

WHEN NOTHING BUT THE BEST WILL DO
FELINE FURNITURE

Written and photographed by June Grayson

Pity the poor pussies with nothing to do all day. No wonder they claw the drapes and scratch the furniture while the people of the house are away.

If this is the way your cat lives, you definitely have a disadvantaged cat. You need a "kitty klimber" in the corner of your living room -or maybe several of them scattered throughout your home.

Linda and Dave Brinkman say that their company, the AMERICAN CAT EMPORIUM, (A.C.E.), produces the ultimate in cat furniture. They are selling it as fast as they can make it.

Their color brochure illustrates more than seventy cat toys and furniture designs where cats can perch, play, and sleep.

A.C.E. is the largest of the six American cat furniture companies. Their friends sometimes refer to them as the owners of the largest "cat house" in America.

Humor aside, cats mean money in the bank to the Brinkmans. Their business has grown more than 50% annually since they started eight years ago. They expect to reach one million gross yearly sales within a few months.

The Brinkmans meant to form only a "sideline" business, one that Linda could manage while she stayed home to raise their children and Dave kept his full-time salaried job.

They knew their market before committing themselves, one of the first rules for business success. Dave had spent fifteen years in the pet industry, starting as a teen-age clerk in a pet store. Linda has a bachelor's degree in home economics and a master's degree in nutrition. Before their marriage, she worked as a quality control specialist in a multinational food company that makes pet food.

Dave identified an underserved market niche - quality cat furniture. "We thought we could design a better product and provide better service than the other companies already in the field," Linda explains.

They started with four workers in a small factory in McHenry, Illinois, in 1980. Outgrowing that plant in one year, they moved to a 20,000 square foot barn in Elburn, Illinois, where they had room for 15 employees.

Within two years they grossed \$100,000 and Dave had to quit his job to help Linda manage the business.

Their latest expansion? Last year they bought out another pet supplier in Wisconsin and merged the two businesses into one factory in Camp Douglas, Wisconsin.

Their smallest product is a \$1.50 toy with a bell inside of a carpeted cardboard box. Their largest piece of furniture is a complicated climbing post four feet wide and six feet high that retails for \$179. Natural bark-covered branches serve as upright supports for carpeted perches, tunnels, and nests.

Janet Hospodar, the owner of the Geneva Pet Depot, Geneva, Illinois, has four of these big climbers, as well as many smaller variations, in the bright and airy cattery where she

breeds her champion American wire-haired cats. "Cats are just like people," Hospodar says. "If they don't have something to do they will get bored. They like to climb and claw. Without the cat furniture, my cats would be climbing the walls."

Dave is the company's creative designer. Linda interprets his designs and makes them work. She trains the staff and supervises quality control. Dave buys the supplies.

They have a hands-on management style for every step of the business. "Almost 97% of pet products are now imported from Taiwan and are cheaply made," Linda observes. "We produce custom handmade products so we have to provide top-notch quality and service."

A.C.E. is the only company making rustic furniture. They buy hardwood tree branches, in good supply in Wisconsin because the branches are smaller than those used for firewood. Oak, cherry, maple, and especially birch branches make attractive designs. They discard bug-infested or rotten wood.

They buy residential grade carpeting - mill ends and samples in all colors and prices - from a Georgia carpet factory. The amount of carpeting in a design determines the final price.

Staples from pneumatic air-driven stapling guns that deliver 120 pounds of pressure join the different components.

"You don't realize how well our furniture is put together until you try to take it apart," Linda says.

Two full-time truck drivers in two trucks owned by A.C.E. deliver the finished products to distributors as far east as Florida and as far west as the Rocky Mountains.

They do not sell directly to retail customers, but most pet stores either carry or can order their products.

They market their business through regional manufacturers' representatives and trade shows. "For the big shows, we close the plant and take the whole family on vacation. Why do you think the major show is held in Tampa, Florida, in the spring?" Linda laughs.

They use the "shoestring" management style. "We always operate on a cash basis. We buy new equipment when we can pay for it in cash. That way we never have to spend money servicing debt. In fact, the owner of the company which we bought last year said he just got tired of trying to pay the interest on his Small Business Administration loan,"

The future looks "purrfect" for the American Cat Emporium. "This is a recession-proof business," Linda thinks. "We started during the economic downturn of 1980-1981 and succeeded

from the start. When people cannot afford luxurious vacations or expensive hobbies they can still afford to have a cat."

Demographics is also on the side of cat suppliers. "Ten years ago, the pet distribution in the United States was two-thirds dogs and one-third cats. Now it is estimated to be 45% dogs and 55% cats - and still shifting," Linda explains.

"As more women work, the percentage of cats can only increase. You can't leave a dog at home alone for long. But you can leave your cat alone for as long as three days if you have to," Linda says.

At least you can if your cat can frolic the time away on cat furniture from the American Cat Emporium.

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