



ENTERPRISE

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Teaching old dogs new tricks

Tomlinson's ability to adapt has helped company grow

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Liniel Click was running late for supper.

It was Thanksgiving Day in 1971, and Liniel Click recently had poured his life savings into buying a pet store called Tomlinson's, which sold birds, as well as feed for livestock and pets.

He told his wife he needed to run over to the new store for about an hour to feed the birds. It took him more than four hours. When he finally returned home just in time for dinner, exhausted and said: "We have made the biggest mistake of our lives buying that store."

Today, his son, Scott Click, is general manager of Tomlinson's, which has four Austin locations. He's happy his father made the "mistake" of buying their first store.

T.R. Tomlinson founded Tomlinson's as a chick hatchery in 1946. Back then, Austin had a more rural flavor, and it was common for people to raise chickens in their backyards. Over the next 25 years, Tomlinson's business focus evolved as the city changed and the pet industry grew. Eventually, Tomlinson's began selling livestock feed, pet food and supplies. In the mid-1960s, Tomlinson's began wholesaling birds to other pet stores across the country.

Then in 1971, T.R. Tomlinson decided to retire and sold his business to Liniel Click.

In the 33 years that have passed since buying Tomlinson's, Liniel Click and the Click family have kept the business going by changing with the times and with the city.

Today, Tomlinson's Feed & Pet Inc. operates four stores that sell premium brands of food for dogs, cats, fish, reptiles, birds and other small animals. The company also is a major wholesaler of birds.

"We ship more than 100,000 birds a year to retailers around the country, ... Petco and many others, and even to some foreign countries. Mainly, the birds we sell are the smaller breeds ... parakeets, cockatiels, lovebirds and finches, but we also sell some parrots in our stores," says Scott Click, who joined the business on a full-time basis after graduating from college in 1986.

Wholesaling birds has been a good business for Tomlinson's, but it has had its rough spots. The late 1980s and early 1990s saw a decline in the retail bird market. About the same time, Wal-Mart and Kmart abandoned the business of selling live animals, including birds.

"We used to sell birds to Wal-Mart. It hurt when it suddenly ended, but we quickly started selling to a then up-and-coming company called PetsMart," Click says. "After a few years, PetsMart set up their own distributor network in Florida, and we lost them, too. So we quickly lined up Petco as a new customer.

"Overall, we learned from each experience. We learned to stay in good standing with many different customers and not to put all our eggs in one basket. Now Petco is only about 15 percent of our bird business."

will be up more than 20 percent for fiscal 2004.

Beginning in the late 1980s, another change affected Tomlinson's business -- the shift in public attitudes toward pet ownership and how people feed their pets. Customers began to buy premium brands to help their pets be healthier and live longer.

"People began caring more about what they fed their pets as dogs and cats became members of the family, rather than just another animal on the farm. Years ago, people fed their dogs table scraps. Now, people care more about what they feed their pets, and they buy premium brands from stores like ours," Click says.

As brands such as Science Diet, Eukanuba and Iams have grown in popularity, stores like Tomlinson's have seen their businesses grow by catering to customer demand.

According to the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association, Americans will spend \$14.3 billion solely on food for their pets in 2004. By comparison, Americans spent \$17 billion on everything from food to veterinary care in 1994.

"Scientific breakthroughs on nutritional values for pet food are better regulated," says Dr. Charlie Meynier, associate veterinarian at Austin's Brykerwood Veterinary Clinic.

"Foods have also improved due to competition between the premium brands. Today, there are specific foods for specific needs like improving renal and liver function or weight control formulas, because people expect more from food manufacturers."

Along with the rise in local population each decade, pet ownership has risen, which has affected Tomlinson's business. According to the Town Lake Animal Shelter, the number of pets adopted locally has risen steadily every year since 2000. Adoptions of dogs and cats totaled 3,327 in fiscal 2001.

Last year, pet adoptions reached 4,049, and should be higher this year.

To keep his business competitive, Click doggedly works to stay on top of the market and change when it's necessary -- even if that means closing a store.

Tomlinson's opened a second store on Burnet Road in 1987 that sold only pet food. Before expanding, Liniel Click traveled to Phoenix to see how a store could stay in business by only selling pet food. The store he visited was the precursor for PetsMart.

Tomlinson's remained at the Burnet Road location for nearly 10 years, but then lost customer traffic when MoPac Expressway opened. Ironically, a tough competitor also opened nearby: PetsMart.

The Burnet Road store was relocated to Round Rock in 1996 and later to 3300 Bee Caves Road.

Tomlinson's operates a store in Central Austin at 908 East 49 1/2 St. at Airport Blvd.

Since 1989, Tomlinson's has operated a store at South Lamar and Ben White boulevards. In June, Tomlinson's opened a store in Cedar Park. Looking forward, Scott Click plans additional expansion as the market allows.

In 1999, Tomlinson's opened a Web-based store.

To promote his business, Click actively markets Tomlinson's through newspaper advertising, radio ads and by mailing coupons through the ValPak direct mail service. Tomlinson's also supports the Town Lake Animal Shelter and the Austin Humane Society.

Along with his father, Scott Click is proud of his business, which is now in its 58th year. By changing with the times, they've stayed in business and prospered. He credits his company's competitiveness against some of the larger retailers to a knowledgeable staff.

Not too bad for a "big mistake."

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