

LOCAL INSIGHT

Retailer Not Panned In Entrepreneur Turns Animal Passion Into Profits

By Joanna Smiley
Special to the Hartford Business Journal
Today

Sue Okie used to sell livestock feed out of her Granby garage. Today, she's the owner of Horses & Hounds, a 12,000-square-foot store stocked with elephant chow, a free-dog wash station and at least 20,000 items.

Okie's niche lies in servicing "every need for every breed," her company tag line that popped into her head at 3 one morning. Her customers include the Ringling Bros., Barnum & Bailey circuses and even Pennsylvania Amish farmers who wandered into her store looking for hardware to build a barn while on a visit to the state. She says each year since 2006, sales at her store, located at 15 Mill Pond Drive in Granby, have been "over the million dollar mark."



Okie's path into business was unconventional.

She lacks a college degree. The 9-to-5 world makes her cringe, she found, after working several corporate jobs. It was one fateful day back in 2005 when she realized she'd always had a unique bond with animals since being raised in a rural farming community in Hawaii. She wondered if she could turn her passion into a profitable business. In short order, she says things "naturally" began to fall into place.

"A landscaper friend of mine was opening up a landscaping business and got me to take the (University of Hartford) nine-month entrepreneurship program," Okie said. "I said, 'Hey, why not.'"

"I got into it, bypassed all kinds of requirements they had, and that's when I started working on my five-year business plan," she said. "My first year in business, I blew through all of my savings. I consider that the joy of entrepreneurship."

Okie had enough money left to put down 25 percent of the \$1.5 million she needed to buy and stock her Granby store. She borrowed the rest.

The first 18 months, Okie operated on a big learning curve. It took her almost two years, she said, to get zoning to approve her store's sign. She learned quickly not

to listen to vendors all the time — she wound up stocking her shelves with far more inventory than she really needed.

Now, whenever she orders new products from vendors, which happens almost daily, she has a firm policy: if the items don't sell after three months, she returns them.

After spending about \$60,000 on TV ads her first year, Okie realized that word-of-mouth marketing was the “free” key to her business growth. That, and a 14-foot inflatable dog she put up to advertise her business. Since her store is tucked away in a remote shopping center, Okie said she had to think creatively about how to get noticed, considering the competition in the feed retail industry.



Sue Okie, owner of Horses & Hounds, sits atop a hand-painted horse outside her storefront. With her are employees Karen Puccio and Matthew McCarthy. The two canine employees are Paco and Emma.

There are approximately 50 feed dealers in Connecticut and about 2,000 in the nation, according to Tiffany Wyman, a representative of Nutrena, a producer of animal feed.

Industry Consolidation

Rick Zimmerman, executive director of the Albany-based Northeast Ag & Feed Alliance, has been monitoring the industry for decades. While there may be some small pockets of the state experiencing an increase in business activity to serve a growing farming or “pleasure animal” community, Zimmerman says it's not common.

“In general, there's a consolidation going on in the feed industry. There are fewer rather than more feed retailers,” Zimmerman said. “This poses challenges for current feed retailers. They have to get creative with their business models so that they can stay viable in their communities. That may mean their businesses are expanding their product lines and offering a wider range of items. It's a fact of life that although the numbers of farms are down, the sizes of farms have increased. Most feed used to be sold in bags; now, it's delivered in bulk trucks. This has changed the composition of retailers as well.”

Although Okie says Horses & Hounds experienced nearly a 15 percent drop in sales last year, she's still on track with her business plan's goal: to earn over a million dollars every year in the first four years and start turning a profit in 2011.

"None of us have a defined role," she said of her staff. "We do everything from sales to loading feed to cleaning bathrooms."

Okie and her employees are in constant motion. One day, her store manager may be picking up 400 chicks from the local post office. Next, a customer may walk in the store wanting web clings to prevent birds from crashing into windows.



Horses & Hounds in Granby sells a wide variety to owners of commercial and leisure livestock.

Okie designates a day for her manager to call on local farms and suggest different feeds. The result, she says, is those farmers come to her for purchases.

"The thing is we've never once turned away a customer," Okie said, as she rolled up the sleeves of her Horses & Hounds sweatshirt and got back to work.

Editors Note: Joanna Smiley, a freelance writer from Collinsville, will periodically serve as a guest columnist for the Hartford Business Journal.