

# That Old Town Vibe

Pet Product News' 2017-2018 Lifestyle and Boutique Retailer of the Year winner provides a distinctive, personal shopping experience in the heart of a historic Arizona neighborhood.

## PAWZ ON MAIN AT A GLANCE

**Locations:** 918 N. Main St., Suite B Cottonwood, AZ 86326

**Co-owners:** Denise and Steve Strong

**Employees:** owner operated

**Years in business:** 4

**Square feet:** 1,500

**Products and services:** Boutique, dog and cat foods and supplies, CBD hemp oil, adoption days, gift items, delivery, price matching, fundraising fashion show

**Website:** pawzonmain.com

**RETAILER**

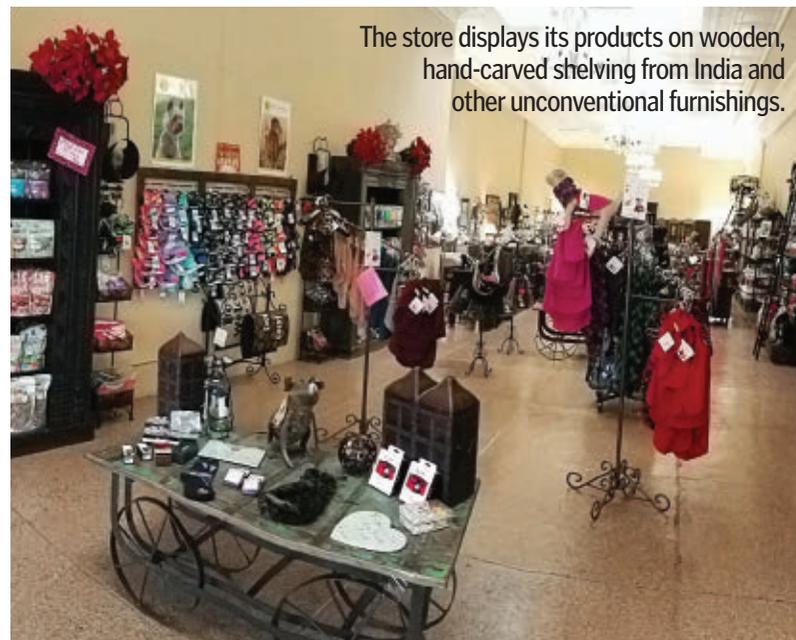
**LIFESTYLE & BOUTIQUE**

of the **YEAR**



Denise Strong,  
co-owner of Pawz on Main

PHOTOS COURTESY OF PAWZ ON MAIN



The store displays its products on wooden, hand-carved shelving from India and other unconventional furnishings.

BY LIZETT BOND

In 2013, Denise Strong and her husband, Steve Strong, were enjoying breakfast at a café in the Old Town district of Cottonwood, Ariz., when they spied a sign that would not only prove life changing, but also bring Denise full circle and back to her roots.

"Steve and I looked across the street and noticed a 'for lease' sign in the window of a building," says Strong. "I was in real estate at the time, so, just for fun, we walked over to check it out."

Cottonwood had only recently become home for the couple, and they loved the charm of the city's Old Town district, located on Main Street. As they explored the building, built in 1924, Strong was captivated by the historic ambience of the 1,500-square-foot space with its original tin-stamped ceilings and period chandeliers. Sensing her enthusiasm, Steve suggested she consider opening a real estate office there.

Strong, however, had other plans. At the time, she was heavily involved with pet fostering in collaboration with Breeder Release Adoption Service, a rescue organization that rehomes dogs from commercial breeding facilities. Subsequently, a

passionate interest in the proper care and feeding of these animals ensued.

"I wanted to open a pet store that offered quality foods and to provide nutritional information to the public," Strong says. "And that's exactly what we did."

Opening and operating an independent retail store was a natural fit for Strong. She enjoyed careers in the corporate world and as a real estate broker, but retail remained a comfort zone to which she easily gravitated.

"My dad was a small business owner, and, as a child, I literally grew up in his nursery and garden center in Virginia," she says. "Even as a 5-year-old, I loved sitting on a stool and running one of those old-fashioned cash registers."

Opening a pet retail store would be like coming home, she thought. Strong decided to name her fledgling endeavor Pawz on Main.

### A FAST FORWARD LIFESTYLE

The venture began welcoming customers in February 2014. At the time, only a small portion of the retail floor was utilized for product display. Within the first year, however, inventory filled the entire 1,500-square-foot space. By year three, sales figures had tripled.

Beyond her background and experience, Strong attributes this growth to friendly,

knowledge-based customer service and an ever-evolving inventory.

"I live a sort of fast-forward lifestyle, and I'm open minded about products that I bring into the store," she says. "This is definitely not your typical pet store."

Strong is dedicated to providing stellar nutrition to local pets, and in an effort to stay abreast of changes, trends and recalls, her research is continual. As a result, she is considered the go-to expert for many pet lovers in the Cottonwood area and beyond.

"People with pets don't always have time to sit down at the computer," she says. "My customers trust that I have already done the research."

Food offerings include organic and all-natural products that are grain and chemical free, manufactured with human-grade ingredients, and USA sourced and made.

"I bring in foods based on what I would feed my own pets," Strong says. "You are not going to find hundreds of brands in my store, but what I do carry is based on my own research."

Because of Strong's reputation for inquiry, clients of a local holistic veterinarian in nearby Sedona, Ariz., often are referred to Pawz on Main for assistance in pet food selection.

In addition, a broad array of supplies including supplements, treats, dental care, bedding, grooming products and more round out the mix.

Items are uniquely displayed on wooden, hand-carved shelving from India and other unconventional furnishings.

"My bully bar with all my single bully sticks is an old, iron wine rack," she says. "Everything is custom here."

For the canine wishing to flash a little bling, Susan Lanci collars and harnesses with genuine Swarovski crystals are in stock, along with a selection of hand-painted collars and other boutique items.

However, the mix transcends goodies for the furry set. Two-legged shoppers can browse an array of specialty gifts and souvenirs, including wine accessories, Laurel Burch designer tote bags, novelty socks, cards, candles, pillows and doormats.

"I try to carry choices that cover all price points so that everyone can afford to buy something fun," Strong says.

To keep things fresh, inventory is constantly evolving.

"Our local customers are here every week," she adds. "I have to offer new things."

### STANDING OUT FROM THE COMPETITION

Strong credits a notable portion of Pawz on Main's business growth to CBD hemp oil.

"I added CBD to my inventory in early 2016 after losing my beloved 3-year-old Yorkie, Isabel, to a toxic mix of pharmaceuticals prescribed by a veterinarian," she says. "CBD is literally changing pets' lives, from chronic pain to arthritis to anxiety, cancer and more, by providing maximum health benefits in a natural way."

Consumer response has been remarkable.

"It's mind boggling," she adds. "We have people coming in month after month to pick up their CBD."

However, the retailer counseled caution when purchasing product, adding that not all choices are created equal.

"I buy mine from Pet Releaf, a company based out of Colorado," Strong says. "It's all grown organically, and I find the quality of their products beyond reproach. The owner has even been out to do an onsite workshop for our customers."

Additionally, Strong shares her own fact-findings with customers.

"I do mini workshops every single day," she says. "We sell about 80 bottles a month."

Cottonwood sits on the Valley Verde Wine Trail, and

as the scene grows, oenophiles flock to the region. Strong estimates that 20 percent of her business is the result of tourism. Travelers checking into the area's pet-friendly hotels are greeted by distinctive Pawz on Main gift bags filled with food and treat samples and a discount coupon.

Pawz on Main is not without competition; a big-box retailer, a smaller pet chain and a local feed store are within proximity. However, Strong's selections, knowledge and personal touch all serve as differentiators. In addition, home delivery services are available.

Price matching is another avenue to staying competitive. Strong examines the prices being offered through the online merchants and compares those findings with each of her own product offerings.

"Talk about labor intensive," she says. "I look at companies that are charging for shipping and those that are not, I figure out the price points, and I'm there."

"On some items, I don't make a lot of money; others, I'm OK," she added. "But we sell in quantity, so this works for us."

Strong takes great pride in a customer base that she also considers her circle of friends.

"I'm old school and keep it personal," she says. "When a customer comes through my door, they are greeted immediately and by name, we hug and I remember their pet's name."

Tables and seating, including a cushy easy chair, encourage customers to linger and visit while soaking in the unique décor and quaint character of Pawz on Main.

"My store is comfortable," Strong says. "Shoppers know I'm not pushy, but if they have questions, I'm right there with them for some one-on-one time."

### FOCUS ON COMMUNITY

Community is a primary focus at Pawz on Main, and that involvement encircles both critters and their people. Championing the cause of homeless pets is an all-important aspect, and adoption days take place on an "as needed" basis in cooperation with area shelters.

That assistance takes a walk on the glamorous side when the annual Dogs on the Catwalk fete gets underway. A furry fashion show is the highlight of the all-day fundraiser, which benefits Breeder Release Adoption Service. The 35-foot runway platform, designed by Steve, spans the interior of the store and is lined with chairs. Spectators observe chic local pooches, owners in tow, strutting their stuff in canine couture from Pawz on Main, and they partake of libations and dine on a repast prepared by Denise. Raffles and live music complete the festive vibe.

"The founder of the rescue group comes from Colorado and brings a few small dogs available for adoption," she says.

The Payments in Kind program supports pets in need through Pawz on Main's credit card processing center, with a percentage of those fees donated to groups of Strong's choice.

Seasonally, popular holiday pet photo sessions generate proceeds that go to greyhound rescue services.

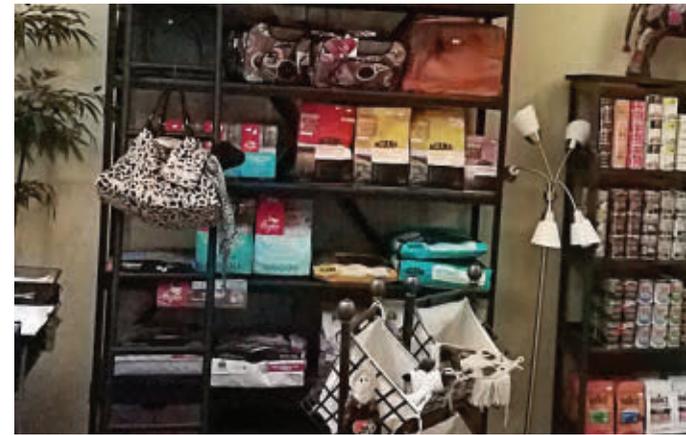
For a little one-on-one care, Strong keeps dog and cat food on hand in her car to pass out to homeless folks with pets, and she donates pet food to a local mission pantry.

Old Town events also are embraced.

"Every year, the Thunder Valley Rally comes to Old Town," she says. "It's like a mini Sturgis [Motorcycle Rally]. We shut down Main Street, and all the bikes come in."

Live bands perform on the street, and vendors ply their wares from booths. At Pawz on Main, attendees browse a selection of Harley Davidson vests, harnesses and hats that even the toughest four-legged biker would find irresistible. Doggles eyewear complete the look.

Advertisements in several local newspapers, social



media postings, and a monthly newsletter keep customers apprised of store happenings and up-to-date on recalls or manufacturing facility issues, as well as provide nutritional information.

Strong also cites word-of-mouth as vital to the success of her establishment.

"Word-of-mouth has been phenomenal for my business," she says. "Customers go to the dog park and their pet is wearing one of my harnesses or its coat is so healthy and shiny, and people ask questions. Then they come to my store."

## THAT OLD TOWN REVITALIZATION

When Eric and Michelle Jurisin acquired a 40-foot mahogany bar with its polished brass and plush green upholstery, the couple knew it needed a special home. After all, it was the very bar they sat at during their dating days. Thus, Nic's Famous Italian Steak and Crab House was born in the Old Town district of Cottonwood, Ariz., with the beautiful piece installed as a focal point. It's an event that prompted a revitalization movement within the two-block district.

"We opened Nic's 15 years ago so we'd have a place for our own dates," says Eric Jurisin. "At the time, Cottonwood's historic Old Town was two blocks of great buildings, a large percentage of which were just sitting empty."

The restaurant was a hit, and soon merchants and other business professionals, who dined at Nic's, were beguiled by Old Town's charm. As a result, many hung shingles and opened doors on the historic street.

"Isn't that how so many of these street revitalizations go all across America?" he says.

Several years later, as the area emerged as a wine region, the street flourished as a tourist destination. The Jurisins eventually opened several more dining establishments, as well as The Tavern Hotel, a luxury, Euro-style inn.

However, when Denise Strong began welcoming customers to Pawz on Main in 2014, Jurisin was skeptical.

"I didn't see people in our area spending high-end money on their dogs and didn't think the store would be around long," he says. "Demographically, it just did not work in my mind. I was dead wrong."

Jurisin noted that the Pawz on Main experience combines a welcoming vibe with expertise and a distinctive mix of offerings.

"Denise goes out of her way to find fun products for animal lovers—items you wouldn't see in a big-box store," he says.

"Pawz on Main is a gathering spot for pet lovers; it's like their own world. Denise brings that feeling to her store."

The very site where the Strong's adventure began is now the Jurisin's Crema Craft Kitchen. The café's walk-up ordering window is a favorite with Pawz on Main customers, who order a coffee and then stroll across the street to hang out with Strong. Often, these pet owners make a day of their outing.

"We sell meals because those customers shop with her and then dine with us," he says. "Who would have thought a pet store would be an asset to our restaurants?"



## IT'S A RETAIL LIFE

### What is Pawz on Main best known for?

**Denise Strong:** Product knowledge and the research done prior to putting anything on the shelf.

### The biggest challenge for independent pet retailers?

**DS:** Competition from the online and big-box retailers. It's a fact that we have to address. I do it by daring to be different—that's what we all need to do

### For the pet industry overall?

**DS:** Our pets are getting cancer from the toxins in pet food. The pet industry needs to encourage the manufacturers to get their act together and stop making it all about money. For me, it's not all about money.

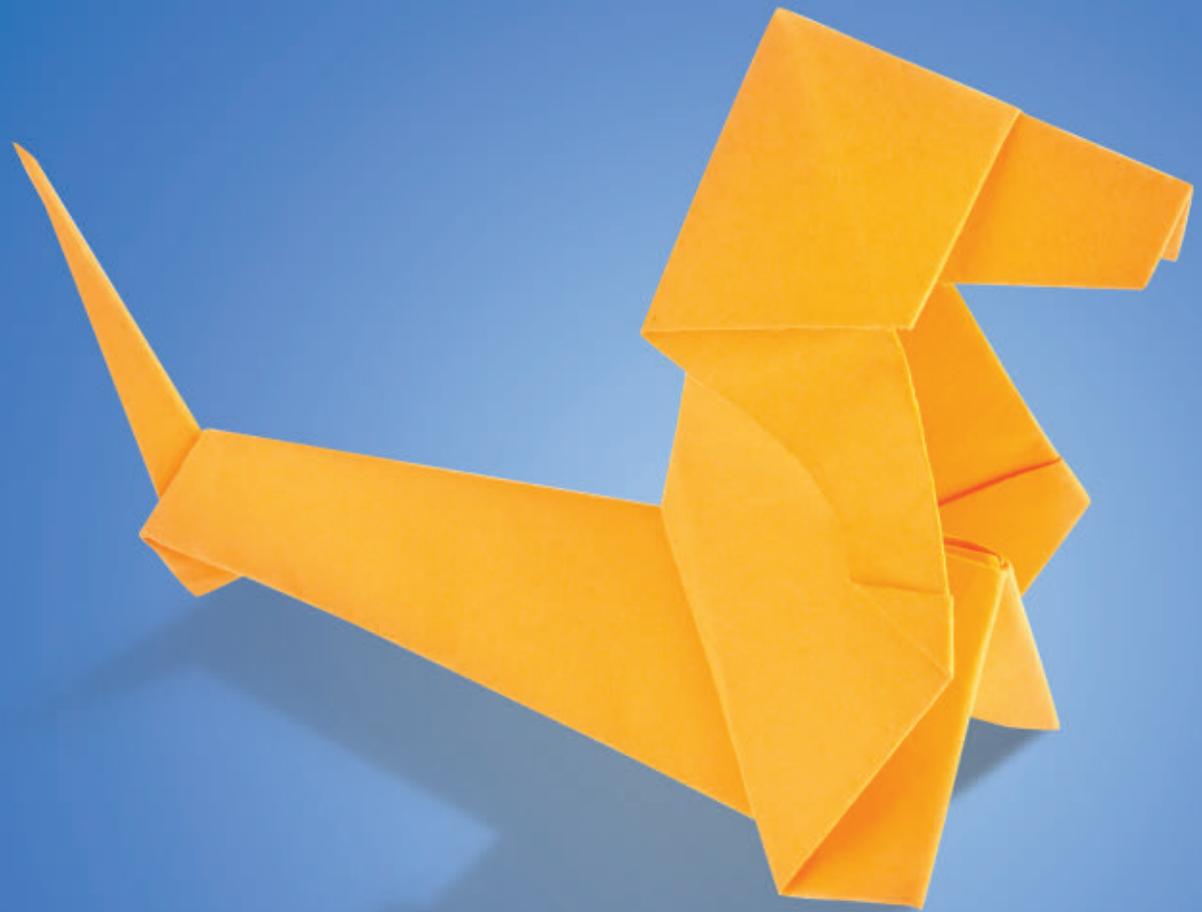
### What trends are you watching?

**DS:** When customers come in, particularly to buy treats, they want their pet to eat a diet similar to their own. For this reason, I carry a lot of single-source-ingredient treats with no fillers and no garbage.

### What do you see for the future?

**DS:** I want to continue to expand my customer base and get the word out to anyone who doesn't already know where I am.

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