

Pet Projects

From Carers to Careers – Going from Play to Pay

Sassy Treats and Mammoth Mutts Photos by Animax

In this issue we highlight three more interesting individuals who have set up pet related businesses. This two-part series came from talking with folk we met through the pet industry. We were intrigued by how their businesses came to fruition. Many came up with ideas by discovering 'holes' in the market for their particular product or service to become a viable niche. Some developed their ideas through lifestyle change; others just wanted a change from their normal 9-5 daily grind. All are unique and dynamic individuals yet there is one commonality amongst these 'entre-Pet-neurs' –they all share a great love of animals. Judging from our readers' feedback, we know that you also have enjoyed an insight into how small pet related companies have sprouted and grown through a concept or great idea.

Luciana from specialist pet food and treat company, Sassy Treats

If we were to sum up Luciana in one word it would be dynamo. She's a tireless worker who really believes in her pet food products. We've seen her marketing her treat and meals at various pet related days throughout Sydney and her energy is seemingly boundless. She's an evangelist for pet nutrition without being a preacher. So often we hear about 'special needs pets', those pets with itchy skin, are gluten intolerant, fussy eaters or have weighty issues from hitting the treat jar too much. All of these problem pets are catered for in the range of fresh, home delivered, pre-packaged meals.

Cats are not forgotten as Luciana has developed a range of meal options for busy folk and their felines. Cat treats are also catered for with cheesy delights like 'Lady Fingers' or 'Mishka Morsels' containing anchovies. Organic produce features heavily in the list of ingredients with no preservatives or colour added. Just honest to goodness, healthy produce that promotes healthy skin, bright eyes and shiny coats.

Tell us what 'Sassy Treats' is all about.

Sassy Treats is unique because we specialise in making diets for dogs, cats and horses that are made entirely from organic and human grade ingredients. The 'Main Courses' are freshly frozen to seal in the goodness and maximise the nutritious value of the ingredients. The philosophy behind it is simply, you are what you eat. All orders are delivered to our customers, to make the experience of feeding pets nutritious, easy, convenient and cost effective. Most of our clients are people who either already cook for their companion animal but don't seem to have the time anymore, yet would like their pet to have a greater variety. Or there are people who have tried just about everything to help their pet's allergy problems and are looking outside the pharmaceutically engineered dog food suppliers for a more holistic approach.

How did you get the idea to start Sassy Treats?

There were two factors in the development and growth of Sassy Treats. Firstly, I used to make food and biscuits for human consumption for various restaurants and cafes. One day when making the little biscuits for my customers, I watched my dog Smudge salivating at the smells coming out of the oven. I went to get her the dog treats that I bought from the supermarket but she rejected them. I was curious as to why she would pass up a treat and turned over the packet to check out the ingredients.

There in plain print were the reasons I imagine Smudge's finely tuned nose could detect the difference—the commercial treats I had in my hand had a variety of ingredients—some with very long and complex names and numbers. So this spurred me on to invent delicious, safe, healthy treats for Smudge and her playmate Jemma.

The second factor in Sassy Treats growth was when I researched that animals need more than just nutritious treats to be healthy. Smudge had been on Cortisone for at least four years to help alleviate the discomfort she felt from being diagnosed by the vet with atopy, contact and flea allergies. She had lost most of the hair on her back and legs from scratching herself raw. She smelt very 'doggie' spending most of her time asleep in a far corner under my bed. She was intolerant of children and other dogs and lacked energy. Smudge was not responding to all the immune boosting injections she was on—so I decided to change her diet in the hope that this would help her. I researched the market and there seemed to be no other option but to cook meals for her myself... and Sassy Treats Main Courses were born!

When did you actually start the business of Sassy Treats?

The idea was conceived in August 2001. I didn't actually sell anything until Christmas 2001. I spent a few months researching the market and possible competition yet found little out there. I then made batches and batches of all the flavours I had developed, and tested them on over 100 dogs from very small to very large. I asked the owners to grade the treats in 1-5 most liked to least favourite.

In December 2001, I approached a couple of pet stores and vets to sell my treats on consignment. Most shops and vets thought it was a very cute idea—but not a very necessary one. So for the Christmas season, they were happy to give it a go. I sold 45 packets in that short period. I had not even thought of Main Courses yet—that was yet to come.

I launched to the public in February 2002 at the Mardi Gras Fair Day. By September 2002, after extensive research on nutritional requirements for dogs, and nutritional values in food stuffs, I developed four different Main Courses. I was selling to friends and family after they saw the improvement in Smudge's coat and attitude.

I spent a great amount of time handing out brochures at Council awareness days and enlisted the help of some very kind friends to target people frequenting dog walking parks. I was encouraged by many people who'd tried the products then returned for more.



Luciana with Smudge

What have been the biggest challenges you've encountered setting up Sassy Treats and developing the business?

People's attitudes have been one of my biggest challenges. It's very hard to tell people what to feed their animals or how to teach their children! Most people really want to do the right thing by their pet though, and that's really encouraging.

When I started Sassy Treats, there weren't any other people making healthy dog treats—let alone fresh complete and balanced meals. Many people believe that animals only eat for calories and therefore do not need variety. It would be a sad day for our senses where our diet consists of only a 100g packet of cheese-flavoured, bite-size-pieces that we are told meet our daily mineral, vitamin, protein, fat and carbohydrate nutritional requirements. This would be incredibly boring and so it takes me back to you are what you eat...

As health experts keep telling humans to eat lots of fruit and vegetables, whole grains, lean meats and fish, omega 3 rich oils and add supplements depending on their age and health requirements, I'm endeavouring to get some of that advice to guardians feeding their pets.

Another challenge has been distribution. Not many usual outlets are equipped to stock Sassy Treats as the Main Courses are frozen. So coming up with delivery options for both direct home deliveries and retail service has been challenging to say the least! I am really encouraged though, that we're in our fourth year. Some shops are not only stocking the treats, but have made the investment of freezers too... and the investment is paying off!

What's the best thing about running your business?

I've been working for myself for about nine years now between restaurants and Sassy Treats. It takes an enormous amount of energy and dedication and discipline. I work on my business almost every day. One of the most time consuming but deliciously fun aspects of Sassy Treats is doing the delivery runs. I get to drive around in the sunshine, with my dogs in the car, four days a week. Every time I do a delivery, my dogs get to run around, sniff a new place and catch up on what's happening in the clients' neighbourhoods. I get to see my clients most of the time, and so when an obese (pet) client becomes part of the "Fat Dawg Slim" club, or one with terrible pancreatitis stops throwing up and has a glossy coat and shining eyes, it's very exciting and satisfying. Making a difference in an animal's quality of life is the greatest joy. The bi-product of Sassy Treats is that my clients' guardians who are less stressed about what to feed their beloved companions and happier about knowing their pets are eating a complete and balanced variety of meals—in a time poor environment, that can be a big plus!



Sassy Smudge

Is this business the only business you have or do you still have to supplement income with another gig?

I spent eight months of the first year of Sassy Treats working full time catering to sustain the business, pay the rent and eat! However, Sassy Treats really needed more attention to help keep it growing, so for the next year and a half I worked part time at night at a restaurant and worked all my days on Sassy Treats. Last year, I realised that I really needed to concentrate solely on Sassy Treats to push it to the next level. I had started to make Treats and Main Courses for cats too, and was looking to expand into horses. So I've been working on Sassy Treats solely since about July 2004. Every now and again, I still do a catering gig-this helps keep my horse in shoes and me in pocket money.

Where do you want your business to be in terms of growth over the next few years?

Sassy Treats is destined to become an Australia wide product and service. As the demand in the other states grows, so will the business. It will have to have more people in positions of ownership and responsibility to meet this demand. I envisage this will become one of the greatest challenges

I would love to expand internationally, but not at the cost of clients closer to home.

It would be great to see the cat and horse side of the business meet the level of the dog side in the next few years. Ideally to have Sassy Treats operation set up in every capital city so animals all around Australia could benefit.

Being rich from Sassy Treats has never been a top priority for me, (laughs) flexibility and financial stability are more appealing benefits from further growth. One of Sassy Treats huge points of difference is its ability to cater to clients needs with immediate flexibility-this will never be sacrificed-after all, it's about the pets...



Vicky and Ruby

Vicky from Mammoth Mutts – creator of a line of products, including comfy beds, for the larger dogs in our lives.

We always like getting calls from Vicky as she's got an infectious enthusiasm for her fledgling business, Mammoth Mutts. Sometimes you're introduced to an individual through unusual circumstances. It was at a launch of a pet photography exhibition, and I got talking to a woman, the normal chit-chat over canapés and wine. She asked what business I was in. I explained about Urban Animal, the philosophy of the mag, its free distribution-information I was sure I would bore her with. Instead she appeared very interested and told me about a friend of hers that specialised in making big, comfy beds for large dogs. The next day she made a stop into Mosman's pet store, Pawprints for Pets and People, picked up a copy and passed it onto her friend Vicky.

Within a few days, Vicky contacted us and wanted to advertise in the magazine as she approved of our editorial policies and content. That was heartening to hear and even more heartening has been the recent news that Channel Nine in Adelaide 'discovered' Mammoth Mutts through the magazine and is now featuring her unique products.

The name Mammoth Mutts is an unusual one so tell us what Mammoth Mutts is all about.

I supply cool accessories for medium to large dogs, mainly specialising in dog beds. The beds come in all kinds of colours and fabrics (from polar fleece fabric, combat motif colours to fake fur). These days there are many discerning customers who don't want a basic bed in the corner of their lounge room. I'm happy to match beds to a customers decor or at least find a suitable style to complement their existing style.

My beds measure approximately 12 to 15 cms in depth so the extra thickness fully supports the dogs and they can comfortably snuggle into them. I always ask customers what the breed of dog is as certain larger breeds need thicker beds. The comfort of my canine customer is very important to me. A quality bed also has to be practical for my human customers so the beds are fully washable and can be aired easily. Eradicating that doggy smell and practicality is important to me.

The beds also have a layer of fabric that deters fleas. Mammoth Mutts doesn't just cater for larger breeds, we can also cater for small dogs if requested. 10% of profits from sales go to a rescue organisation to help with their operating costs, including vet bills etc. My dog Ruby was a rescue and I feel it's important to contribute in some small way.

How did you get the idea to start Mammoth Mutts?

After I adopted Ruby (German Shepherd x Mastiff), I went looking for collars and beds for her and couldn't find anything. Only a massive headache and a mound of hessian!! The beds that I did find on the market were not big enough and were so thin they offered little in support or comfort. I went to a fabric shop got some quality fleecy fabric and made Ruby her first bed. The bed is big enough for her to fully stretch out on and supports her weight. I also wanted something that was fun and colourful-don't bigger dogs deserve cool stuff too?

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When did you actually start the business of Mammoth Mutts?

A number of people asked me to make up these beds for their larger dogs and I just thought why not make this into a business so I registered the name in August 2004. I then researched the potential of this business and did many searches on the Internet for similar products. I had already been from here to Bourke and back looking for a bed for my own dog so I knew there was a void in the market. There was so much research involved in finding a range of high quality items for larger dogs.

What have been the biggest challenges you've encountered setting up Mammoth Mutts?

A big challenge was to put together a range and style I wanted. What type of image I wanted for the product range, that sort of thing. I found there were a lot of 'utility' style, simple leather collars for large dogs, but not anything really funky. I then found a range of collars and am really happy with them. Also coming up with a design of bed that people would find easy to use was quite a challenge. Then there was the nightmare of packaging and shipping something so bulky and large-it's all a work in progress!

What's the best thing about running your own business?

It's great because I'm doing something I really love-creating, sewing and helping animals with a range of products and great bedding. I also love donating money to the animal adoption facility, as they need all the help they can get. I love the challenge and have met some wonderful people and have been encouraged with some great stories.



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Is this business the only business you have or do you still have to supplement income with another gig?

I work part time at Don Adan Coffee house in Mosman and I love it. I would love Mammoth Mutts to grow and develop into a bigger venture in the near future. However, I will always be at the coffee house—it's a very special place it's like family for me. I would miss it too much and the coffee is amazing. The coffee house has a lot of history and the people I work with are very rare and beautiful.

We have very talented musicians and artists and there is always something interesting happening there. I'm privileged to be part of something with such a history and story. The customers are great too and many have become my friends. I was truly blessed the day I walked in there.

Where do you want your business to be in terms of growth over the next few years?

Ideally, I would like Mammoth Mutts to grow at a steady pace. As to the limits? I don't want to restrict myself and I want to enjoy the journey. I want to supply great products without forgetting the real reason for starting my business—which is for Ruby and where she originally came from. I don't want to lose sight of the humanity or giving to the animal adoptions. It's important to keep grounded and remember the reasons why I started out doing this.

I also want to involve my family more, yet I have to say a huge thank you to my Mum for manning the phones. I like the idea of a family business that gives back and provides a choice for dog owners. Ideally I would like to create a business that stands for generations. I believe that I will expand my range of products but don't ever want to make any compromises on the quality of the finished products.



Susie from all Australian made Herb Doctor's Pet Care Products.

Herb Doctor's Pet Care Products are based in Victoria. Susie runs the company from her Herbal clinic in Nunawading and her home nestled on a couple of acres in beautiful Dandenong. Susie sees a variety of clients—both humans and animals. Most of her human clients seek her out for homeopathic, naturopathy and massage therapy. Her animal clients come to her for a range of problems, the most common being dermatitis and itchy skin complaints. Susie believes that many of the problems she sees from clients stem from modern day living, environmental pollutants and poor diet and nutrition. One of her most unusual, yet successful client cases involved a cow that benefited from homeopathic therapy and body balance work.

We came across Herb Doctor's products and tried them out. Last edition we featured the Shampoo and Rug Wash in Creature Comforts. The Rug Wash has really been put to the test when dealing with small puppy pee accidents around the office. The pet Perfume has also got a work out, quickly dispensing nasty odours. We were impressed with Susie's drive to create a quality product that is so affordable.

Tell us a little about Herb Doctor's Pet Care Products.

Herb Doctor's Pet Care products are made from Australian ingredients and organic herbs. The product range includes shampoo, coat conditioner, soaps, a dry shampoo, pet perfume and a rug wash. These are all made without harsh chemicals and no colour pigments added. So it's gentle to the animal and of course, the person doing the washing or grooming. My biggest seller is the shampoo followed by the conditioner and the perfume.

How did you get the idea to start a business selling this kind of pet care product?

Many people and pets have bad reactions to products that contain chemicals and I've always believed in trying natural remedies for allergies or other ailments. I love my pets and only want the best for them in



"A dog is the only thing on earth that loves you more than you love yourself."
- Josh Billings

their nutrition and care. Back when I had two English Mastiffs, I tried to find a natural and chemical free pet shampoo to use on them and was frustrated that there was nothing on the market.

That was back in 1989 and pet stores and supermarkets only stocked the big brand pet care products. I looked at the ingredients and was alarmed that there were so many ingredients with long, un-pronounceable names. Then there was the smell of some of these products—just really over perfumed and un-natural smelling. If anyone wonders why a freshly washed dog rolls in something nasty the moment they can, I can tell you, it's probably because they want to rid themselves of that strong smelling shampoo.

There are a few 'pet perfume' products on the market, all with clever names and stylish marketing. Like many of the human, designer brand perfumes, these are full of chemicals and can really affect people who are sensitive to artificial smells. There are some people who really hate that doggy smell and try to cover it up with these products. However, dogs' noses are incredibly sensitive and to cover their odour with an un-natural and strong smelling product can lead to problems. Many dogs have very sensitive skin and I see many of these complaints through my practice.

When did you start the business?

The concept came back in the early nineties. I worked on the basic ingredients and packaging. I was also studying during the mid nineties, completing diplomas in both Naturopathy and Medical Herbalism. I have a real interest and belief in natural remedies for both people and animals. My garden is full of vegies and herbs with happy chickens delivering fresh eggs and bees that produce honey.

The business was really put into full gear in 1995. Call me crazy, but I never researched the market as to whether they would be successful or whether there was a market for them. I just believed in the concept and that there was real value in providing people with a quality, chemical-free and natural product.

What are some of the challenges you've encountered in setting up and running Herb Doctor's Pet Care?

With any small business, there will be obstacles and glitches that occur from time to time. I've always tried to stay positive through these times and remain focussed on the business and my customers. Customer satisfaction is paramount in what I do and the feedback I receive always spurs me on.

Most of my products are priced to be around \$10.00 (for the Shampoo) and it annoys me that some retail outlets want to mark the prices up for greater profit. I've returned to the outlet and been disappointed to see the Shampoo retailing for, say \$25 to \$30. It's not fair to customers and it's not in the spirit of what I started or fitting with my belief in a quality product for a realistic price. I've been known to pull the products from retailers that are charging too much. You might think this is like shooting yourself in the foot but I don't want my customers to be paying inflated prices.

What's the best thing about running your business?

The feedback I get from customers is always a big buzz. My main market is here in Australia but I also have customers from overseas and hearing how happy they are with the products is a bonus. Of course, it's great to hear that people are getting results and loved pets are getting the results as well.

Is this your only business or do you have to supplement income with another gig?

I have a herbal centre where I treat animals and people with herbal medicine and massage. Having two businesses that complement each other is really important to me. I love waking up every day and attend both businesses.

Where do you want your business to be in terms of growth over the next few years?

My dream is to get more retailers on board, stocking the products. There are many pet shampoos and conditioners on the market and so there's plenty of competition. But I would like to think that there are pet people out there who want alternatives to the mass-produced and marketed products so readily available. National distribution throughout Australia would be fantastic.

At the moment I travel around two to three thousand kilometres delivering the products to retailers. This means that I can't consider having a dog or two. My two beautiful English Mastiffs inspired me to create these products. They've both since passed on and I really miss dog company and companionship. Travelling so much, and being away from home, just wouldn't be fair on a dog. So another dream is that one-day I can hand over the distribution someone else. For the time being I just have to plug away at the business and be content with my bees, to sheep and precious cat, Kimba.



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