

SMALL BUSINESS CORNER

Mobile grooming service has lots of furry friends

By Jeff McKinney
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MIAMI TOWNSHIP – Riding the tide of the fast-growing pet industry, Rick Doepke is struggling to keep up with requests from customers who want their dogs or cats groomed.

After launching a local franchise of Aussie Pet Mobile just nine months ago, Doepke is being forced to expand.

With 80 percent of his sales coming from repeat business, Doepke's firm is expected to pull in 150 customers this month, up from a monthly rate of 120 in June and more than 90 since April.

He stopped advertising last month because demand was outstripping his capacity as he was scheduling appointments two to three weeks out.

"Keeping up with the demand is a nice problem to have, but it also has created some challenges," he says.

Hoping to cut the time customers have to wait for service, Doepke plans to rent another van. He now has one van with two full-time groomers, and hopes to increase that to two vans and three groomers by October.

Doepke, 58, owns the franchise with his wife, Bonnie. He started the business after a 30-year career at Procter & Gamble. He finished the last five years working for P&G's Iams pet-food division.

Doepke's franchise provides mobile grooming services for dogs and cats outside of a pet owner's home.

The firm grooms pets inside of an \$80,000 Mercedes Sprinter solar- and battery-powered van that includes a heated hydro bath, grooming table and two dryers.

Doepke says the average price to groom a dog is \$75 to \$80 and \$85 to \$90 for a cat. The Aussie Pet Mobile concept was created in 1996 in Sydney, Australia. The franchise fee to launch the business typically start at \$40,000, according to the company.

Overall, the pet-care services business has been brisk despite the recession.



The Enquirer/Amie Dworecki

Rick Doepke watches pet stylist **Mackensie Murphy** groom a toy poodle last week in a van outside of a client's home near Walton.

Aussie Pet Mobile

■ **Owners:** Rick and Bonnie Doepke of Miami Township.

■ **Hours:** 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday; 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturday; closed Sunday.

■ **Contact:** 513-264-7387 or <http://yourlocal.aussiepetmobile.com/Cincinnati>

Industry sales totaled \$45.5 billion last year, up from \$43.2 billion in 2008, according to Pet Care Services Association, a Colorado Springs-based international trade group.

For Doepke, about 85 percent of his sales come from grooming dogs and the rest for cats in Greater Cincinnati, Northern Kentucky and South-east Indiana.

He says monthly revenue has more than tripled since January, from \$2,500 to \$8,000 in July. Doepke is not a groomer and focuses on running the business.

Mackensie Murphy, a professional pet stylist and groomer for Aussie Pet Mobile, says pet owners she has worked with prefer the service because of the personal relationships groomers can build with them and their pets.

"It's a lot less stressful for the animals because it's a one-on-one experience between the pet and the groomer," says Murphy, 23.

A groomer for seven years, Murphy grooms about 40 pets a week.

Drue Rolfes says she uses the service because Murphy provides professional and high-quality grooming services – particularly on her toy poodle and two Scottish Terriers – that she can't get elsewhere locally.

Rolfes, who also has two large mixed-breed chow collie shepherds, says the price is lower than she pays other dog groomers and she doesn't have to haul the dogs to be groomed.

Doepke's future goals include expanding to five to seven vans with up to nine groomers by 2015.