

Key Wagner's Baltimore Dog Bakery is Dog Gone Good

By Sabina Dana Plasse

To be an entrepreneur one must recognize the moment of opportunity. For Key Wagner, owner of the Baltimore Dog Bakery, her desire to change careers led her not only to owning a niche business, but to one of the most fulfilling opportunities of her life and her passion.

Originally a social worker, Wagner understood business through job placement where her main concern was to keep people in their jobs. Since she placed many of their clients with small businesses, Wagner learned first hand how many types of businesses functioned. After 13 years Wagner grew weary of her job, "I decided that if I got yelled at one more time by one more person I am out of here, though it did take a little while to leave."

Introduced to a recipe for all natural dog treats by a friend, Wagner took an interest in creating a possible business. "They were into it just for their dogs and their friends' dogs," she tells. "They were approached by a store and asked to sell the product and at the time they were making two pounds an hour all by hand." Soon after Wagner bought the recipe and the company from her friend.

Having no desire to take out loans, Wagner found private investors to launch the Baltimore Dog Bakery. Each investor served as a key component to laying a stable foundation for Wagner's business as a viable entity. Her instincts for surrounding herself with the "right" people were uncanny even to Wagner, "I had no idea. I brought in three other people that I knew: a financial person, a creative person and one person who was good at production. I put all those things together and wrote up a business plan – that was nine years ago."

Wagner started selling her doggie treats at Cross Street Market where she shared a stall with another baker. Admitting it wasn't easy, but an incredible learning experience, Wagner grew out of her Cross Street space and found a facility with plenty of room where she could invest more in her equipment and distribute her product on a larger level. Having a storefront was not as important to her as having the ability to make her dog biscuits and lots of them.

Within a year Wagner was selling Baltimore Dog Bakery to Whole Foods and eventually throughout its mid-Atlantic stores as well as adding local markets such as Eddie's, Graul's and Klein's. Wagner's timing for her product also proved to be an important asset to her business. Specialty pet items have grown into an enormous business in the last decade. Wagner explains, "I can do a lot more and would like the chance." She adds, "It's scary to grow and the growing pains are hard. Every couple of months there are new fees, and its part of being a small business owner in the pet industry which is being regulated by the government."

Through lots of research and listening to the consumers who are faithful to the Baltimore Dog Bakery, Wagner feels she has been extremely fortunate with her business. "If I need to know information I will find it out and ask. There are so many rules and laws for a small business, and most of the time I have not idea what they are. When I first started this I hired a bookkeeper, a lawyer and an

accountant. Those were my three hires. They do everything for me.” Wagner also employs two part-time employees. She adds, “My attitude is that I have a good thing going. I have a good product. I know what’s in it and I know it’s healthy... The packaging is good. It’s simple, it’s a bakery, it’s silly and it’s for your dog.”

Selling 300 to 500 pounds a week, Wagner has to do tremendous volume to make money, and hopes that eventually a big distributor will pick up the Baltimore Dog Bakery where she could expand the business even more. And they should. The healthy dog biscuits are excellent for a dog’s digestive system. “I have had lots of people whose dogs have had problems, and this is the only product that their dog will tolerate,” reveals Wagner. “I have had vets endorse it as well.”

Wagner makes three different sizes for her treats which come in five original flavors. Soon she will be introducing wheat and corn free flavors for dogs with allergies. In additions, she creates special packaging for the holidays. Eventually she would like to expand to cat treats. Beyond specialty grocery stores, the Baltimore Dog Bakery treats can be found in Ellicott City at the Yuppy Puppy and in Pikesville at Pet Chic.