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Emile Wamsteker for The New York Times

Greg Kleva, a Bark Busters franchise owner, uses his dog as a distraction for Cody, a Cairn terrier.

By MARYANN MOTT
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Pet stores, grooming shops, boarding kennels and dog bakeries are some of the more common pet-related franchises that have sprouted in the last five years. But perhaps the most unusual is Pet Butler, a service that collects dog waste and disposes of it properly for a fee.

The company, based in Dallas, began selling franchises last year, and has 17 nationwide. Matt Boswell, the founder, said there was no

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shortage of office workers willing to trade briefcases for pooper scoopers. Each month he receives more than 200 applications from people willing to pay the \$24,900 franchise fee. New franchise partners can expect to pay a total of about \$60,000 in start-up costs.

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Sales of pet franchises increased 116 percent from 2000 to 2004, the most recent data available, according to Frandata, an independent provider of franchise information.

“They’re tired of their micromanaging boss,” Mr. Boswell said of the corporate refugees. “They’re tired of no control over their pay. They’re tired of sitting in a cube all day.”

That was the case for Niki Tudge of Panama City Beach, Fla., who worked long hours managing luxury hotels for 15 years. Ms. Tudge, who worked as a canine behaviorist part time for seven years, decided that working with pets full time was what she wanted to do.

“When I found Pet Butler I thought, ‘Wow, how quirky is this?’ ” recalled Ms. Tudge, who also opened a dog training center. She said she had thought about starting her own business for many years but was not sure she could give up the lifestyle her six-figure salary allowed. “But as you get older and most of your intrinsic needs have been fulfilled,” Ms. Tudge, 40, said, “all that stuff becomes a little less important. Then it’s more about having the time, freedom and independence.”

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She has invested \$70,000 so far and expects to break even by the end of the year.

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A lifelong dog lover, Greg Kleva was ready for a professional change. Three years ago, he quit his high-paying Wall Street job and bought a Bark Busters dog training franchise.

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Mr. Kleva, 38, now enjoys being his own boss and helping families in Bergen County, N.J., tame their misbehaving pets.

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The first few years in business were a financial struggle, he acknowledges. “Quite honestly because of America’s love affair with their dogs, the money is there to be made. Am I going to get rich doing this? Probably not,” Mr. Kleva said. “But I make a comfortable living and I love what I’m doing.”

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Today more than half of all American households own at least one pet, and this year spending on pets is expected to reach \$38.4 billion, according to the American Pet Product Manufacturers Association, a trade organization.



That is more than Americans spend each year on toys or candy

The increase in spending on pet products and services reflects a change in attitudes toward pets, which are now commonly considered to be children and are treated accordingly by many.

The founder of Just Dogs Gourmet, Colleen Starnadori, said baby boomers and empty nesters, like her, are the ones helping the pet industry soar. "Once the kids were grown, and it was just me, I had to have somebody to spoil," she said. That somebody is Lucy, a golden retriever.

Ms. Starnadori believed her pup deserved the same type of homemade nutritious food she served her children while they were growing up. After several months of trying different recipes, she finally created all-natural treats from scratch that Lucy truly loved.

In 2001, the first Just Dogs Gourmet location opened in Washington, Pa. Two years later, the company began selling franchises. Today 35 "barkeries" in malls throughout the country sell hand-decorated doggie treats that come in a multitude of flavors. By the end of this year, 10 more are expected to open.

"Dog-crazy people are attracted to the business," Ms. Starnadori said, adding that most franchisees were women who did not have pet-related business backgrounds.

Opening a store costs \$75,000 to \$125,000, including the franchise fee, she said. The average store nets about \$50,000 annually.

The company recently introduced a line of private-label spa products for dogs, including bathrobes, shampoos and spritzes. It also began selling treats infused with vitamins and supplements, like glucosamine and omega-3 fatty acids.

Among the more traditional pet enterprises is Camp Bow Wow dog day care and boarding houses. Each is designed with indoor and outdoor play areas, and has a live Camper Cam for pet owners to watch and piped-in classical music for overnight campers.

In just three years, the company, based in Boulder, Colo., has sold 140 franchises in 28 states. Another 25 are scheduled to open by the end of the year. Each costs \$250,000 to \$500,000 to open.

Heidi Flammang, the chief executive, says the goal is for franchisees to break even, in terms of monthly cash flow, within one year. So far, she says, no one has failed. The majority of camp owners are corporate burnouts, most of them professional women in

their 30's and 40's.

“People are really shifting their mind-set into spending their time careerwise into doing something that they really love,” Ms. Flammang said. “And, boy, this fits the bill for a lot of people.”

Some of the franchises like Camp Bow Wow are innovating. The company plans to open self-serve dog washes, either in or near each camp. This fall, it is creating a retail division.

Bark Busters dog training is also building its own brand of product and merchandise. There is a television program and Internet radio show in the works, too, said its chief executive, Andrew [Brooke](#).

The company began in 1989 and now operates in seven countries. There are 200 locations in 38 states in the United States.

The franchise fee is \$64,500, and there's a strict screening process to make sure the business is a good fit for both company and applicant.

Ultimately, most franchise owners stay in the system, Mr. Brooke said. In six years, only 12 people have sold because of health reasons or because they found that the business wasn't right for them.

The turnover rate for all pet franchises is 9 percent, according to Frandata, while turnover for franchises in general is 11.8 percent.

Mr. Brooke says the people who buy a Bark Busters are seeking freedom, fun and flexibility.

“They want to find a business they love and never work a day in their life,” he said. “In doing that they find success and happiness in working with animals.”

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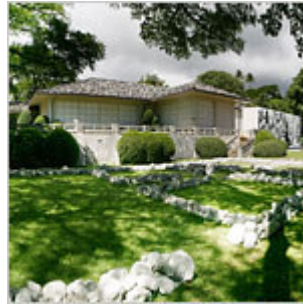
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