

Behind the Scenes: Evanger's Dog & Cat Food Inc.

Moving on Up

After 76 years, the Wheeling, Ill.-based company is relocating to a newer, larger facility in order to accommodate growth.

By Michael Ventre

Holly Sher isn't looking forward to the commute. Sher is the president of Evanger's

Dog & Cat Food Company Inc., based in Wheeling, Ill. Since 1935, her company has been nestled in the same old cannery facility in

which Fred Evanger first cooked up his natural formula for his beloved Great Danes.

Time change, however, and companies grow and sometimes longer distances have to be traveled in order to do business. Sher and her husband, Joel, are preparing to move into newer and more expensive facilities farther south.

"It's about an hour away from my house," Holly Sher lamented. "A lot of traffic."

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But generally speaking, the trek will be worth it.

"We're growing so much, so we need more space," she said. "We want to make more different kinds of food. We want to enlarge what we do."

Right now, what Evanger's does is produce an array of dry and canned food for dogs and cats, as well as treats. The brands vary from Super Premium Gold Dinners and Supplements and Signature Series to Grain Free Game Meats and Evanger's Organix. The company also has a private label arm.

What Evanger's does mostly is the natural thing. That's not

of additives and preservatives. So he built a canning factory on the site where he had his kennels, and it's been there ever since.

The Shers aren't quite that old, however. They didn't get into the game until 2002, when they bought the company. For 15 years prior, Joel Sher had been in the business of supplying canneries with raw materials. In the course of that, he had dealt with Marge French, who purchased the company from Fred Evanger. French, said Holly Sher, wanted to sell only to her and Joel.

"I am allergic to cats. I had just gotten a dog. I always loved dogs



The approach at Evanger's is to simply adhere to a philosophy that was passed down from Fred, and market that to a discerning customer base that values longevity, loyalty and quality.



Evanger's lineup covers all the food angles for dogs and cats, including freeze-dried treats and canned dinners.

unique, of course. Just about everybody with a dog, a business plan and a dream has been diving into the natural, holistic and organic markets because of increased consumer demand.

Yet Fred Evanger had the idea long ago, even before 1935, which is when he officially started the company. He wanted to feed his enormous dogs quality food made with natural ingredients and free

and cats, but that's not the prime reason we did it," Holly Sher said. "It was just perfect timing. It was totally different than what I was doing before. I thought it would be easier than the previous family business, which was in the clothing industry in Chicago."

The Shers dived in and haven't look back.

Again, the market is thick with natural products. But the approach at Evanger's is to simply adhere to a philosophy that was passed down from Fred and market that to a discerning customer base that values longevity, loyalty and quality.

"We make our own food here," Holly Sher said. "We're not an office, not a marketing company. We're here seven days a week. We use fresh ingredients, which is not always easy. Other foods use dehydrated this or that, or use meals."

One example of Evanger's commitment to unadulterated products is its hand-packed line. When you open a can of its whole chicken

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Every month, Evanger's website offers its customers incentive to buy more.

thighs, that's what you get—two of them, intact. Its "Hunk of Beef" is a hunk of beef...etc.

There are also kosher considerations for the observant pet owners. Evanger's offers 30 products for dogs and cats that have been endorsed by the Chicago Rabbinical Council as acceptable for use by those who observe Jewish Law, and they're acceptable for use during Passover holidays. That line came about because one of the Shers' neighbors had fed her dog in the garage rather than violate her religion.

Evanger's sells throughout North America and beyond, covering in Sher's estimation "10 to 15 countries," with help from an overseas rep. Evanger's products are sold by independent retailers and boutique pet shops, not the big chains.

One way the Shers attract customers is to print a calendar featuring monthly specials. There is also a printable monthly coupon on the company's website.

Neil DeVivo, who has a chain of 12 stores—nine along the East Coast and three in Arizona—said he has been carrying Evanger's products for at least 15 years.

"I was looking for a high-quality holistic brand, and there were

very few around at that time," he said. "Evanger's is a really good product. They were one of the first we brought in, and it's been doing great ever since.

"The line expands beautifully," he added. "Pets and their owners are very happy with the product. I never get any complaints, only compliments."

DeVivo said Evanger's is quite responsive whenever he has an issue.



"I sent Holly an e-mail just about three months ago because our West Coast distributor was running out of stock on a few items," he said. "She got right on top of it and got the product in the stores as soon as she could get a truck out there.

"You're going to have problems from time to time with every

The company introduces new protein sources and flavors on a regular basis.

company, but it's all about how you handle it," he continued. "Her heart is in the game."

And her foot will soon be on the gas pedal as she motors through highway congestion to her company's new digs.

"It's five acres, at least three times bigger than what we have now," she said. "We might even have to purchase more [land]. We have to move there. We have to move forward." ■



AT A GLANCE
Evanger's Dog & Cat Foods Inc.

Location: Wheeling, Ill.; relocating to Markham, Ill.
Owner: Holly Sher is the owner, but Evanger's is family-owned and operated
Employees: 78
Years in Business: 76
Areas of Distribution/Business: North America, South America, Europe and Asia
Company Mission: Evanger's is committed to producing the highest quality of pet food available, and is dedicated to improving the health, length and quality of life of the pets that eat Evanger's.
Product/Business Categories: Pet food manufacturing: dog food, dog treats, cat food, cat treats and private-label pet food
Product/Business Lines: Canned food: Classic (Since 1935), Super Premium Gold Line, Hand Pack, Evanger's Organix (USDA Organic) Signature Series 75th Anniversary stews; Treats: raw freeze-dried and jerky treats; Dry food: Super Premium and Grain Free.

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