

Cleaning Up at the Dog Wash

Pet Food Express wins customers with innovation, hot new products

Peter Sinton, Chronicle Senior Writer

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Sadie dried off as Larry Edwards checked Hilda Rebello's dog, Toby. Chronicle photo by Susanna Frohman

Hairdresser Irene Fixico likes the semiautomated dog wash at Pet Food Express in Oakland so much that she brings her mutt Sid Vicious in for a weekly shampoo. Vicious doesn't mind, especially since he also gets to pick his own pig's snout or other snack from open bins in the dog deli section.

Neila Hallenbeck and Jim Stephens are big fans, too. A few days ago, they drove their yellow Labrador Timber from San Leandro to Castro Valley and then Oakland in search of a Pet Food Express with a dog wash.

Eleven of the 15 Bay Area Pet Food Express stores offer token-operated dog-wash stations that are similar to do-it-yourself car washes. Dogs climb into a raised tub. Owners put in a \$10 token (good for 25 minutes), choose one of three shampoos -- including Hansen's De Lime Citrus Plus -- and then use a long hose with a nozzle to clean their pet.

There are other dog-wash shops around the Bay Area, but most are mom-and-pop outfits, and none is as automated as Pet Food Express. Michael Levy, president of the San Leandro chain, hired a contractor to design and build the system after car-wash-equipment companies couldn't help him.

That kind of innovation has been a key to success for the privately held chain, whose revenues jumped 55 percent last year to about \$20 million.

Pet Food Express also has lured new customers by being first to stock some hot new products.

Recently, the chain became one of the first and biggest U.S. distributors of Crystal Clear Litter Pearls, a Chinese-made product that uses the same sodium bentonite ingredient found in diapers to trap odor and moisture.

It's not cheap. A four-pound bag sells for \$12.99 -- about 50 percent more than a 25-pound bag of conventional litter. Levy said both bags will last about a month, but the newfangled litter is lighter and easier to use and absorbs odors better.

Thanks to people who pamper their pets, the U.S. pet-supply business has grown 20 percent over the past four years to more than \$20 billion. Puppy love is especially strong in the Bay Area, which has newspapers such as the Berkeley Bark. The quarterly publication includes ads for dog walkers, telepathic animal communicators, day care facilities, pet portraits and grief counselors for people who lose an animal.

Levy, 48, got into the pet business in 1976 when he was studying architecture at City College of San Francisco and training dogs on the side. He dropped out of school to pursue the business, and 10 years later, he and seven assistants were training about 1,000 dogs a year, many for police departments.

Pet supplies were just a sideline until it dawned on Levy that "training was really the tail wagging the dog." He then shifted his focus to stores.

Pet Food Express is wedged between the small, independent pet-supply shops and the superstores such as Petsmart and Petco Animal Supplies. Its stores are in neighborhood shopping centers, usually next to supermarkets that get a lot of foot traffic.

The stores average 6,000 square feet each and typically stock 4,500 items such as bones (both smoked and plain), cow hooves stuffed with pig meat, toys, beauty aids and food.

With its "buy three of any one product and get one free" policy, Levy said Pet Food Express is price-competitive with the national chains, whose stores are two to four times larger.

Pet Food Express does not sell animals, but it does offer weekly services such as vaccinations and helps customers adopt animals.

Levy tried selling fish and reptiles but concluded that specialty stores did that better.

Levy also has tried to differentiate Pet Food Express by offering Nordstrom-style service to customers. He and three other executives take turns visiting every store every week.

"The clerks are very helpful and animal friendly," said one Berkeley dog owner, who likes the chain's open-door policy for pets but worries that "it encourages consumerism among dogs and cats."

Last year, the company was named national "retailer of the year" by trade magazine Pet Product News.

Pet Food Express may have the most automated dog-wash setup, but there are plenty of competitors in the do-it-yourself market.

For example, Mud Puppies operates as a concession at Richmond's Point Isabel dog park. A self-service wash, including use of a tub, hose, soap and towels, costs \$10. A dryer is \$5 more.

In Albany, Dog's Best Friend charges do-it-yourself dog washers \$14.95, which includes shampoos, dryers and soothing music like Italian tenor Andrea Bocelli's "Romanza."

"It's very relaxing and there are no time limits," said shop owner Nancy Han.

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