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Does your dog eat BARF?

Small businesses in the Lower Mainland are capitalizing on pet owners' preferences to serve their animals biologically appropriate raw food

By Nelson Bennett

In 2007, thousands of dog and cat deaths were reported worldwide due to contamination that prompted a massive recall dog and cat food.

James Hartmann, owner of Langley-based irRAWsistible Pet Foods Inc., believes that episode, more than anything else, has helped to accelerate the raw-meat pet food business.

"It really took off with the 2007 pet food recall," he said.

Hartmann's is the most recent small business to pop up that is involved in a niche pet food market: biologically appropriate raw food (BARF) for dogs and cats.

A few months ago, Hartmann quit his job and launched his business, after taking a 12-week venture program at BC Institute of Technology. One of the things he learned while researching the BARF trend is the raw-meat pet food space is a very small one but one with good growth prospects.

"The pet food business in Canada alone is a \$2 billion business," Hartmann said.

In North America, the pet food business was worth \$18 billion in 2007, he said. Raw-meat diets represented less than 1% of those sales.

"It's a very small segment of a very large market," said Neal Cropper, owner of Growlies for Pets, a Victoria-based pet food store.

"The growth in the raw pet food segment is 23% [annually]," Hartmann said. "So it's growing faster than any other segment."

Many pet owners are willing to pay a premium for raw food, as the owners of companies like Red Dog Deli Raw Food Co. and 3P Naturals will attest.

Both have built thriving small enterprises that specialize in manufacturing raw-meat pet food for dogs and cats.

"We surpassed the \$1 million mark last year," said Red Dog Deli owner Inna Shekhtman. "We've seen, on average, 20% growth every year that we've been in business. I think it's a growing market."

Debbie Benson, who owns 3P Naturals, said her company's sales have grown by 7% to 15% each year since opening a plant in East Vancouver in 2003.

"We're doing 10 times more sales than when we started in 2003," she said.

A former software designer for MacDonald Dettwiler, Shekhtman started feeding raw meat to her own dog - Adhara, a gargantuan Irish wolfhound-Great Dane cross - about eight and a half years ago. She knew that large dogs don't live long, and wanted to make sure she did everything she could to keep her healthy.

"I started finding information about natural diets," she said. "I started feeding her raw [meat]. It was just one of those things that made total sense."

At first, she made her own raw dog food, with the help of Louise Bryce and Linda Edwards, who had been feeding their dogs raw meat for years.

Shekhtman wanted the meat she fed her dog to have no antibiotics or hormones, and the problems she had getting good, chemical-free raw meat presented itself as a business opportunity.

Teaming up with Bryce and Edwards, she founded Red Dog Deli in 2004. The company sells dog food under its Red Dog brand, and cat food under the Blue Kat brand. The company's North Vancouver plant now employs 11 people. Benson's plant in East Vancouver likewise employs 11 workers.

Red Dog and 3P Naturals both use human-grade, non-medicated meat trimmings, bones and organs (beef, chicken, turkey, lamb, bison, venison, etc.). In fact, the meat used in 3P Naturals comes from the same source as the butcher shop she and her husband run in North Vancouver: 3P Natural & Exotic Meats.

Benson said so many of her customers kept asking for things like turkey necks and meat

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bones for their dogs and cats that she eventually decided to open a pet food division, and the Basic Instincts brand was born.

The meat isn't just packaged as-is. Both Red Dog and 3P Naturals grind their meats and blend them with a variety of other ingredients. Red Dog Deli meats include some vegetable juice and fibre, for example.

The products are vacuum-packed and frozen. Red Dog's plant in North Vancouver processes 10,000 pounds of meat per week and sells it through 80 pet stores throughout B.C. and Alberta, like True Carnivores in Vancouver.

"I think it is a niche market that is growing," said True Carnovores owner Dakota Bawden-Tutte, who has been an advocate of the raw-meat diet for 17 years.

The BARF diet is not without its detractors. Some believe feeding raw meat to dogs and cats puts them at risk of salmonella and E.coli. Some also believe feeding raw meat to dogs can make them vicious.

Michael Goldberg, a veterinarian with the Vancouver Animal Wellness Hospital, said there are risks associated with raw meat, but added it is rare. Meat that is properly prepared and packaged reduces the risk of food poisoning. He believes the benefits of a raw-meat diet outweigh the risks.

The pets he sees in his clinic that are on raw-meat diets exhibit better muscling, improved digestion, better body weight and better quality coats, he said.

"My experience has been extremely few cases of having any problems whatsoever of bacterial disease," he said, adding he has fed his own dog raw meat for nine years. "You're getting real food. You're not getting any filler." •

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