

## **Give up the Computer and Pick up the scissors**

### **Set up a Parlor to Doll up the Pets**

*“‘Crazy’ was the word of our families and friends when we opened our new parlor,” said Elsie and Christina, co-proprietresses of Pawfect Spa, a beauty parlor for pets. Elsie is a computer Science graduate of the University of Waterloo and has been a consultant to many major Canadian and American software companies and banks. Christina has a master degree from the University of British Columbia and has worked as a chemical engineer in many Southeast Asian countries. Both of them were drawing good pay when they decided to quit their professions.*

*Three years after they started their new business, Elsie and Christina began to see results. Last year, they won the Best Start-Up Award for new Chinese Canadian entrepreneurs, and their business grew by from 20 to 30 percent.*

*“People now talk about us quite differently,” said Christina, with a smile.*

“A haircut for a dog requires as much skill as a haircut for a human being,” said Elsie. “Though many pet owners treat their pets as members of their families, we couldn’t find any hi-end pet grooming shop in town 3 years ago. That’s why we are here,” said Elsie.

Elsie and Christina have been friends since they were school-girls together in Primary 4. They remained in close touch even when they lived in different parts of the world. They always wanted to have their own business. And now they have founded one, one with great potentials.

In April 2003, after her service contract with a big company expired, Elsie took a course of pet grooming. She did so because she was not disliked the work she had been doing. On the contrary, she said she quite liked it because, as a computer consultant, she had the opportunity to see how big institutions operate and to write various kinds of computer systems for them. Yes, she liked her work then, and she still likes it now.

She completed the course in September that year. Christina, who was then working for General Motors in Shanghai on industrial electrical designing, came to Toronto to join her in setting up their joint business.

The first thing to do was to rent a shop space. They set their eyes on North York, where they then lived. At first, on learning the nature of their business, none of the owners of suitable premises accepted them as tenants. Noise, filth and smell were the problems. Eventually, 9 months after they began their long search, they got their present premises, but not without some persistent and earnest convincing. “Now tell me,” Elsie asked her interviewer sitting opposite her in the shop. “Do you smell what you usually smell in some other pet grooming shops?”

Pleased with the answer “No,” Elsie explained: This is because we have installed here an air filtering system generally used in hospitals. This high-tech system is costly, but money was not a problem. The system is a must, even for a shop measuring only a few hundred square feet.

Our next job was to look for some reference material about the trade. There was hardly any. This, according to Christina, might not be a bad thing, for it showed that competition within the trade was still not keen. “Through talking to pet owners,” said Christina, “we could get a fairly good picture of this line of business. Every time we walked our dogs in the street, there was a chance for us to meet other dog walkers. We asked them what kinds of service they got from the pet groomers they were using, what improvements they would like to see, etc. From the information we so gathered, we got the ideas how we could do better.”

“Slowly but surely, we built up our clientele,” said Christina. “New customers came to us through the recommendation of the old. Publicity did not help much. We charge \$80-90 for a job; other shops probably charge only \$30-40. Will you come to us right after you see our ad. In the bus?” asked Christina.

Without waiting for an answer, she continued: “But our service is special. We spend 3 hours to groom a dog, others probably half an hour. Our customers pay happily for what they don’t get elsewhere. They know our service through the words of those who came before them, not through what we say in our ad.”

According to Christina, there are 3 classes of pet beauticians, the Assistant, the Stylist and the Master. She explained:

“An Assistant’s job is to assist. He or she may do such things as cleaning, shampooing and some other odd jobs, but not grooming, which is the job of a Stylist. A Stylist must know

the particular nature of each breed of dog and cat. (There are over 400 breeds of dogs.) A Master, in addition to the skill of grooming, must have the knowledge of pet nutrition and nursing. He or she should always be well-informed of everything new about pet keeping. I myself travel at least twice a year to visit pet grooming shows and look for new products for better pet caring. Finally, only Masters are qualified to take pupils.”

“To be a Master,” Christina continued, “you must have a certain amount of experience. For instance, you must be aware of the risk that some pets may be so nervous on their first visits to us that they bite if you approach them with a pair of scissors in your hand. Experience has taught us that small dogs are more likely to bite than big ones. Some dogs are extremely nervous when you put them in a cage. It would take at least 2 years for a Stylist to gain enough experience to become a Master.”

Elsie pointed out that a candidate has to pass a number of tests, both written and practical, to become a Master. At the same time, the candidate must also take part in certain international competitions before they are qualified. According to Elsie, there are not so many Masters around.

Elsie named the United States as the world leader in pet grooming. Certain Asian countries are closely behind. Grooming is no longer the only service pet owners want for their pets. They also want their pets to have hair-conditioning, clothing, shoes and accessories. When their pets have an allergy or some skin troubles, they bring them to the pet beauty spas for treatment. Another luxury is a special kind of mud bath. The mud comes from the Dead Sea. “So you see,” said Elsie, “pets nowadays are very much pampered, almost as much as human beings.”

*Pawfect Spa* is at its busiest near Christmas. Its business stays calm in January and February. In March, it begins to pick up again. During the busy season, the shop can only handle 10 pets a day, perhaps just a few more. For the last 3 years, neither Elsie nor Christina had a vacation.

The parlor works from Tuesday to Saturday. “When a pet is brought in,” said Christina, “we must be able to instantly tell when it will be ready for pickup. We do not want to keep more than 7 or 8 pets on the premises at any one time, or we won’t be fair to those poor animals.”

When asked to compare what she and Elsie earn from their present business with their former incomes, Christina said: “It is difficult to compare. We work harder than before, and

definitely take greater responsibility. Moreover, we cannot expect too much in the first 5 years of our business. We have to take a long-term view.”

“Further, our business gives us tremendous satisfaction. Here is a difference between self-employment and working for a boss. Once we have decided to do what we are doing, we must forget the fat pay cheques we used to receive.”

As their business can only grow within a district, Elsie and Christina are thinking of setting up branches in other districts. They are very confident, as the reputation of their business spreads.

Selling franchises is also in their mind. “But you cannot sell your franchise to anyone who only has a wish to be in the business,” said Christina.

Three years in the business has convinced Elsie that the most difficult job for them to do is to train up a qualified team. There is a team of 3 in her shop; each has to do everything from receiving the customers to helping in grooming. According to Elsie, it would take a year at least to train an assistant. “Not everyone is prepared to stay in this kind of business that long. As to franchise, a grantee must have the determination to give his business the very best and go through at least the study of a Stylist’s course,” said Elsie.

*Pawfect Spa* has begun to run a certificate course to train not only its own workers, but also other workers who intend to work elsewhere.

It also runs some lighter courses for pet-owners who only want to gain some basic skills and knowledge to improve the way they look after their pets.

Looking into the future, both Elsie and Christina believe that the market potentials of running such training courses may well become greater than the potentials of the pet grooming industry itself. They will continue to develop their business along both lines.

When asked how fast the development would be, Elsie emphasized that it all depends on the availability of a qualified workforce. “It has to come from people eager to learn. They are hard to find,” said Elsie.

(An abridged translation from the *Ming Pao Saturday Supplement* of February 17, 2007)