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TOP DOG in a **ROUGH** ECONOMY



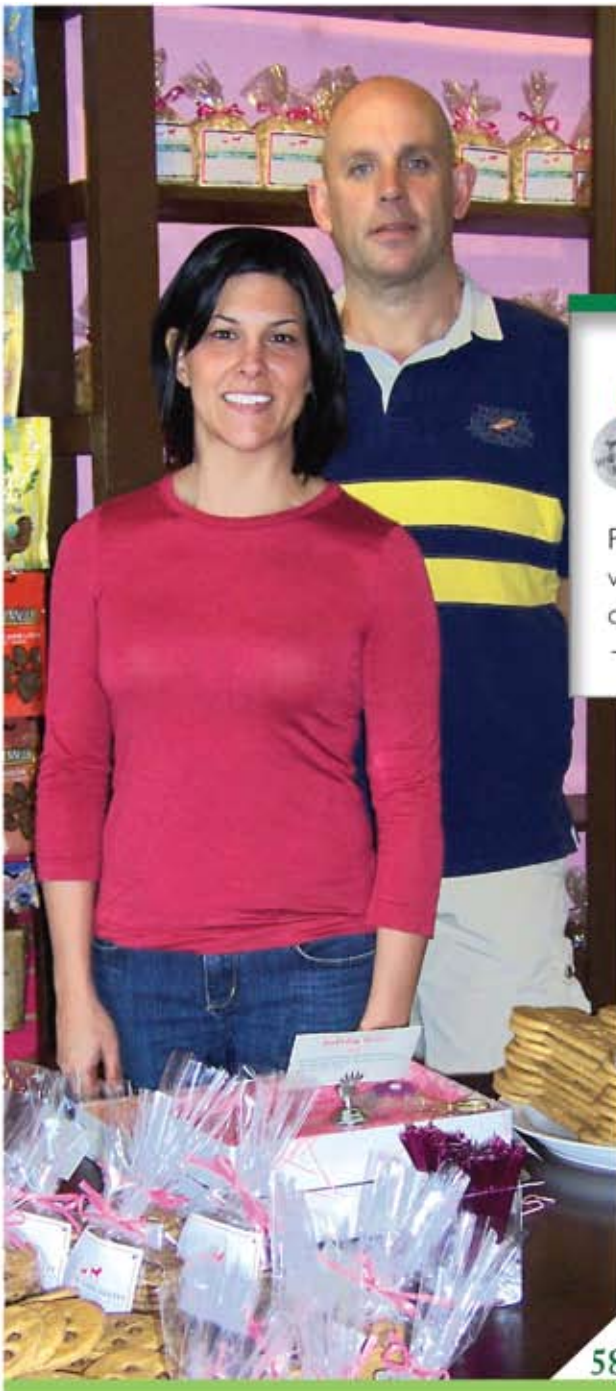
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Top Dog in Rough Economy: **HOW ONE COUPLE IS LIVING THE**

DREAM

BY ASHLEE JONES

Paul and Cara Allen successfully climbed the corporate ladder, building a dream life in Orlando, Fla. She was a marketing executive with Walt Disney World; he was at the top of his game, working for a major construction cleaning franchise as a partner and director of franchise development. What motivated them to walk away from it all and open a one-stop pet food shop?





PAUL AND CARA ALLEN

The corporate couple who
chucked it all for K9 bliss are
surrounded by the treats their
customers beg for — literally.



DOGGIE DELIGHTS
Vibrant colors, squeaky toys, and a variety of “Scooby snacks” set tails wagging and create a fun atmosphere for shopping.

Like many driven professionals who have climbed to the pinnacle of their careers, Paul and Cara Allen wondered about the next step.

After all, for the self-motivated who thrive on challenge, achieving your dream job only satisfies you for so long. Then, you need a new adventure to stimulate your business senses and satisfy your appetite for ambition.

So after months of research, the Allens decided to take the plunge into business ownership. Their goal: Build a high-end franchise opportunity catering to the growing pet industry.

Soon after making that decision, the couple began putting their plan in place. They would move south and build a Woof Gang Bakery in Jupiter, Fla., placing it strategically adjacent to the local Starbucks. As planning continued, Paul finally found a window during which he felt comfortable walking away from his partnership in the franchise, one that was dependent on the faltering residential housing market.

“When opening a business, timing is everything,” says Paul. And after he walked away from his career, he had enough time to focus all his efforts on the bakery.

In November 2007, the Allens opened their first storefront to both human and animal clientele. In an economy where so many small businesses were failing, Woof Gang Bakery prospered, and the Allens quickly opened their second location. Today they own two stores and have sold five franchises.

What’s their secret to success, even during a challenging economic climate?

Twelve years in marketing and publicity and 13 years in the franchise industry taught Cara and Paul that developing a successful business depends on four factors: an excellent location, precise timing, clever marketing, and stellar customer service.

Key ingredient: Location

The blueprint for the bakery and the location came together simultaneously. In 2007, a trend swept through several of

Central Florida’s retail stores and restaurants — they opened their doors to patrons *and* their pets. The Allens, who have pets of their own, witnessed consumers’ positive reactions to the growing popularity of this move. They also determined that pet-friendly businesses were scarce in the South Florida area, leaving them with little competition.

When retail space opened up right next to Starbucks, the Allens felt the stars aligning and jumped at the opportunity.

“Location is a huge component in the success of a small business,” says Paul. “Spending a few extra pennies on a monthly lease is worth much more than spending thousands of dollars on marketing. The foot traffic that passes our storefront each day because of its location is priceless.”

Now, each time the Allens explore a new franchise location, they examine their retail neighbors thoroughly. The shops must have the potential to draw customers. “If you’re in a plaza without a heavy customer base, you’re in big trouble,” Paul says.

And Starbucks was drawing a steady stream of customers who were carrying cups of coffee in one hand *but no doggie treats in the other*. So the Allens began construction on the store themselves, and within three weeks had their model ready to showcase as a franchise opportunity for other wannabe business owners.

Timing is everything

Last year, Americans spent about \$40.8 billion on pet care, including food, veterinary visits, medication, and grooming — up from \$38.5 billion in 2006, according to the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association.

More specifically, *organic* pet food sales are expected to reach \$54 million when final 2007 numbers are compiled, up from \$41 million in ’06 and \$30 million in ’05, according to Massachusetts-based Organic Trade Association, a national advocacy group. Certainly, these rising figures can be attributed in no small part to last year’s pet food scare, recall, and eventual devastation.

And according to industry experts, this trend is expected to continue indefinitely, as people persist in pampering — and protecting — their pets. “People may be eating in, but no corners are being cut for their dogs,” explains Cara.

The result: In 2008’s economic times of uncertainty, Woof Gang Bakery is sitting pretty, watching sales of its healthy gourmet pet treats soar.

The Allens couldn’t have come up with their business concept at a more ideal time. Now, they just needed to coordinate their store opening to capture enough of this spending surge as possible, as well as establish their reputation as the go-to store for healthy dog treats before any competition surfaced.

But because construction happened so quickly, the Allens found themselves with a completed retail shop — and nothing to sell. They immediately met with an expert who helped them choose products made from organic and natural ingredients, safe for human consumption, and with no animal byproducts.

“We knew nothing about what products to sell, so we took the advice of experts and friends. That alone put us on track,” Paul says.

By opening day, products such as Ark Naturals, Canidae, California Natural, Dogswell, and NaturVet filled the shelves. And the menu was full of what would eventually become the store’s main attractions: mouth-watering, natural gourmet treats with ingredients that promote wellness. The Allens and their two dogs happily assisted in the taste testing to ensure all treats were drool-inducing.

With the store fully stocked and ready to welcome customers, the Allens faced their biggest challenge yet — actually opening the doors.

A friend told me, “Don’t open the doors unless you are completely prepared, because people won’t give you a second chance,” says Paul.

Satisfied that they were as close to perfection as possible, the Allens opened Woof Gang Bakery immediately before the 2007 holiday season. The timely launch created a buzz in the community. And treats such as Snickerpoodles, Nutty Squirrels, Paw Lickin’ Chickens, and custom Woof Gang Bakery Bones became instant hits.

A marketing message that works

The Allens put a lot of thought into building the presence and brand of their store. And they didn’t wait for the glow of the grand opening to fade before they started, either.

“From day one customers walked out with a Woof Gang Bakery bag that stood out,” says Paul. “Our packaging is high-end, and we aimed for the best. We made sure that each first-time customer left with bags full of treats. When they got home, they could see for themselves that what we offer is much better than what they were giving their dogs.”

Plus, the unique concept caught the eye of local media, and media attention rarely hurts. Within one week of opening, Woof Gang Bakery was covered on the local NBC station. More recently, the *Sun-Sentinel* featured the Allens in a business

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story. “A secret — you need local news to help spread the word,” Cara says. “It gives you great exposure using no marketing dollars.”

When it comes to marketing your new business, you must be creative and tactful with your marketing money, adds Cara, who served as a publicist at Walt Disney World. “Be very focused, and find events that target the audience you want to walk into your store. You need to find economical solutions like local and grassroots strategies.”

For example, the Allens relied on local community events and charities, like Paws for a Cause and Dog Days of Summer, to help launch and build their brand.

Other marketing outlets recommended by the Allens:

Appear on city lists. Businesses in West Palm Beach, Fla., rely on customers to vote them onto the city’s annual “A List” — an honor Woof Gang Bakery achieved.

Become a sponsor. Nonprofit organizations, such as the Humane Society, are always looking for financial support. You could also peruse your newspaper for upcoming local events you could sponsor. Seek out opportunities that will draw your target audience.

Donate your products or services. Depending on the size of your community, you may have hundreds of opportunities to get your name out there. Donate door prizes, raffles items, and baskets to any group that would be interested in your specific brands. Schools and churches are always looking for items to add to auctions and fundraisers.

Become an exhibitor. For a low cost you can set up a booth at many local, county, and state conventions or fairs.

Franchise your business. If you are interested in creating a franchise opportunity, the International Franchise Association is a functional and credible organization to help you get the word out about your business.

Do unto your customers...

Creating a pleasurable experience for your customers is just as important as offering a quality product. And the Allens learned firsthand how *not* to treat customers while visiting boutique stores during their personal vacations. As a result of these experiences, which obviously left a lasting negative impression, Cara and Paul vowed to build a business that meets the needs

of the growing pet industry as well as delivers an incomparable shopping experience.

Even before their shop had walls, the Allens began considering the customer’s point of view, factoring ambience and atmosphere into their design plans. Customers are greeted by an eye-pleasing color palette of pink and chocolate, chandelier lighting, and a dining area fit for a round table of royal pets. “Bringing your family pet to Woof Gang Bakery is unique,” says Cara. “There is not any store or franchise like it in this area.”

And the efforts to surprise and delight customers don’t stop at the entryway.

“The key to our success is that we are kind and respectful to our customers,” says Cara. “When I open the door for them and welcome them in, I want their experience to be exceptional so they want to come back again and again.”

“We are kind and helpful, but most importantly, we listen,” she adds. “I think that many new businesses miss the mark when it comes to *hearing* what their clients need.”

The Allens have made listening a priority since day one. They ask all new customers to fill out customer information cards, which they do not discard. Instead, they use the information to send pet birthday cards and a monthly newsletter — all with the goal of creating a lasting relationship between Woof Gang Bakery and its customers.

Four-legged inspiration

Many business owners may wonder how the Allens handle competition from the big box stores, such as PetSmart and Pet Supermarket. After all, even giant players like Target are reacting to the economic potential in the pet industry, by expanding their pet selection and placing animals in their advertisements.

But savvy, small-business owners can take advantage of today’s economic climate to position themselves uniquely in their niche markets.

“Transitioning from a massive Disney budget to the Woof Gang budget was challenging,” says Cara. “But one thing the big companies can’t compete with is how we personally connect with our customers. This personal touch is a foundation for the success of our franchise.”

As she’s locking up the Jupiter store for the evening, Cara provides one last insight into her and Paul’s success. She’s rushing home to Ivory and Monty, who serve as Woof Gang Bakery CDOs or chief dog officers. “Our dogs are a part of our family,” she says. “Our passion for their quality of care definitely contributes to the bakery’s business concept. They have been a big inspiration.”

In other words, in the dog-eat-dog world of small business, it’s vital to remember who your *real* customers are. You might even want to keep a few of them on your payroll.

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woofgangbakery.com

For more information about the products and franchise opportunities available from Woof Gang Bakery, go online!