

Peter Muhlenfeld, Champion Pet Foods
9503 90 Avenue, Morinville, AB T8R 1K7

Champion Pet Foods is, well ... a champion, the name says it. Winner of the international Pet Food of the Year Award for the third year in a row, this Morinville company has nabbed top honours by creating what they call “biologically appropriate” pet food, which is sourced from regional ingredients. And, according to Peter Muhlenfeld, they would not be the success they are today without the support provided by Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development (ARD). They helped “tremendously,” he says. ARD assembled a pet food team that was “instrumental in the creation of the concept itself.” They helped Champion link up with suppliers of fresh regional ingredients. These included Alberta chicken and beef producers, helping Champion source the freshest ingredients and connect with people raising farm animals naturally and humanely.

One of the points that Muhlenfeld emphasizes about his working relationship with the people at ARD is that they do not attempt to impose their expertise on their project, but help Champion Pet Foods realize their vision of what specific types of pet food would address a nutritional gap left by pet food supplies on the market at that time. In addition to Champion’s dry kibble, ARD also helped to make sure the product, under the names of *Orijen* and *Ancana*, would sell. ARD’s attempt to realize Champion’s vision of what was needed in the pet food industry to improve the health of dogs and cats, helps explain some of Muhlenfeld’s enthusiasm for their ongoing contributions to the success of the company. The nutritional composition that sets Origen apart from other pet food products is found in its very high animal protein content, which he argues are natural to the animal’s digestive system. The pet food industry is largely unregulated at this point, which means that pet food companies are free to include ingredients of many kinds in the product as a way to reduce their bottom line while also selling their product more cheaply. By contrast, Champion’s business model, which ARD fully supported according to Muhlenfeld, was to introduce a pet food into the market at a higher price point than most others, while also featuring 80 per cent locally sourced protein. On the pet food forums on the Internet, pet owners feeding Champion pet food products report a remarkable increase in the energy level of their pets, a dramatic improvement in the sheen of their pet’s coats, and a reduction in the size of their pet’s stool. The high protein content means that the pets can be fed less overall, which might offset the increased cost of this high quality food product. By identifying that dogs, for example, are genetically very similar to wolves, instead of to humans (despite their high level of intelligence and label as “man’s best friend”), Champion was able to diverge from common practice in the pet food industry at the time and create a pet food product that was extremely reduced in carbohydrates. Despite the innovation of this approach, ARD experts offered their full support throughout the initial research and development stage of the product. As well, since Champion manufactures, packages, and distributes the product out of their Morinville facility, ARD provided crucial business advice and important grant support along the way to help establish the company as a long-term, viable business venture.

One of the “multi-dimensional levels” of help ARD provided was to support Champion’s presentation at the International Trade Show called Interzoo in Nuremberg, Germany. According to the Interzoo website, “Some 1,500 exhibitors and more than 38,000 trade visitors from 115 countries make Interzoo the world’s undisputed leading exhibition for pet supplies.” Muhlenfeld was especially impressed that ARD flew a representative to Nuremberg to help spread the word about the authenticity of this Alberta product. This kind of support, he says, has contributed to Champion Pet Foods’ current availability in 60 countries around the world. As Muhlenfeld says enthusiastically, nothing the ARD did was about government policy, but instead they bought into what we were doing from the start, and offered help on all levels as needed, from branding the product, to marketing, and also production. And now that they are a well-established, Alberta business success story. ARD continues to provide assistance with sourcing the regionally grown ingredients they use in their product, putting them in touch with individual farmers, and expanding their ingredient base.