
YOU LOOK FABULOUS

It takes at least an hour,
and not a little product,
to get Cypress
Scheherazade Frontpage
ready to face the world



BEST IN SHOW

When it's time—
and when *isn't*
it time?—to primp
and pamper a
show dog, price is
no object.

That is where
Chris Christensen
comes in

BY JOSH DEAN

To trim an unruly shrub into topiary requires only an artful eye, a steady hand, and some clippers, but to perform similar sculpting to prepare a poodle for a dog show is exponentially more complicated. For starters, a poodle must be washed twice—once in the morning, to provide a blank canvas, and again at the end of the day, so that it doesn't have to sleep with a coat that is lousy with products. The evening wash is easy, relatively. After that, a poodle handler need only blow-dry the dog and put its

into tiny rubber bands, so that the hair doesn't tangle overnight. Depending on the size of the poodle, that might take only half an hour.

To get ready for the show, on the other hand, the handler will need at least an hour. He'll need to blow-dry the dog, carefully misting in some texturizer or bodifier or texturizing bodifier (mind you, it's not hair spray, because that would be against the rules) to distribute it evenly throughout the hair; then brush out any tangles; powder in some chalk; brush the hair again with a finer-bristled brush; and then touch up the pompons with some shears. He might finish with some coat spray to add shine, and if necessary dab out any discolorations on the nose with special makeup, and must then keep the poodle from sitting or bumping into any person or thing that could disrupt a poof until it's time to assemble in the ring for the judging.

If this is the first time you've considered the process required to turn a poodle into a show dog, then the whole rigmarole surely seems ridiculous. But if you are the kind of person who views the world through the prism of opportunity, you might also think: That handler needs a lot of products to do his job!

Which explains how it is that Chris Christensen has built a \$4 million-and-growing business out of making and selling beauty products for show dogs.

Chris Christensen Systems, of Fairfield, Texas (population 2,951), manufactures products for every stage of purebred-show-dog renovation. Just a quick tally of what our theoretical poodle handler might need would include: Clean Start Clarifying Shampoo (\$10 for 16 ounces), White on White Whitening Treatment Shampoo (\$12 for 16 ounces), Thick N Thicker Texturizing Bodifier Spray (\$10 for 10 ounces), White Ice Chalk (\$12 for 8 ounces), black ChrisStix touchup stick (\$4), a Kool Dry Dryer (\$375), and some combination of brushes, most likely including a 27mm Fusion Pin Brush (\$55), a 20mm Large Wood Pin Brush (\$35), and a 16mm T-Brush (\$24), as well as Trimming Shears (\$140) and Texturizing Shears (\$195).

And that's just for one poodle. As Christensen said, "The dog-show industry can make a person a pretty good living"

Chris Christensen is the 800-pound gorilla of high-end products for show dogs. He is, you could say, the Paul Mitchell of poodles, or the Vidal Sassoon of vizslas, except that he is more like both combined and then some, because his is a business without rivals.

Christensen, a thin, ponytailed man in his early 70s, lives on a shady central Texas ranch with his wife, Lisa, who is the company's vice president and chief financial officer; an elderly rottweiler named Bear; a papillon named Classique Lyndsey Cabernets (Lyndsey for short); and June Matthews, a.k.a. the Bird Lady of Box Canyon, the couple's 93-year-old friend/"aunt," who, until the Christensens res-

cued her in late 2010, was living alone with more than 300 exotic birds in a California house so ramshackle that when a tree crashed through the roof and into her bedroom, Matthews just readjusted her life around it. ("I didn't have any money," she told me when I visited the ranch in August, during the hottest spell in Texas history. "What else was I going to do? Sleep on the moon?")

For the first eight years of their life in Fairfield, Chris and Lisa ran the business from the ranch—initially from a small casita that doubled as office and warehouse, and then later from a building they put up next door. In August 2010, they cut the ribbon on the brand-new, 13,000-square-foot world headquarters of Chris Christensen Systems, flagship tenant of the Fairfield Industrial Park, just off Interstate 45. The company now has 17 employees.

The fact that a vigorous 73-year-old is now the Vidal Sassoon of the dog-show world is a bit of a happy accident, Christensen explained from behind the heavy wood desk in his comfortably chilled office. For the first 35 years of his career, he was a successful rep for beauty products (the human variety) in Southern California, selling expensive shampoos and hair sprays. Then one day, in the mid-1990s, he ventured out to a local dog show, where, instead of looking at show dogs, Christensen spent most of his time perusing the vendor booths. In particular, a shampoo advertised as a whitener for white dogs caught his eye. He unscrewed the cap, poured a little on his fingers, and had a reve-

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lation. That night, he told his wife he had an idea: They should use their knowledge of cutting-edge beauty-product technology to produce a shampoo to make white dogs whiter. "And that's how we started—with one product," said Christensen.

That product was White on White shampoo. Christensen made just one size at first, a pint, and at his first dog show with the product he sought out nine handlers of white dogs. He handed out the pints gratis, and within 30 days, all nine handlers had called to buy more.

Christensen led me out of his office, apologizing for a limp caused by a Zumba injury, and into the icy-cold conference room, where he plucked a bottle of White on White from a display along one wall. He unscrewed the cap and poured a little onto a paper towel. The syrup that flowed out was a deep blue, almost purple. "Remember bluing laundry?" he asked. I didn't, but I nodded anyway. "It made clothing white, not yellow. That's called 'grabbing' in the beauty industry. It 'grabs' the yel-

low cast and makes hair whiter.” It does this by replacing the pigment in a hair’s cortex with a blue tint, which nullifies the yellow. (Overuse will cause a blue cast, which is how elegant old ladies become “blue-hairs.”)

The success of White on White prompted Christensen to look further into the existing products sold at dog shows. He determined that most of the liquids were just modifications of the same basic formula, tweaked slightly (by adding dye or fragrance or even just a new label) and alternately marketed as products for dogs, or cats, or whitening, or conditioning, or treating harsh coats, or soft coats. Christensen (who wasn’t a scientist but knew the guys who were) figured that if he just made products that actually worked, he would have no problem winning over customers. In the ensuing 15 years, Christensen has attacked product category after product category, expanding his line to 201 stock-keeping units and counting. He has nine U.S. distributors and 42 overseas. “If they have dogs,” he said, “they have dog shows.”

White on White shampoo is still one of his top five sellers, but it has been displaced at the top by Thick N Thicker, um, texturizer. “It’s a PVA—polyvinyl acetate—hair spray, and it caught on fire and has just flown,” he told me, mixing some unfortunate metaphors. Chris Christensen Systems sells, in addition to shampoos and conditioners and sprays, a profusion of brushes. When the owner of his brushmaker, a small operation in Germany’s Black Forest, showed him a brush with wood bristles three years ago, Christensen fell in love with the craftsmanship and put it in his line. Today, the Wood Pin Brush—available in three sizes and starting at \$25—is his best-selling brush, the unrivaled top tool on the market for getting out tangles. It’s so effective that he gave me one to take home to my wife. And I did. I gave my wife a dog brush and got exactly the reaction you would expect upon doing it. I then put it out of my mind until, three days later, she announced that it “was the best brush I’ve ever used, in my life.”

There is no one method to how Christensen tackles a particular product. His comfort zone, owing to his background in the beauty business, would probably be the liquids. Sometimes, as in the case of hair spray, he need only source a good formula and repackage it. In other cases (White on White, for example), he works with a trusted chemist to tweak a human formula so that it works on dogs. Once his name had become a trusted brand, expansion was easier. At that point, dog-show people were ready to buy his products, and Christensen’s challenge was to be rigor-



FAMILY BUSINESS Lisa and Chris Christensen with Classique Lynndsey Cabernets

ous about quality. His distributors told him he was nuts to enter brushes, and then shears, because those were deep and competitive categories. But Christensen knew that the same thing that worked with shampoo or hair spray—that a truly effective product sells itself—would work with any other category.

He determined what customers wanted by simply going to dog shows and making himself available. Handlers would bark out requests, and Christensen would scribble them down: “Make me a comb rake, put a handle right here, and make it 7.5 inches long. I’m going to use it on Great Pyrenees and other big dogs with a longer coat!” He would design a prototype and send it out for a test. In some cases, he would name the product after a person who had asked for it: For instance, the BB Tail Teaser Buttercomb, a \$27 stainless-steel, double-toothed comb with a long handle, is named for a Westie breeder.

Christensen’s line grew quickly, as he identified areas in need of improvement. “Shears is the most exciting category I’ve ever been in,” he told me, though I suspect that on a different day he would probably say the same thing about stripping

knives or wood pin brushes. Shears were probably on his mind, because he had recently unveiled a new top of the line, installed above his previous top-of-the-line model, which cost \$200. The new shears were handmade of Damascus steel, a Swedish variant comprising 67 layers of steel. He asked his factory in China to source the metal, sent specs, and then had the blades tweaked in Texas until they were perfect. At \$500, the Damascus steel shears were not a volume play, but they further burnished Christensen's reputation as a maker of quality and also caused sales of the \$200 shears to spike, since they were now the middle price point in his line.

In 2010, he had a new portable cool-air dryer (the Kool Pup), which used technology from the company's first-ever acquisition, and he was preparing to introduce an industry first on its back: an adapter that mounts to the hose, allowing for various products—which CCS will, of course, sell—to be sprayed into the coat via the powerful blasts of cool air.

Relentless expansion is obviously Christensen's primary

I asked if selling at Westminster was difficult, and Christensen rolled his eyes. "You just hand product and take money," he said.

mode of operation, and it has driven propulsive growth at CCS, even during the recession of 2008 and 2009. There was a very simple reason his company did well, Christensen said: "New products. We just kept adding stuff."

Only a small portion of Christensen's sales is direct to consumer over the Internet. The lion's share is driven by his distributors, who are given regions and exclusive rights. It's a model he learned in the beauty business, where Paul Mitchell, he told me, "has made millionaires out of all of his distributors."

Roy Loomis has owned the largest U.S. representative, the Phillipsburg, New Jersey-based Cherrybrook, for six years. In addition to controlling the most lucrative region for dog shows, the 11 states that make up the Northeast, Cherrybrook operates three retail stores. Last winter, I stopped by Loomis's booth at the sport's Super Bowl, the Westminster Kennel Club show at Madison Square Garden, and he pointed out Christensen's line, which occupied at least half of the footprint of his 400-square-foot booth. Loomis said that one of the best business moves he had made was to tighten his relationship with Christensen, who at that very moment was demonstrating the "buttery" feel of a \$55 fusion brush to a woman in a sweatshirt with a golden retriever head on it. "He's a great salesman," Loomis said. "So he moves tons of product. He's a good per-

sonality, too." (It has become common, in fact, for customers to ask Christensen for autographs.) Already, Christensen had sold a pair of \$500 shears for Loomis.

Indeed, Christensen was selling like mad in my periphery, until there was a rare break in the traffic, at which point he slumped against the counter. He was, he said, "so sick I can barely think." Only the manic energy of the show was keeping him upright. I asked if selling at Westminster was difficult, and he rolled his eyes. "You just hand product and take money," he said.

Loomis beamed and put a hand on the shoulder of his star supplier.

"The dog-show world is one of the funnest things I've ever done, because when we develop a new product, we spend most of our time and energy trying to figure out how to make it work instead of spending most of our time and energy trying to keep it below a retail price level," Christensen told me later. In most industries, he explained, you identify what you think is an attractive retail price point and "then see where you can cut

corners to bring the product to market and not exceed that projected price." In the dog-show world, he said, "you can spend your energy and creativity and research on how to make this product better, so that these folks going to the show ring have a better chance of coming out with a blue ribbon." He was very proud of this.

"You can market a product at a much higher price than in a grooming shop or retail pet store," he said. "We can spend our time and creativity and be at \$50, and if the doggone product"—I'm almost certain no pun was intended—"does what it says it will do, it'll sell."

Lisa Christensen is 24 years younger than her husband, and though she is both attractive and charming, she is anything but a trophy wife. The two first met in 1986, when Lisa sold display ads for a California newspaper and one of her clients was a pet store Chris had opened for his son. A year or so later, the two ran into each other at a dinner party, and upon hearing that Lisa was newly divorced and, like him, enjoyed country and western dancing, Chris asked her out. Lisa said she'd think about it, and she wasn't kidding. Three months later, she called to accept.

The two fell in love and merged their lives, and a few years later relocated from California to Texas to lower their overhead and give their fledgling dog-product business a better chance to survive. For three years, they worked out of the guest bedroom of a small house in Dallas, using the garage as a warehouse, where Chris filled orders with an orphaned blue jay named Zippity resting on his head. ("Truly," Lisa said. "I have pictures."). Over time, the two sold enough shampoo to buy 15 acres about two hours south of the city.

From the onset, the two were the perfect balance for each other: Whereas Chris is risk, Lisa is caution. "Our accountant

says he gets a kick out of us,” Lisa said, “because Chris always has his foot on the gas, and I have my foot on the brake.”

In addition to holding the purse strings, Lisa wears many hats and has, during the past half-year, overseen two major new initiatives. The first was a total overhaul of the company’s website, which hadn’t been updated since it was first built in the late ’90s. The new, sleeker site was set up so that any of the company’s distributors can choose to have a CCS “child” site that will look exactly like the mother site, only with that company’s branding. Anytime CCS adds a product or tweaks a label, all sites will update simultaneously. The distributors, then, need only manage sales and distribution.

The other project aims to solve a critical problem of the Christensen business. “The dog-show vendors—we call them distributors, but they’re really retailers,” Lisa explained. “They’re selling to the end consumer.” That means if a person wants White on White, or a T-Brush, he or she is going to have to buy it from Cherrybrook or, if the person is in Seattle, The 3 C’s (which controls the Pacific Northwest). This system works great for dog shows, but it foils any effort to expand into grooming shops and pet retail before it has begun. Even the shops—some of them major national pet stores—that call and ask for product (on the order of 10 or more a week, Lisa noted) wouldn’t be able to sell the products with any success, given the prices the distributors would want to charge. Lisa saw only one solution. “We need a retail line that doesn’t hurt our show and pro line,” she said.

That line—Lisa Lynn—has been in quiet development for a year, and should begin to appear by early 2012. It will not, as you might assume, come in at a lower price point. “It will actually be more, probably,” Lisa said, explaining that the idea is to go in the complete opposite direction of the low-cost, high-volume brands you find at pet stores and in catalogs like PetEdge. Rather, Lisa Lynn products will be in smaller sizes, at higher prices. Think Aveda—less technical than the dog-show stuff but prettier, with more “froufrou perfumes,” said Lisa. “The stuff pet owners will buy.”

To pull back slightly, the business space into which CCS is growing is made up of three industries: dog shows, grooming, and retail. The company dominates the first, but that market is finite. That leaves two, much larger areas to probe, and while Chris is more interested in grooming—in the past year he’s attended more grooming shows than dog shows—Lisa is into the retail world.

I spent enough time with the Christensens to realize that Lisa isn’t just a smart and strong personality who balances her husband; she’s a shrewd executive. She said that one reason she’s so focused on containing cost and avoiding debt—or paying it back as quickly as possible—is that the reality of her circumstances warrants keeping a very close eye on the future. Being 24 years younger than her 73-year-old husband, she will,

in all likelihood, be running the company herself someday.

And yet, her foot is only barely on the brake. Her own goal, she told me, is to triple the business in four years. “No grass grows under our feet,” she said with a smile. “It never has.”

Despite the fact that America’s economy was at that very moment in great turmoil, there were no signs of stress at CCS. Chris led me through a door into the warehouse/factory portion of the headquarters, where the 110-degree summer heat smacked me in the face like a blast of jet wash. It would have been far cooler to stand in front of one of the company’s cool-air dryers, one of which was being assembled in a corner by a cheerful woman in shorts and eyeglasses.

Much of the heat was drafting in from a massive loading-dock door, open to the outdoors while pallets were stacked for pickup. CCS is the local UPS office’s largest customer, to the extent that the driver who used to have the route called her truck the Chrismobile. That kind of personal relationship is precisely why both Christensens consider their small-town location to be a linchpin of their success. So long as they

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promised to double their work force by 2016, the local government gave them the land, with room for 80,000 square feet of expansion, for free.

One reason CCS should easily fulfill that requirement is that the company is preparing to take over the mixing of chemicals for its liquids. And while the move introduces risk, both financial and chemical, to the operation, it provides yet another excellent opportunity for growth. Within a few months, CCS will have the ability to contract-fill for other companies and, because it already does labeling on-site, provide a full-service operation for private-label jobs.

With sales at \$4 million and climbing, expansion already under way into grooming shops, and a retail line in the works, it should be noted that Chris Christensen is also not at all finished with his domination of dog shows. At last count, he told me, his company was in only 13 of the 100 categories that apply to show dogs. “Think about leashes and collars and crates and dollies,” he said. “The list goes on and on and on.”

Josh Dean is a regular contributor to the magazine. His book about show dogs will be published next spring.