

Smart Solutions

Dog Gone Smart Pet Products constantly draws on the expertise of its canine behaviorist founder to develop a well-rounded selection of pet solutions.

BY MARK KALAYGIAN

While many successful pet industry executives end up finding their way into this market after spending years building their careers in other fields, others are actually born into the world of pets. Chris Onthank, founder and CEO of Dog Gone Smart Pet Products, is a part of this special breed. In fact, his pedigree comes from a family that has been in the dog business since the early 1900s, raising Dachshunds and Bloodhounds.

"I was born above the kennel house, with 60 dachshunds and bloodhounds downstairs," says Onthank, whose grandmother and aunt both served as American Kennel Club judges. "So I've been working with dogs my whole life."

Although Onthank did try his hand at other professional pursuits—including a stint as a marine mammal trainer, and then building a successful design business in the 1980s—he kept one foot firmly planted in the pet care industry, and eventually decided to return to his roots for good. "I had my day job, and I was training dogs in the evenings," he says. "But then in the early 90s, I turned to my partner [in the design business] and said, 'I'm going to work with dogs full-time.'"

"I decided to take my passion for animals—something that was imprinted on me from the time I was born—and make it into a career."

In 1993, Onthank founded the Dog Gone Smart canine center, an 11,000-square-foot facility where dog owners can bring their pets for a variety of services, including day care, boarding, grooming, behavior and agility training, and even swimming lessons. While the center was a pio-

neer in doggy daycare and can board up to 100 dogs at any given time, training is the real cornerstone of the business—and for good reason.

Onthank has an extensive background in canine behavior, which—combined with some of the knowledge he brought from his experience working with marine mammals—has made him a much-sought-after training expert among dog owners, including more than a few famous clients. "I've helped many celebrities with their dogs' behavioral issues," he says, noting that this diverse group includes such familiar names as Kathy Lee Gifford to Gene Wilder.

After more than a decade of focusing 100 percent of his energy on helping dogs and their owners at the Dog Gone Smart canine center, Onthank was inspired to strike off in a new, albeit related, direction when a Swiss fabric finishing company asked if he would try out a dog bed it had developed. Intrigued by the nanotechnology that the company had incorporated into the fabric of the bed to keep it clean and smelling fresh, Onthank agreed, and it wasn't long before he knew he had a winning product on his

hands. "We started using it in the facility, and my kennel manager came back to me and said, 'Oh my gosh, this bed is awesome—it stays so clean. Where can we get more of these?'"

When Onthank learned that more beds were simply not available because the fabric's creators were still looking for a licensed production partner, a light bulb went on. "I come from a family of entrepreneurs, so when I heard that, I thought, 'Hey, maybe I can launch this,'" he says.



In 2005, Onthank got the exclusive license to use the fabric technology in the U.S.—followed by the worldwide exclusive license in 2007—and Dog Gone Smart Pet Products was born.

Dog Gone Growth

Over the past decade since it was founded, Dog Gone Smart Pet Products has greatly expanded the breadth and depth of its offerings by staying true to the concept behind that first dog bed—providing practical solutions to the problems commonly experienced by pet owners. To improve upon the fabric technology that started it all, Onthank added a bacteriostatic agent to inhibit the reproduction of bacteria, which made the beds even more resistant to unpleasant odors. Then, three years ago, Dog Gone Smart developed its own proprietary technology, called Repelz-It.

“Repelz-It is a nano-technology that keeps fabrics cleaner,” says Onthank, noting that it repels water, dirt, odors and oil—which is important. “What makes a dog bed smell is [when] the oil from a dog’s coat gets on the fabric and then bacteria attacks it. Our fabrics have some of the highest oil repellency on the market, so not only do they stay clean, the oil does not absorb. As a result, our dog beds last for years.”

Another important element to the company’s Repelz-It technology is that it delivers this level of performance safely by avoiding the use of suspected carcinogens that are used in some other stay-clean fabric finishes.

More recently, Dog Gone Smart has further pushed the boundaries of how long dog beds can last with the development of its NINJA Beds. These beds not only incorporate the Repelz-It fabric protection, but also address another common canine problem—chewing. By utilizing heavy-duty nylon, NINJA Beds stand up to even the toughest chewers. In fact, the company offers customers a 90-day chew-proof guarantee.

But Dog Gone Smart has not been content with bringing its unique brand of innovation only to beds. The company has also launched award-winning products in other categories, including pet apparel and cleanup. In the apparel category, the company is focused on outdoor wear, in particular. Once again using its Repelz-It technology, Dog Gone Smart has developed a stable of products that marry style and function across three lines of canine jackets, including the Aspen Parka, NanoBreaker Rain Coats and Trailblazer Jackets. All of the styles not only draw from the latest trends in the human fashion world, they offer unmatched performance with easy adjustability for the perfect fit and waterproof zippers



that allow pet owners to use them with any dog harness.

In the pet cleanup category, Dog Gone Smart has three popular offerings using their Advanced Wicking Technology. The Zip n’ Dri is a “bag” that dog owners zip their pets into to quickly dry them off, while the Dirty Dog Doormat cleans up a pet’s messy paws before they can track mud all over the home. The Cat Litter Mat instantly traps litter scatter. These products utilize super-absorbent micro-fiber to trap water and mud instantly, leaving pet owners’ home free of muddy paw prints, that wet-dog smell and even cat litter.

When it comes to developing problem-solving products like these, Onthank points to two important factors in Dog Gone Smart’s success—where the company gets its inspiration and where its products are put to the test. “We look for technologies designed for the human market, then adapt them for the pet industry,” says Onthank, who notes that his search often takes him to trade shows in the outdoors, toy and technology industries.

“And one of the biggest benefits to Dog Gone Smart is we have the canine center, where we can test all our products,” he says. For example, while developing the company’s Zip n’ Dri, Onthank put the product to the test by having a dog-drying race with one of the canine center’s groomers, who was armed with a pet dryer. The Zip n’ Dri won handily, drying the dog in about half the time.

In addition to delivering a solution-oriented lineup of products, Dog Gone Smart has made itself a valuable partner to pet stores by deploying a team of field representatives to provide guidance and service to its retailer customers. More importantly, the company remains committed to the channel in which it has already achieved much success. “Our products fall on the better-best tiers; we are not a low-end brand,” says Onthank. “We don’t sell to mass retailers; we’re focused on the independents.”

Looking forward, retailers can expect Dog Gone Smart to continue to not only remain focused on helping pet stores thrive, but also innovate in every pet product segment it sets its sights on. “We are known for being a trend setter,” says Onthank. “So we will always work to improve, change and redefine categories by launching problem-solving products.” **PB**