Palatnik. Some of that occurred in the subsequent 14 days of training where Palatnik, Nicholas and others worked with the dogs eight hours a day, learning the art and science of canine scent detection and getting to know their new partners by discussing what might be going on in the dogs' heads and bodies and what was in their own thoughts and heads. Tests ensured the trainees and their companions were ready to get down to business.

**A LEARNING CURVE.** Palatnik noted that he "felt ready to roll right off the bat, but I also understood right off the bat that I had a lot to learn." He knew the relevance of ongoing education, sound relationships with those in the field and, of course, practice. He also said that online media, educational courses, lectures and summits on bed bugs have supplemented and expanded his initial training.

While admitting, "It's not rocket science, it's just a bug," Palatnik also knows there is more to his business than buying a dog — continuing practice, work and learning can yield success in his field. Still, time also brings changes and adaptations. Three years ago he lost Vila and met Hunter.

"He was one-year old when I got him," Palatnik said, noting that he found Hunter through Nicholas. "He had been flagged for his drive with a strong predator-prey instinct." From this instinct "it becomes a matter of maintaining the training and practicing," Palatnik said, noting that activity plus reward can improve overall performance.

Hunter works off leash, but is easy to control in New York's small apartments. Palatnik shares the process with customers before he brings his partner in. After introducing himself, he explains that he's about to bring in "a 70-pound yellow lab ... who would like to do nothing more than lick your face."

Some opt to stay and watch, standing still so Hunter can go about his business. Then, Hunter enters.

"He goes charging into the room and starts sniffing everything," Palatnik said. He finds that, as humans discern a room with their eyes, so do dogs based on a room's scent. Just a couple of molecules of scent can emanate an odor. The dog passes through, seeking

that scent – and the reward that comes with it.

**WORK AND FUN.** Palatnik, who posts a video of the process on his website, enjoys his work, describing it a bit like a game. “The dog is the player, I am the game maker and finding the bed bugs is the game.”

When the pest is found, the dog sits and awaits his reward. Still, as in any interaction, the handler and the dog must know each other. “A big part of this is about the bond, the relationship,” said Palatnik, who knows how to read Hunter, and can distinguish his excitement in finding a ball from that of finding prey.

Though small apartments are often their worksite, Palatnik and Hunter have also seen multi-million-dollar penthouses, offices, hospitals, retail or department stores, hotels and more. He also subcontracts for pest control companies who

don’t own, but want to use, dogs in certain situations. “People have confidence in the dog, they know about the dogs,” Palatnik said, noting that TV ads feature bed bug detection dogs. As subcontractors, he and Hunter find the bugs, which the contractor treats.

Days often begin with paperwork, answering phone calls and confirming appointments. Then, it’s off to those appointments until the day ends with more phone calls, reports and paperwork.

“Every inspection I do, I try to educate them,” Palatnik said of his customers. If Hunter alerts, Palatnik combs the area with a flashlight and magnifying glass, then tells the customer how they can do the same in the future, and maybe save a call. Many customers prefer the reassurance of a professional — or, in the case of Palatnik and Hunter, two professionals.

The two share living space and Hunter

lives much like any other pet. “I try to keep it that way,” Palatnik said, describing himself as Hunter’s buddy. The two practice, which keeps Hunter excited, interested and on his game.

The former professional chef, who still enjoys cooking, feels fortunate to have found another profession that he loves.

“I like being in charge of my own destiny, being my own boss,” he said. He also likes helping customers and restoring their peace of mind, noting that customers are often smiling as he and Hunter leave them. And that is the reward for Palatnik, who appreciates return business. He also appreciated a unique birthday gift from his siblings this year — the original art panels from his and Hunter’s feature in The Sunday Times. **PCT**

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