

MARCH 2008

INNOVATORS IDEAS INQUIRY ODDITIES

edited by Jesse Semko



ALL NATURAL: Tamara and Brent Hauberg with their dog Cobe

REMAKING A DOG'S BREAKFAST

A health food chain for pets proves an old idea can translate into profits – you are what you eat, and that goes for Fido, too



Most business owners wouldn't want the word "barf" associated with their products. But

when Brent and Tamara Hauberg opened Tail Blazers, a health food store for pets, they knew they would have to confront people's prejudices. They started by introducing their customers to the concept of BARF – biologically appropriate raw food (earlier versions were spelled out as "bones and raw food" or "born-again raw feeders") – popularized by Australian vet and author Ian Billinghurst. Eight years ago, the store was a radical concept: feed your pet human-grade food, pay double what you pay at the supermarket and stop feeding them >

OUT FRONT



LONG-LIVED TREND: The Haubergs' idea started with their white shepherd, Skylla

grains, additives and other nasty stuff that's bad for their health.

The idea came from a cliché in which Brent Hauberg, the former owner of four vitamin stores in Calgary, fervently believes: you are what you eat. That goes for dogs and cats, too. When the Haubergs decided to get a white German shepherd in 2000 and found research that showed the life expectancy for their furry friend

is lower today than it was in the 1960s, Brent figured if he could improve pets' health by offering them a better diet, he would have a fail-safe business. "My first pet was a parrot because they live for 60 to 80 years. I don't like death," he says. "I wanted my dog to live as long as possible."

Despite being ahead of the trend – back then, few people were buying free-range, antibi-

otic-free meat for themselves, let alone their pets – the married couple opened an 800-square-foot store in Calgary and stocked its shelves with the only healthy dried, canned and raw food on the market.

A tough year followed. Tamara wondered if they should close the store. But Brent had seen the tide change in the human health industry and believed that it was only a matter of time before that shift made its way into the animal world. “If people were aware of what’s in the food they’ve been choosing, and had other options, they wouldn’t choose it,” he says.

He was right. Today it’s easy to find products that meet the Haubergs’ criteria, which stick to the ingredients nature intended animals to eat. Their original store is now packed to the ceiling. They own two stores in Calgary and have established nine franchises throughout Alberta. Plus, they’re pursuing franchises in British Columbia and Saskatchewan. They expect sales this year to ex-

ceed \$5 million, a far cry from the \$100,000 they first eked out in 2000.

“It’s actually been the perfect business because the health of dogs and cats was in crisis,” Hauberg says. “There were a lot of customers that were so frustrated with the ill health of their animals that they were looking for other options.”

Still, many people thought the Haubergs were alarmist radicals when they started. It took a few success stories, spread by word of mouth, and consumer education by way of radio advertisements and a website that touted the benefits of healthy eating for pets to change old attitudes. New technologies made it possible to make kibble without using grain, which means more dried foods fit the natural foods principle. Recent events like the Menu Foods recall, which saw several animals die of kidney failure from tainted wheat gluten, suddenly made the Haubergs look prescient.

—Lindsey Norris