

Transcript:

Interviewer: OK, so my first question is: how did you come up with your café concept?

Owner: My husband and I were actually living in the Czech Republic, and we were traveling a lot. We noticed there were many cat cafés in that part of Europe. So we decided we wanted to try opening one in St. John's. Through our research, we realized that in Europe most cafés have resident cats, but in North America the trend is to partner with a rescue—like what we're doing—and help find homes for cats. So that's what we set out to do.

Interviewer: That's amazing. Very interesting—I didn't know Europe did that. What type of business model do you run?

Owner: What do you mean? Like non-profit, LLC?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Owner: Oh—it's incorporated, so it's for profit.

Interviewer: OK. How did you get the funds to start up?

Owner: Our initial funds came through Futurpreneur, and the rest was our own.

Interviewer: Nice. What licenses, health regulations, or zoning laws did you have to navigate?

Owner: A whole lot of them. The “cat” aspect is actually one of the most difficult parts of starting a cat café, especially in a city that isn't familiar with the concept. You have to do a lot of research on how legislation is worded—municipally and provincially—and be prepared to jump through hoops.

For us, zoning was a big issue. The City of St. John's zoning rules explicitly state what can operate, whereas some cities state what cannot operate. Because of that, cat cafés fell into a gray zone—was it a lounge? A café? Something with animals? Some people in the city even tried to say it was a cattery, which is prohibited. But we're not breeding cats or taking in public surrenders, so we had to clarify all of that.

We looked at other places in Canada with similar legislation and contacted them to learn how they did it. We brought those points to the city here, and they allowed us to proceed.

Then there was the food safety side. In our province, live animals cannot be where food is served, stored, or sold. So we designed a long hallway between the café and the lounge, and our café section is licensed as takeout only. People buy the food there, and they can either

leave or bring it into the lounge—we are not serving food inside the lounge. That was how we made it work.

Interviewer: That's really smart. I don't think I've seen most other cat cafés do that. Very interesting.

Owner: In some provinces, it would've been fine if the lounge had a completely separate door. Our original layout had an open area connected to where food was sold, which wasn't allowed, even if cats never went there. Other provinces use wording like "same building," but ours specified "same premises," which gave us a bit of wiggle room. But other provinces, like Nova Scotia, are stricter—they can't have food sold in the same building as live animals.

Interviewer: Follow-up question: how do food inspector visits go?

Owner: Good. We have a good relationship with them. Once they were familiar with the idea and we explained how other cafés operate, they were great. They tell us what needs to be done and we follow it.

Interviewer: Wonderful. What life skills, knowledge, or certifications helped when setting this up?

Owner: I have an international business degree, so that helped with business skills. Other than that—you definitely need to like animals.

Interviewer: Moving on to financial and operational areas: how does your location affect revenue and other factors?

Owner: For cafés, location is probably the most important thing. There are two halves to a cat café: one is the cat/rescue side, and the other is the commercial viability. Both have to work.

You need to be in a city with a solid population. I wouldn't try this in a city with fewer than 200,000 in the metro area. We also adopted a seasonal model in recent years because costs have increased. With our winters being slow, it makes more sense to open during busier seasons. Tourism is also huge for us. Being downtown at street level is extremely important because passersby see the cats and get curious.

Interviewer: Two follow-up questions. First: how does being downtown affect the types of cats you take in? Second: since you have a seasonal model, what happens to the building when you're closed?

Owner: Sorry—can you repeat the first one?

Interviewer: Sure. How does being downtown affect the cats you choose? I imagine it's louder and more stressful.

Owner: Our shelter partner—Humane Services—handles choosing the cats, and they're excellent. They select cats that will do well in a noisier, busier environment and around lots of people. If we were a rescue ourselves, it would be harder because we wouldn't have the same flexibility. But the cats that come here usually enjoy the windows—there's lots of stimulation outside.

Interviewer: Great. And what do you do with the space when it's off-season?

Owner: Any cats left—usually one or two—go back to the shelter until adopted. The space itself stays unused when we're closed due to lease terms. But financially, winters are unpredictable, so it's better to plan around known summer expenses and income rather than unknown winter ones.

Interviewer: What are your biggest ongoing costs?

Owner: Labor is the biggest. Rent is second.

Interviewer: Which areas are most profitable or sustainable long-term?

Owner: Lounge entry fees. That's essential unless you have a very large retail space for cat merchandise. But for most cat cafés, the lounge fee is the main profit center.

Interviewer: How do you handle staffing and volunteers?

Owner: We have an amazing team. We're lucky—many of them have stayed for years. Volunteers apply when we put out calls during the open season.

Interviewer: What kinds of events or programs have worked well? And what has failed?

Owner: Events can be tricky. Sometimes something you expect to do well doesn't, and sometimes you're surprised. Social-type events—movie nights, knitting or crocheting groups—tend to do well because people enjoy meeting others.

Interviewer: How often do you try new events?

Owner: When we were open year-round, events were mostly a winter staple. Now that we're only open in summer, we don't have the capacity or space to run many events, and it doesn't make sense cost-wise.

Interviewer: Makes sense. How does where you get your cats affect your business model?

Owner: It's huge. I'm in groups with other cat café owners across Canada and the U.S. Many work with multiple rescues and run into challenges. We're very lucky—our partner provides

food, vet care, and takes cats back if they're uncomfortable here. They have an in-house vet, which helps a lot, especially when illnesses spread. Not all rescues have that capacity.

Interviewer: How do you ensure cat health and safety? Are you liable for medical checkups?

Owner: Our partner, Humane Services, handles all medical care and ensures cats are healthy, spayed/neutered, and suitable for the café. Cat colds still spread sometimes—just like in shelters—and we work with them when that happens. If emergencies occur, Humane Services handles them.

Interviewer: Do you have procedures or rules for customers?

Owner: Yes. We have a full set of rules: no picking up cats, don't disturb them when sleeping, sanitize hands before entering, etc. We have shelves and a litter-room area where cats can retreat if they're overstimulated.

Interviewer: How many cats are usually in the café?

Owner: Typically between six and eight. We may have more if we have kittens or if the shelter has many cats, and fewer if the shelter is low.

Interviewer: And how does adoption work?

Owner: It's done entirely through our shelter partner. People apply through them, and they handle vetting. The cats arrive on Mondays when we're closed and go to adopters on Sundays. That ensures we always have cats in the café and gives new arrivals time to settle.

Interviewer: Have you noticed traits that make certain cats a good fit?

Owner: Outgoing cats do very well—they enjoy the attention. Cats that get along with other cats also thrive.

Interviewer: What type of customers do you attract?

Owner: All kinds. Tourists, people traveling for work who miss their own cats, community groups like Big Brothers Big Sisters, and of course, lots of cat lovers.

Interviewer: Would you say they're mostly under 30?

Owner: Hard to say—probably under 40 on average, but fairly mixed.

Interviewer: Do you require reservations or allow walk-ins?

Owner: We allow walk-ins, but if it's busy, people may have to wait.

Interviewer: What feedback do you hear most often—other than “we love the cats”?

Owner: People often say the space is surprisingly relaxing.

Interviewer: If you could go back to the beginning, what would you do differently?

Owner: We've learned a lot—staffing needs, seasonal expectations, etc. But we opened before the pandemic and had to go through that, so it's hard to say what we'd change given how unusual those years were.

Interviewer: What advice would you give someone starting a cat café today?

Owner: Do your research and have realistic expectations. Cafés aren't extremely profitable—the margins are thin. If you're in a bigger place with lots of tourism, that's ideal. If not, you need to fill another commercial or community need as well.

Interviewer: That's my final question. Anything else you want to add?

Owner: No, that's it.

Interviewer: Thank you—I appreciate this.

Owner: No problem. What exactly are you doing with all this?

Interviewer: I'm compiling the data. I'm interviewing several places and creating individual case studies, then summarizing patterns—what works, what doesn't, what to watch for when starting up. Kind of like a checklist or guide, since every cat café is different but certain foundational things are helpful. Also—I'm just interested.

Owner: Understandable. Where are you located?

Interviewer: I'm currently traveling around Canada.