

## ALS Solutions Inc.

ALS Solutions, Inc., a small manufacturing firm based in St. Marie, Illinois, was recently awarded the prestigious Consumer Digest "Best Buy" award for their signature product, The Dog Palace, an insulated dog house. Intended for outdoor use, The Dog Palace is made of polyethylene inner and outer walls for easy cleaning, and has up to four inches of recycled Styrofoam to keep your pet warm in winter and cool in summer. The Dog Palace looks like a small barn with a self-closing door with window and a raised sloped floor. Both the interior and exterior can be easily cleaned with a garden hose.



Howard Atkison is the president of ALS Solutions and says that the inspiration for his business was from his own personal experience as a fourth generation owner of a St. Bernard dog. All the other "insulated" dog houses on the market are not adequately insulated he says. "I felt there was a need for this type of product and began investigating how to build one that really worked" he added.

Mr. Atkison began work on his insulated dog house while working as a Vice President at Roadmaster Corporation, a manufacturer of bikes, exercise, fitness and playground equipment based in Olney, Illinois. In early 2000, Roadmaster was in the midst of being purchased by a multinational corporation, which eventually decided to close the Olney manufacturing plant where Mr. Atkison worked.

During the period before the Roadmaster plant finally closed in mid 2000, Mr. Atkison joined with a fellow coworker to incorporate A & G Holdings LLC, to purchase a 9,000 square foot manufacturing building in St. Marie, Illinois. At the same time, Mr. Atkison incorporated ALS Solutions Inc. as the entity to manufacture and sell The Dog Palace. During the initial planning stages he heard about Barney Brumfiel, the director of the Illinois Eastern Community College Small Business Development Center, who helped him with the business plan. The Illinois Eastern Community College Small Business Development Center is partially supported by the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity. The business plan for The Dog Palace took about three months to complete and was revised several times over the next two years. Mr. Brumfiel also helped the firm identify specialists to assist with specific engineering problems, and to identify sources of financing for the venture.

Because of his experience working in a manufacturing environment, Mr. Atkison was familiar with the equipment and materials needed to manufacture the insulated dog house he envisioned. The firm established a plastic rotational molding business, and began developing prototypes for The Dog Palace starting in late 2000.

While Mr. Atkison was in the developing phase for The Dog Palace, like countless entrepreneurs before him, he worked part time and consulted with other companies. By the time a final prototype was developed in early 2003, the firm had purchased equipment and rebuilt the St. Marie facility to suit the production needs of The Dog Palace.

Once the manufacturing production system was completed, Mr. Atkison began marketing his product to retailers. Because the Dog Palace is large, it is flat shipped by United Parcel Service carrier to be assembled by the customer. To minimize shipping costs, Mr. Atkison decided to try to sell The Dog Palace locally at Rural King, a farm supply store and at area veterinary clinics. In addition, the company contacted Petco, the national pet supply retailer based in San Diego to see if The Dog Palace could be sold though its stores or on its web site. Today Petco.com sells The Dog Palace for \$229.00 plus shipping and handling through their web site. It is not sold in Petco stores. Mr. Atkison is very pleased with the sales so far from the Petco web site, and how the product is placed in various Internet search engines.

Mr. Atkison is seeking more chains like Rural King to stock his product and is in the midst of finalizing several vendor contracts. He feels that marketing to this kind of store will reach his target customer, a farmer or "wannabe farmers" according to Mr. Atkison, who live in a rural or the far ex-urban fringe of a metropolitan area, who has land and keeps their dogs outside. "This product is not for dogs in an apartment" said Mr. Atkison. "Rural King stocks real products that you cannot find at discount chains or other retail stores. A farmer would expect to find our product in a Rural King store" he concluded. Today The Dog Palace is stocked local Rural King- Feed Stores and Vet Clinics, and Mr. Atkison hopes to expand by 160 stores by mid 2004. Currently the company employs six people.

The Illinois Eastern Community College Small Business Development Center is a member of the Illinois Small Business Development Center Network, working in partnership with the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity and the U. S. Small Business Administration.