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Upgrading an idea for a doggie treats business

Small business profile

By Cindy Kent, Sun Sentinel

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Who: Audree Berg and her husband, Gary Farnsworth.

What: Berg and Farnsworth are founders of Auggie's Doggies Inc., makers of organic handmade gourmet pet treats. Berg makes the doggie biscuits and pet treats, including birthday cakes for pets. They also sell brand name organic pet food products for cats, dogs, birds and other pets.

The business is a career change for the couple. They were in construction for the past two decades until the economy pushed them into a new line of work.

In the meantime, to spoil her own dogs and test the waters, Berg was making homemade treats for her pets in addition to selling the treats at street fairs and flea markets.

The couple began conserving their money and they paid off their cars. "I saw the writing on the wall," said Berg.

The back story: To step up her business idea to a business plan, Berg set out to find a mentor. She searched the Internet and stumbled upon Broward SCORE's Quick Start program, a four-session workshop full of assessment and process steps, says Berg.

"I remember the first class – we all thought we had the best idea ever," said Berg. "But you can't deal in vagueness. You have to have a clear vision."

Berg flourished because SCORE counselors "listen to our specific challenges," she said.

Berg had homework: developing a marketing plan; understanding cash flow. "Each assignment propelled me on to the next level," she said.

"When you're doing something all your life, the unpredictable is predictable," said Berg. "Now we're sharpening our saw every day."

Berg's start-up lessons

Ask: what does my business have to offer? That's the first question the Quick Start program participants are confronted with, says Berg. "It was very enlightening to have to quantify it," she said. She was able to pin it down. "People correlate loving their pets with providing them with good healthy nutrition," said Berg.

Consumers care about the product. When Berg emphasized her pet treats were healthy, nutritious and organic, sales increased she said. It set her product apart while adding a real purpose to why consumers should purchase her pet treats.

Manage cash flow, don't let it manage you. Berg and Farnsworth decided to grow the company on their own dime. "We didn't want to get outside financing and pay later. We didn't want to use other people's money, it's too risky," said Berg. They don't tie money up in inventory which also means they avoid overhead expenses for storage space. To keep marketing costs down, they join community groups and network for their business through events and charities.

Find a catalyst to grow. To expand upon and emphasize their commitment to healthy pet nutrition, they opened booths: at Yellow Green Farmers Market in Hollywood and Marando Farms in Fort Lauderdale. Both venues highlight organic products. The booths presented additional opportunities, to fill shelves with pet products from other like-minded manufacturers and in turn forge deeper relationships and increase their nutritional pet product knowledge.

The take away: You have to have a passion for what you're doing because that's what will motivate you.

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