

Traditional vs. Boutique

The world of retail is changing and so is the way consumers shop, but the need for good customer service remains. **WORDS** EMILY FOWLER



What are your opening hours and does it matter?

How would you describe your business? The conventional image, the one that plenty of consumers will automatically think of, may well be the traditional high street pet shop, selling everything from pet food to bird seed to dog collars. But while traditional pet shops continue to be an incredibly valuable part of our high street, the pet industry has expanded over the years and our peers now include a veritable cornucopia of businesses catering to the ever widening range of pets and their individual needs.

The 2018 Pet Population report from the PFMA (Pet Food Manufacturing Association) estimated that 45% of households

in the UK, that's around 12 million homes, have pets. With that many companion animals of all shapes and sizes living in our homes, it's no wonder the UK pet industry continues to grow.

The changing face of UK pet businesses

With the dawn of the internet came a new economy, and as more and more information became available online it became so much easier for people to research everything pet-related, whether that was potential pet owners deciding what type of animal would best suit their family, or existing pet owners finding out how best to care for them. Of course, the internet has also

transformed commerce, making buying pet products easier and more accessible.

While trading online makes life easier for pet owners in many ways, we can't forget that a lot of people appreciate having a physical shop 'on their doorstep'. The personal service and friendly face of a retailer who knows your name, knows the name of your

pets, knows your pets' favourite treats (and remembers to order them in!) is something that's hard to replace, even if you take into account the ease of browsing online and ordering with a few clicks of the mouse.

The personal touch also comes into play when we look at the independent boutique businesses in comparison to the

big retail giants (whether those giants trade exclusively in pet products or offer them as just a part of their 'everything plus the kitchen sink' catalogue). Yes, consumers can buy fairly easily from a faceless giant, but many will want to support a smaller business, one where the story of the business's beginnings is a personal one, and where they can actually relate to the business owner(s) and employees. Let's face it, the majority of boutique pet businesses, whether online or offline, are run by pet owners for pet owners. So much more relatable than the head of a giant corporation.

Animal welfare and the pet industry

There have been huge changes in public awareness of what's right and wrong in terms of animal welfare over the years, changes that have rightly impacted on the buying and selling of pets. While The Animal Welfare (Licensing of Activities Involving Animals) (England) Regulations 2018 only came into force last October, meaning more stringent regulations for any business that sells animals as pets, an increasing concern for animal welfare and a greater public understanding of what different species need to be happy and healthy, has meant that any business selling pets has been subject to scrutiny for much longer than that.

As well as the animal rights side of the industry, these days pets are usually classed as valued members of the family in their own right. That means there is always going to be a healthy percentage of the family budget allocated to keeping them fed, entertained, and cared for. After all, how many times have you heard a pet owner say they'd make sure their pets could eat before they themselves could eat?

Traditional or boutique business?

Whether a traditional bricks and mortar business, or an online boutique business, running a pet business will always be rewarding thanks to those unique, and often unpredictable, end users! The different types of business will

How you treat your customers will affect your business takings.



From humble beginnings, businesses grow.



each come with their own needs, their own strengths, and their own individual challenges.

The pros (✓) and cons (✗) of a bricks and mortar business

✓ Customers can see/handle items before they buy – so they're more likely to be happy with their purchase, and less likely to return them as unsuitable.

✓ Customers can take their purchases home straight away – rather than having to wait for a delivery.

✓ The personal touch – as previously mentioned, this is a great advantage for local bricks and mortar pet retailers.

✗ Extra costs in terms of physical premises – the day-to-day running costs of a physical retail outlet are naturally going to be higher.

✗ Location limitations – while a bricks and mortar business may have dedicated customers prepared to travel, there will of course be limits to how far. The majority of customers (the regular ones, at least) will come from the local area.

✗ Stock limitations – with the market for niche and speciality products (particularly in the food sector) increasing, physical space means a bricks and mortar retailer probably won't be able to stock everything.

The pros (✓) and cons (✗) of an online business

✓ Lower start-up costs – without the need for a physical premises, many online pet businesses are started from a spare room without the need for a huge amount of stock, meaning start-up costs can be minimal.

✓ Lower running costs – similarly, the lack of a physical storefront means running costs aren't as high

– though as a business grows, more manufacturing and/or storage space may be needed.

✓ Open 24/7 – so customers have the option of browsing and buying no matter what time of day (or night!) it is.

✓ Bigger customer reach – not only can customers access an online retailer at any time, they can access them from anywhere. As long as the business ships to them, customers from all over the world can purchase what they need.

✗ Delivery times – unlike a bricks and mortar business where customers can (usually) take their purchases home with them, online retailers rely on a third party to deliver purchases to the customer.

✗ Global competitors – while a global reach means a wider customer base (see one of the pros, above), it also means more competition!

✗ It can be harder to separate work and home – if the business is run from home, as many are to begin with, it's not as easy for business owners to leave work behind them at 'closing time'.

Learning from each other

In the UK pet industry, the range of different business fit together to serve the pet-owning population and their differing preferences and requirements. Instead of looking at the limitations of your type of business, why not take inspiration from what works well on the other side of the fence, and adapt those things to fit how you work?

For example, most traditional high street retailers have realised the benefits of selling online as well as in their physical premises, and adding an e-commerce option to your website is something easy to get help with if you haven't already got it set up. Other valuable



ideas can be taken from online businesses, like offering automatic reminders to re-stock when a product will be running low. For online businesses, personalise your interaction with customers wherever possible (something that's easier with smaller boutique firms), and if you have your own product range, look at stocking products in select bricks and mortar retailers. 📌

Case study: Teddy Maximus

Teddy Maximus, founded in 2015, is all about fun, luxury, British style for consumers and their dogs. The business was inspired by founder Holly Simpson's dachshund Teddy, and its luxury products are loved and purchased by dog owners across the globe. The challenge when starting out was finding the right manufacturers to fit the business ethos, as Holly explains: "We are really proud to be champions of British manufacturing – when starting out it always takes time to identify producers who are going to be reliable and trustworthy. It's worth taking your time to find the right people – and we are very lucky to have that – when you build something from scratch, the beauty of it is that you can work with partners who share your vision and passion."

What are the challenges?

"As any business owner will say, day-to-day challenges are often the same – managing supply, marketing, sales, social media, and so on. But as you become more experienced at balancing priorities and finding the right people to help, this

becomes much easier. As the business grows so do the demands on your time, so staying focused is key."

Who works at Teddy Maximus?

"We are very much a family business, which is wonderful. We bring expertise in where needed and have been lucky to have some wonderful students working with us." Teddy Maximus products are currently sold via the website, as well as in select stores. Holly explains why this works so well. "We are delighted that people love visiting teddymaximus.com, and the website sets the style and tone for everything we are about. For us, working with select stores who share our vision for a luxury shopping experience is also important – meaning that people can see and feel the quality of our products. A one-to-one personalised service really matters, especially for new dog parents. The pace of innovation online is really

exciting, offering new opportunities all the time – and it's great to be a part of that – but at the same time you have to remember that shopping experiences and personal advice is also important."

What about the future?

"We are proud to be the official pet pawtner of the Mandarin Oriental Hyde Park and to be loved by dog owners across the globe. We continue to innovate and listen to the feedback from our wonderful customers. We look forward to continuing our growth online, on social media, and with select partners across the globe."

