

B.C. animal owners prepared to spend big dollars on pampering family pets

Global economic uncertainty persists, but the premium pet industry continues to post major business gains

By Noa Glouberman

Blame it on Paris Hilton.

In 2004 the Hilton Hotels heiress put her pooch in her purse, walked a red carpet and sparked a craze experts have labelled the “premiumization and humanization” of pets – the tendency to treat our animals like people, caring for and coddling them as we would our own children, sparing no expense to ensure their happiness and longevity.

Local entrepreneurs are capitalizing on this trend, throwing their bones into Canada’s \$5.8-billion-a-year pet industry. Rather than provide run-of-the-mill products and services, they’re playing to animal lovers’ deepest emotions by putting a high-end spin (often with a strong health or luxury angle) on their offerings.

“People see pets as an extension of their family,” said Shaun White, owner of Open Range All Natural Pet Treats in New Westminster. “They want to feed them and keep them happy and healthy as best they can.”

No stranger to the industry, White started selling natural pet treats nearly two decades ago in an effort to give pet owners “something better than the standard, processed rawhide you see in stores.”

Though he sold the company 11 years later, he missed the business so much he decided to “get back into it” in 2009.

Today White distrib-

utes all-natural, free-range treats to pet stores across Canada and says he’s seen the industry change by leaps and bounds over the last 15 years.

“When you add up all the factors that make it a more positive experience for your pet, it’s certainly worth the money”

– Michelle Berg, franchisee, Aussie Pet Mobile

“All people seem to want to feed their pets now are natural products,” White said, adding that his revenue last year totalled well over \$1 million.



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“We’re much more health-conscious ourselves these days, and with so much information on the Internet about pet nutrition it’s easy to see why owners are looking for new options.”

Barrie Balshaw, owner of the Rex Dog Hotel + Spa in Vancouver, says he, too, has



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noticed a growing demand for products and services that reflect how much pet owners care for their four-legged companions.

“Dogs are part of the family now,” said Balshaw. “They used to be boarded in kennels when their owners went away, but now they’re

Above: Barrie Balshaw, owner, Rex Dog Hotel + Spa: “dogs are part of the family now”; left: Labradoodle Nanuq feels right at home in his custom “Canine Chalet”

in bed with mom and dad every night so they’re used to a different kind of atmosphere, which is what we aim to provide.”

Balshaw opened the Rex with wife Karen in late 2006 after years spent running two of Vancouver’s earliest doggy daycares.

The 10,000-square-foot luxury dog-boarding facility – a former meat-packing plant – recreates all the “creature comforts” of home,

with custom-made dog beds, gourmet treats, a full-service spa and even an outdoor waterpark.

“I think people would be willing to spend a little more for their pets,” agreed Lower Mainland carpenter Cole Harvey, who builds “Canine Chalets” through his Friendly Fence Co.

Harvey’s custom cedar doghouses, complete with windows, verandas and shingled roofs, can cost

upward of \$900.

“It starts with a love for their dog like a family member,” he said. “When the owners go off to work, they want to know their pet has a dry, comfortable place to spend the day.”

The desire to cause our animals as little stress and discomfort as possible is also what spurred Michelle Berg to recently give up a health-care career and become the Lower Mainland’s first Aussie Pet Mobile franchisee.

Berg and one assistant travel to pet owners’ homes in a customized, self-contained solar-operated Mercedes van, providing premium dog- and cat-grooming services right on site.

“I’ve always had a great love for animals and their well-being,” said Berg. “When I had the opportunity to not only take that step and run my own business but combine that with my passion for pets, it just made sense.”

By bringing her grooming services to the client (rather than vice versa), Berg provides a “low-stress environment for the animals that’s also really convenient for the owners.”

“The dogs and the cats don’t even have to leave their yards, so they’re much more relaxed than if they had to be taken to a groomer and left alone in a strange place,” she explained. “It does cost a bit more, but when you add up all the factors that make it a more positive experience for your pet, it’s certainly worth the money.” ■

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