

A Year to Remember

Bio-Groom celebrates its 40th anniversary by continuing to produce a healthy assortment of pet products, while staying sharply focused on quality.

By Jennifer Boncy

Forty years in the pet industry is nothing to sneeze at. A manufacturer's 40th anniversary is a commendable signpost pointing directly to its ability to meet the needs of a market and its consumers. But Bio-Groom,

a family-owned business based in Longview, Texas, is not slowing down to congratulate itself too much. Instead, it is forging ahead, doing what it has always done—making the products that its consumers have come to rely on.

Bio-Groom, which is celebrating its 40th anniversary this year, is known by breeders, groomers and pet owners for its extensive assortment of grooming and health-and-wellness products, from shampoos and conditioners designed to help show-dogs look their best during competition to medicated formulas that treat common ailments, like flea infestations and itchy, irritated skin. The company is emerging from the recession in good shape, according to its president, Frank Pohl. Looking ahead, he foresees a bright future for the pet industry and his own company, but he's been in the business long enough to remember the humbling beginnings of both.

When he stops to look back and recap the past decades of growth for Bio-Groom and the pet industry at large, he recalls a meteoric evolution that he says is mind-boggling. Bio-Groom may not be the oldest company in the market, but 40 years and three generations since its inception, it is certainly an industry veteran. Like most in the business, the company started small. The Pohl family parlayed what basically amounted to a shared hobby making one single product—a flea and tick shampoo that turned out to be a great coat conditioner used mostly in the dog-show sector—into a booming business, which now boasts a 60-product portfolio.



"My father was a chemist, working at Eastman Kodak, and I was going to school," he says. "I was making batches after school and bottling them. The garage was the shipping area; the kitchen was the office."

The breakthrough came in the 1980s, says Pohl, when the family began hitting the robust grooming trade show circuit and investing in advertising. Groomers took to their products quickly. Making the leap to the pet specialty retail market to reach the average pet owner was more of a challenge. Eventually, however, the connection was made as pet stores came to see the value of stocking the company's products and distributors picked them up.

Today, the company's top-selling products include its oatmeal shampoo for dogs, as well as flea and tick and puppy shampoos. The products' label claims are simple, straightforward and compelling to customers looking to solve a problem or simply freshen up a smelly pet. Pohl says the products are supported by animal-friendly testing and research that result in products that do what the company claims they do. The company makes products for dogs, cats, ferrets and horses.

LOYAL TO PET SPECIALTY

Bio-Groom has always relied on strong relationships with its distributors to get its products on store shelves and in the hands of groomers and other industry professionals. It has always been committed to the independent pet specialty market and does not plan to delve into the mass market or other channels. Pohl worries

the effort would weaken the company's laser-like focus on its current priorities—the most important of those being to make great products that respond to customers' needs and demands.

Among its newest ventures is the introduction of a store locator on the company's website, allowing Bio-Groom users to find local stores that sell the products. For retailers, Bio-Groom recently launched its Wellness & First Aid Center—a compact countertop display that merchandises several of its health-related products, including ear cleaner and pads, ear powder, anti-itch spray and gel and styptic powder.

Bio-Groom's approach to its 40th anniversary is low key thus far. It is in the process of getting the word out to its distributors, pet stores and pet owners. Its 40th anniversary logo will appear on its brochures, ads and other printed materials. Pohl says they don't want to overplay the anniversary, but they do want to take time to celebrate the milestone.

"The real celebration has been the products moving out the door," he says, "and the overwhelming feeling we have that we've been so privileged to be in the pet industry that long and surviving that long as a family company."

Pohl expects this upbeat family saga to continue, as the market continues to supply fertile ground for growth.

"The pet industry is healthy," he says. "It's going through changes and struggles, no doubt. But one thing has changed [over the years] and won't go back: pets have come a long way. They are in the home, they are in the bed, and I don't think they will be kicked out. What that means is that there is always going to be a need for premium-quality products." **PB**