



## ENTERPRISE

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### Treats are the trick

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Contributing writer

Lisa Lewis-Nourzad's business is going to the dogs.

And she couldn't be happier.

As the owner of Happy Hound Biscuit Company, Lewis-Nourzad has harnessed her gourmet talents to create a growing business serving a four-legged clientele.

Founded in 2003, Happy Hound aims to make nutritious and uniquely decorated gourmet dog treats. The treats, which come in an array of flavors, shapes and sizes, are prepared using fresh ingredients and contain no preservatives. Baked daily, Happy Hound dog treats are shipped within 48 hours to retailers to ensure freshness.

According to the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association, pet owners spent \$32.4 billion on their pets in 2003. It's a dog-eat-dog industry, as many businesses want a piece of the pie. But Lewis-Nourzad's doggedness is paying off.

After a divorce, Lewis-Nourzad, a single mother to her two daughters, wanted to stay at home with her kids, so she explored becoming a personal chef. She even went as far as enrolling in the U.S. Personal Chef Association school in New Mexico.

But an epiphany soon changed her plans.

"They advised us to always do something special for our clients. They said, 'Some people have children, so make cookies. Some people have dogs, so make dog treats.' Something clicked, and I quickly went about finding ways to create dog treats," Lewis-Nourzad says.

Almost immediately, Lewis-Nourzad started Happy Hound Biscuit in her kitchen.

She experimented with various dog treat recipes using applesauce, peanut butter and cinnamon, and assigned taste-testing duties to Molly, her black Labrador.

"Dog treats are like chocolate. You can have a Hershey's bar or you can have a Godiva chocolate. I wanted to make Godiva chocolate-type dog treats," Lewis-Nourzad says.

After baking an initial assortment of decorative treats, she began selling them at various craft shows around Austin.

Her main problem? She found she didn't enjoy the retail side of starting a business.

"I like the design and baking part of it. So my friend, Lee Black, mentored me and taught me how to get into business with retailers," Lewis-Nourzad says.

With advice from Black, who had built and sold a successful business, Lewis-Nourzad changed her business strategy and began selling her dog treats through one local retailer in late 2003.

Lewis-Nourzad also started attending international gift shows throughout the country last January.

Marketing what she calls "Gourmet Dog Biscuits for the Pretentious Pup," Lewis-Nourzad showcased the dog treats from a temporary booth at the Dallas Market Center, where retailers from around the world market various goods.

"I brought plenty of treats that people could take home to their dogs and sample," Lewis-Nourzad says.

Lewis-Nourzad found instant success and gained 32 retail stores in 17 states.

She gained additional retail outlets when another entrepreneur advised her to place an ad in Giftware News, an industry magazine with more than 32,000 readers.

"Placing the ad catapulted my company. It's one of the best decisions I've made so far. By this Christmas, I was in 123 retail stores in 29 states. That's up from one store in Austin to 29 states in one year," Lewis-Nourzad says.

Lewis-Nourzad has had to move out of her kitchen and into a warehouse space on Burnet Road. At her new location, more than 3,000 treats are baked and shipped per week.

While the business has grown quickly, it's still a family affair, with Lewis-Nourzad's daughters helping run the design part of the business.

Lewis-Nourzad is grateful for her business success, and she is most proud of how it is affecting her daughters.

"I want my daughters to learn that you can be anything you want to be," says Lewis-Nourzad.

Many owners use the treats to improve behavior or teach tricks.

"When used appropriately, treats can be a positive influence on your dog if used to reward good behavior," says Janice Patton, owner of A Real Friend Dog Training Inc. in Austin.

*Jason Meeker is a freelance writer.*

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