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Bart and Courtney Emken, owners of DogBoy's Dog Ranch in Pflugerville, count on customer loyalty to buoy their business.

Oh, boy! Dog ranch succeeds

DogBoy's takes bite out of dog kennel market

by AMY E. LEMEN - Special to the Austin Business Journal

Bart "DogBoy" Emken loves dogs, so he decided to make them his career.

DogBoy's Dog Ranch in Pflugerville is to dogs like Las Vegas is to gamblers: total nirvana. Built on the simple philosophy that dogs like to have fun, too, DogBoy's Dog Ranch has attracted pet owners who appreciate taking their beloved pet to people they trust.

DogBoy's has earned kudos from the *Austin Chronicle* for "Best Pet Care" in 2002 and 2003. That's the kind of feedback Emken and his wife, company co-founder Courtney Emken, like to hear.

"My goal is to not make 'kennel' a bad word, and people have responded," Bart Emken says. "We have very strong customer loyalty."

One of those loyal customers is Allison Spann.

"I know my dog is getting the best care possible when I take her to DogBoy's," says Spann, an Austin software developer and owner of Molly, a West Highland white terrier, or Westie. "She gets to play with other dogs there, she's very excited about going, and she's happy when I pick her up."

Spann uses DogBoy's doggy day care a few times during the week so Molly can interact with other dogs, as well as the kennel's boarding services when she goes on vacation. She doesn't worry when Molly is there, because DogBoy's takes special care to place dogs in "play groups" with other dogs of similar temperament.

DogBoy's starts taking reservations for busy dog-boarding holidays like

Thanksgiving and Christmas on Jan. 2. This year, between email and phone requests, the slots were full within two hours. Summers, weekends and other holidays throughout the year also fill up quickly.

"I love seeing dogs that are happy to be here and seeing customers who are also happy their dogs are here," Bart Emken says. "A lot of people say they have peace of mind because their pets are here."

Founded in 1995 with just 10 outdoor runs, DogBoy's now has more than 5,000 dogs and their owners as customers. The company's operations are on 15 acres in Pflugerville. Services include weekday and weekend doggie day care and boarding, as well as dog training through private and group lessons.

Bart Emken has worked with noted dog trainers and has taught dog training classes at the Austin Humane Society.

"We emphasize training through games and understanding the pack mentality," he says. "We teach people to understand their dogs, why they're doing what they do. After all, we want their dogs to be the best companion to them — not just a pet."

Besides being one of the first kennels in Austin to allow dogs to play with others, DogBoy's is also one of the first to require that dogs be spayed and neutered. The Emkens say it's simply about being a responsible pet owner.

"Spaying and neutering prolongs a dog's life and lowers the incidence of cancer," Courtney Emken says.

The kennel also sets itself apart through its "all-inclusive" philosophy, which

includes giving dogs medication if necessary and feeding them special diets.

"Some kennels charge extra for those services, but the only things we charge extra for are nail clippings and baths," Courtney Emken says. "Others charge 'per playtime' and will keep the dogs in the runs the whole time."

Services such as playtime and doggy day care are part of a trend in the dog boarding industry, according to the American Boarding Kennels Association.

Such services "are contributing a much larger percentage to the kennel's income," according to an association survey released in August.

The association expects those so-called "add on" services to keep growing in popularity and make up a larger portion of the kennel income.

But as the cost of doing business rises, kennels will be forced to raise their boarding prices, with fees climbing 15 percent to 20 percent over the next two years, the association predicts. The higher costs will come partly from an increase in "add on" services and partly from an increase in basic boarding prices.

Courtney Emken says the DogBoy's wouldn't be around without a caring, dedicated staff. Most have worked there two to five years.

"We wouldn't be here without them and their hard work," she says. "They wouldn't think twice about coming up here in the middle of the night to check on a dog, especially if they thought there was one with special needs that might need a little some-

thing extra during a storm."

Jeanette Payne owns Doggy Day Out, which opened in 2000 and has adopted similar philosophies as DogBoy's, such as letting dogs play with others and requiring that pets be spayed and neutered. As a result, DogBoy's sends many referrals her way.

"DogBoy's is a leader in changing the perception of a kennel," Payne says. "They've been so good at marketing their business that people are open to my business."

That philosophy has DogBoy's Dog Ranch howling. The kennel achieved about \$551,000 in gross revenue in 2002. Projected revenue for 2003 is \$600,000, but only because the company has reached its maximum for the number of dogs it can handle. Not surprisingly, expansion is in the future for DogBoy's.

"We'd like to open up another location, maybe in South Austin," Bart Emken says. "Franchising also might be an option for the future."

Other ideas in the works include a Web-based reservations system for kennels to make getting on DogBoy's busy calendar easier for customers.

"We love customers telling us how much their pets love it here," Courtney Emken says. "It's not just physical exercise they get; they're exhausted from playing when they get home."

AMY E. LEMEN is an Austin-based freelance writer.