

NewsBank InfoWeb**NewsLibrary**

Estimated printed pages: 4

KNIGHT RIDDER/TRIBUNE BUSINESS NEWS

July 2, 1998

ROUDYBUSH MAKES BIRD FOOD IN PASO ROBLES, CALIF.

Author: *LORE LAWRENCE, TELEGRAM-TRIBUNE, SAN LUIS OBISPO, CALIF.*

Article Text:

PASO ROBLES, Calif.--Jul. 2--The corporate world is a battleground soaked with blood and littered with corpses: Pepsi versus New Coke. Cable versus the networks. Microsoft versus Netscape.

And Tom Roudybush versus bird seed.

If you've never heard of Tom Roudybush, you probably don't own a bird. But make no mistake -- Roudybush is a heavy-hitting entrepreneur, a major player who shook up the pet food industry and carved out progressively bigger chunks of a market that once belonged exclusively to such corporate leviathans as Hartz Mountain and Kay-Tee. His products, which are sold all over the world, are made in an industrial park in Paso Robles.

And what does Roudybush do?

He makes pellets. Little pieces of ground up wheat, corn, peanut meal and other nutritious stuff that range in size from a speck of cookie crumb to something larger than a bullet. He also makes a variety of other specialized diets - everything from diets specifically geared for birds with specific health problems to special hummingbird formula. A complete, scientifically formulated, nutritionally complete feed for every bird from the lowliest finch to the biggest macaw. But why bother?

"People say seeds are the natural food of birds, and I agree with that, because people naturally buy seeds and feed them to birds," remarked Roudybush, who maintains that an all-seed bird diet is not nutritious, something akin to feeding your 5-year-old nothing but Twinkies and Ho-Hos.

"People would just plunk (seeds) down and the birds didn't fall over dead in most cases, but they'd get repeated infections of the sinus because they didn't get enough vitamin A, and maybe thinning of the bones because the calcium phosphorus levels were way out of wack, but it's what people believed. Nutrition is a pretty young field."

While he won't talk numbers other than his company cannot meet the demand, in 13 years Roudybush has taken his company from a one-man operation to a company that has brand recognition in the bird world, as well as a large share of the international market.

According to the Pet Supplies Marketing Directory's 1998 report, independent pet retailers' annual sales of bird food total \$270.6 million. And that's just a tiny fraction of the market -- given other bird food retail outlets, including grocery stores and large national chains, such as PETSMART or Petco. The stakes are high.

In 1985, Roudybush, who had worked on and off as a nutrition researcher at UC Davis -- the school that gave him a bachelors degree in biochemistry, and his masters degree in avian sciences -- parlayed his know-how into his own company. Prompted by local bird clubs that were hankering for the special feed that Roudybush made for the Davis laboratory birds, he set up shop.

"I had nothing," he recalled. "I rented 800 square feet. I had a folding table, I had a cement mixer that would make a 30 pounds in a batch. I needed a screen to screen some stuff through, so I pulled a screen off the window. I had nothing. It was out of pocket, and my pockets were empty."

The business took off slowly, losing money the first year. Roudybush initially targeted bird breeders, who buy in bulk and are usually not persuaded by packaging. The word spread, and so did the product, whose milk-carton type containers eventually made their way onto pet store shelves. As the product took off, Roudybush moved his manufacturing operations to Paso Robles, where one of his distributors was located.

One thing that has distinguished him from other bird food manufacturers is that Roudybush has upgraded his products as new nutritional discoveries come to light.

"I know that over the years the formula has changed, which is to his credit," observed Sandee Molenda, one of the nations leading breeders of parrotlets, tiny green birds who originate from South America." A lot of food manufacturers think what theyve done is good enough and don't work on improvements. Tom is adaptable and very reasonable. He's one of the big gurus in the bird industry willing to listen and learn from other people. Not a lot that do that, and He's very, very generous with his knowledge."

Of course, there is the competition primarily by mega-manufacturers like Kay-Tee, which also makes pellets, and Harrisons, a diet manufactured by distinguished avian vet Dr. Greg Harrison.

"Harrisons? Oh boy, I think Dr. Harrison is in for some grief," predicted Roudybush. "Harrisons is organic, and has everything under the sun in it. It has a huge list of ingredients. He pushes it based on his credibility as a veterinarian and the idea that its organic."

"I think the distinction between organic and non-organic is fading. The most persistent pesticides have been eliminated ... He's maybe a fine veterinarian but he's no nutritionist."

Harrisons laid-back reply: "I'll let the response to our product from other vets and from aviculture speak for itself. We have nutritionists who have helped formulate the diets, and we see results in our birds that we don't see from other diets. Is it organics? We don't know for sure. There's a lot of other diets somewhat similar in ingredients but they don't get the same results."

Although Roudybush's administrative offices are in Sacramento, he regularly comes down to Paso Robles to oversee his operations, which employs about seven people.

But given his passion for avian nutrition (not to mention having competitors like Dr. Harrison breathing down his neck) he also spends a lot of time on the road, speaking at seminars, conventions, veterinary schools, and bird clubs, preaching the word of Roudybush. And while he says he leaves the selling of Roudybush to his marketing firm and his worldwide network of distributors, there's no question that Roudybush's best salesman is Tom Roudybush.

"We have a person in France who sells a great deal of feed ... and he won't use anything else," said Roudybush. "I've had a man in Florida tell me that if he can't get our feed, he'll sell his birds and go out of business, because the performance is so substantially better on our diet than it is anything else. I don't want to lose that reputation and I don't want to lose control of the diet."

Visit T-T SLO, the World Wide Web site of the Telegram-Tribune, at <http://www.sanluisobispo.com/>

(c) 1998, Telegram-Tribune, San Luis Obispo, Calif. Distributed by Knight Ridder/Tribune Business News.

Copyright (c) 1998 Knight-Ridder/Tribune Business News

Record Number: 1998183071