

MICHELE BROUGHTON HOBBS PET WANTS

Michele Broughton Hobbs lives in Cincinnati, Ohio, with her wife, Amanda, and their twin boys, Knox and Wyatt. The couple opened Pet Wants, an all-natural, made-to-order pet food store in 2010 in the middle of a recession with no brand names, asking people to do something they do not want to do: switch their pet's food. After four years they have two locations, a commissary with offices, a licensed store in Lexington, Kentucky, and are in talks for licensed stores in Columbus, Ohio, and Indianapolis, Indiana. They now sell over 30,000 pounds of Pet Wants brand food every month.





“DON’T TELL ME ABOUT THE LABOR PAINS, JUST SHOW ME THE BABY.”
— I HEARD THIS FROM MY GRANDFATHER



I had a pretty good run in the photo imaging industry; that is, until digital technology pretty much wiped out an entire market segment. Think about the brand Kodak, remember them? From there I landed in brick sales, which in my head was almost identical to the photo industry. The architect was like the photographer (visual, creative, educated) and the mason was like the lab technician (hands-on, in the background, but ultimately responsible for finalizing the idea or design). I knew these personalities and somehow convinced a company to hire me, and I had a pretty good run in the construction industry as well ... until the recession. Yep, another industry tanked. The 2007-ish recession annihilated the construction market. Firms I called on that had 300 employees were down to 5 or 10 guys. So in February 2010, there I was again. I didn't lose a job, I lost an industry! Now what?

One night I had a brainstorm: Why not open a retail business, with no brand name, in the middle of a recession, in a farmers' market, and ask people to do something they really don't want to do? Oh! And for good measure, I'll put every last dime I have into it! This is how I am going to take care of myself?



There is something very different about a person who can take an irrational idea and turn it into a successful venture. I thought photography and brick sales were compatible? Open a retail business in a recession? You know who you are. An idea comes and you can't shake it. You wake up and write yourself notes, you drive your friends crazy always talking about your work and ideas, and you struggle in social circles to talk about anything other than your product or your passion for your job. And oh my god — can you believe your spouse is still with you? That's the biggie. Sometimes you become very hard to live with, so thank God if you have the support of your family. My family is my spouse and three kids, and now consists of five full-time and four part-time colleagues. Not only am I taking care of myself, but these remarkable people are taking care of me, and hopefully they trust I am taking care of them.

BUSINESS TIPS

- Trust people ... at arm's length. After agreeing to allow a customer I thought could be trusted to open a Pet Wants, it wasn't long before I realized I had made a huge mistake. The thousands of dollars it cost me to dissolve that relationship was depressing, until recently when someone advised me to look at it as the cost of protecting my business in the long run.
- Involve yourself in your community; not just where you live or where your kids go to school, but your work community. If you are an accountant, offer free oversight to local non-profits. Provide a cookout in a neighbor that doesn't have access to healthy food if you are in the food business. Giving is a great stress-reducer.
- It's OK to say no. We are asked seven or eight times a week for donations, or to participate in fundraising. At Pet Wants we decided that when we get involved it will always be dog or cat-related. Those who ask for our participation and we have to say no, always get a response explaining our reasons for not participating, and wishing them well on their project.
- Take care of your people ... they take care of your business. If your business is seasonal, pay bonuses in high season and be sure to squirrel a little away for your employees during down times. And if you don't think Christmas bonuses are important, think again. Just like you, people need to know they matter.



It takes a lot of trust to run a small business. Besides the obvious, the most important thing about taking care of my entire family is making sure I continue to grow this business. I work for their future, all of them, and they work for mine. For my colleagues, I work for a future where they have a solid career and a continual upward spiral of growth in both knowledge and income. For my family, I work to have more time to spend with them, which makes me more reliable and indebted to my colleagues. See the circle?

Never will I break a promise like the financial one I experienced in my first job, and I know that the folks working with me ultimately will give me the time I currently miss from my family. It is this shared trust that allows our little business to grow and ideally take care of us all for a long time. ■

Where Women Create BUSINESS would like to thank Michele Broughton Hobbs for her involvement in our spring issue. To learn more, visit petwants.com.