



Fit for a Dog's Life



Wander into Ward Street's Central Bark and you will get 'big city style for your small town pet' but you will also find a pair of owners who are in business for the love of the animals whose owners they serve

RANDOM ACTS OF BUSINESS By Sally Smith



If you came to Nelson for the very first time you'd probably figure we've got a population of 50,000, judging by the range of retail and service outlets on the main drag.

Thanks to our tourism market and a whole bunch of dedicated entrepreneurs, this remote mountain town can boast big-city options for us lucky residents.

One of the latest is a pet boutique, Central Bark. Young owners Emma Cox and Keira Coutts opened the Ward Street store in May, catering exclusively to dogs and cats.

Their logo, "Big city style for you and your small town pet," means they provide just about every kind of product you could want for your feline or canine friends — stuff you can't get anywhere else — along with a range of 11 kinds of high quality pet food at reasonable prices.

Having moved here from larger urban centres with their husbands — Cox from London, UK, and Coutts from Victoria — and with plenty of experience to draw on, the pair had a pretty good idea what they were wanted.

Both worked for another local pet store for several years and they helped start the Second Chance Animal Shelter.

"Working as long as we did at the other pet store," says Cox, "we kind of knew what sold and what didn't sell. And we could kind of see what was lacking at the other store."

Not only this, but back in London, Cox was a business analyst, and Coutts and her partner have been running a home business for awhile.

After researching pet boutiques in Vancouver, they came up with a sophisticated theme to balance out their already impressive skill set.

"We want people to come in and get information about food and training, and just, everything," says Coutts, adding that their one employee is certified dog trainer Ella Wright who also runs The Wright Way dog training.

Perhaps the final ingredient that adds to their business savvy is that animals are their passion, not just a means to a living. Each shares their home with several pets, some of which are purebreds they've taken through the show circuit and some, adopted from the shelter.

Okay, so they're suckers for animals — a growing trend apparently. In fact their favourite part of the job is seeing how much people love their pets.

"Just seeing how animals make people feel that good," Coutts explains is what she loves about her job.

Central Bark provides basic supplies and more: a huge range of collars and leashes, beds, tea towels, coasters, toys, games, bowls of every size, cute signs, even dog carrier bags (like purses you can put a little dog in), sympathy cards for animal bereavement, pet urns, other accessories, supplements and most importantly, food: along with bagged and canned food, there's also frozen buffalo bones and dehydrated food made nearby in Armstrong. All their food is holistic, or natural.

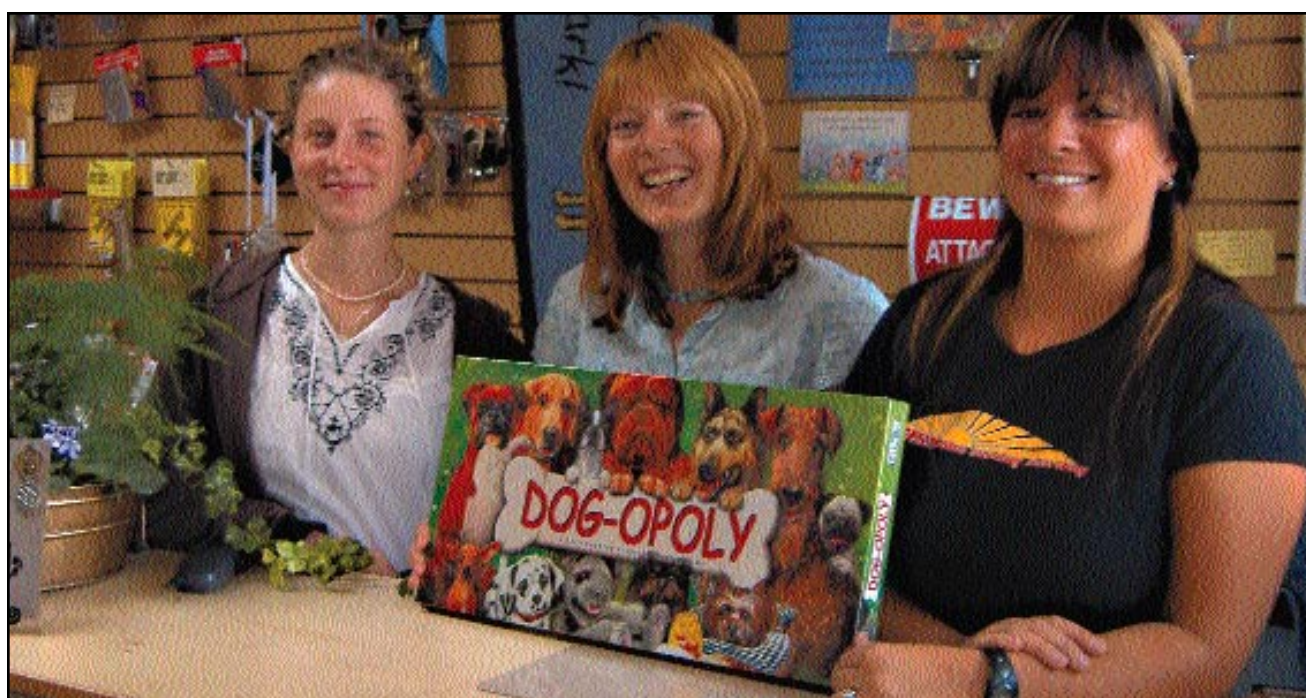
"Nobody wants to feed their dog garbage," Coutts says. "I don't expect everybody to be like me, but at the same time, if you break it down it doesn't cost that much to feed your dog or your cat a decent quality diet. And in the long run, it makes such a big difference."

General well-being and vitality, health of coat and, of course, better digestive system are some of the benefits they cite. Lower vet bills can be the result here.

"I would rather see somebody come in with a terrible dirty collar and nothing fancy on their dog and buy like a decent bag of food," Coutts says.

"Because really that's what important, not the collar that your pet's wearing," adds Cox.

"At the end of the day, we're not making a big buck off our food. It



The crew from Central Bark are ready to provide pet owners with the supplies they need. (L-R) Ella Wright, Emma Cox and Keira Coutts have years of experience in the pet game.

is the collar. But if I had to choose, I'd rather sell the food than the collar."

"We read about every food we were going to carry before we decided," says Cox. "We tried to get a nice range as well."

With their knowledge they can help people select the proper food and supplements for their pet, with the disclaimer that of course they're no substitute for a veterinarian.

"It's slowly building," Coutts says of the business. "I know that Emma and I would both like to see our food sales higher."

Though their new business has been doing exceptionally well over the summer — they've doubled their projections — the majority of their business so far has been from tourists.

"And that's because we sell gift items and really styly collars that you can't get anywhere else. Things that people just can't find anywhere else," Cox says. "People are starting to hear about us though, more and more."

They cite the difficulty of parking out front as one possible deterrent to locals. Also there may be a perception that their prices are

higher because of their boutique theme.

"It's not expensive," Coutts. "For sure there's some things that do cost more but our prices are comparable to other places. We have collars that cost from \$150 down to \$9.99. If you want to part with your paycheque here, sure. But if you only want to part with a piece of it, you can do that too."

They have had a great reception from the community and lots of support from friends who are also local business owners.

"The people are the friendliest I've ever met, anywhere in the world, without a doubt!" Cox says, beaming with her most sincere smile.

The store has moved into selling belts and arm cuffs because some owners like to match their dog's accessories. They happen to be pretty nice products, which explains their popularity. One range is handmade in Canada. You can even get your dog's name in rhinestones or other great fashion ideas — skulls anyone?

"It's 'bling bling' for your dog," jokes Coutts. "Because every dog needs 'bling bling.'"

The co-owners say their fun-

niest experience so far has been customers buying dog collars and even special ordering leashes for themselves and their partners.

They also have a squeaky dog toy in the form of George Bush's head — very popular with American tourists, they say.

Their goal is hopefully to expand in January. If they're able to get the extra space next door, they'll increase their food lines and bring in a professional dog groomer, Migon Cochrane.

"I really want people to come in. Just come in and see for yourself," Coutts says.

"There's something for everyone," adds Cox.

"And if there's not, we'll get it for you. Come on in! Check it out, because we love pets. If we can make some money, great. But we're doing it because we love it. Like I LOVE coming to work!"

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