

The vet whisperers

Forchelli, Curto has a law practice dedicated to veterinarians

By ADINA GENN

If it takes a certain breed to become a veterinarian, developing a veterinary law practice requires the aspiration to be best in class.

“It was born out of necessity,” Mary Mongioi, a partner at Uniondale-based Forchelli, Curto, Deegan Schwartz, Mineo & Terrana, said of the firm’s veterinary practice group.

As Mongioi tells it, the practice got its start about six years ago when partner Robert Groman began assisting his son, a veterinarian, with employment agreement negotiations. Groman realized “they were different than everyday documents. He began looking for lawyers to help him, and found there were none.”

The practice now has eight attorneys practicing in this field. It addresses the special needs of veterinarians in the sale and purchase of their practices, as well as the day-to-day contractual and management and compliance issues.

The growth of the practice comes at a time when big corporations, including candy giant Mars Inc., are buying multiple vet groups.

Best known for its Snickers and M&Ms, Mars has moved into the growing pet care space, as fewer consumers are craving sweets and an increasing number are spending more on their pets. In January, Mars agreed to acquire VCA Inc., a Los Angeles-based animal hospital chain, for nearly \$7.7 billion and the assumption of 1.4 billion in debt, adding to its existing base of three animal hospital networks.

Americans spend more than \$66 billion on their pets – including supplies and medicine, vet care and grooming and boarding – according to the American Pet Products Association.

With corporate giants getting into this



Photo by Judy Walker

MARY MONGIOI AND DAN DORNFELD: Their practice grew as people spend more on pet care.

growing field, including investment funds that are actively buying practices, smaller practices have more on their plates than simply caring for animals. There are economies of scale to contend with, and individuals wondering if they need to sell in order to stay in the game.

“There’s a lot of consolidation,” said Daniel Dornfeld, a partner at Forchelli Curto. “Big companies are buying multiple practices in the last year, and now they’re doing it on a national basis.”

In the last three years, smaller consolidators are seeing vet practices as an investment vehicle, which holds a certain appeal. The investors “don’t have to practice medicine, and the veterinarian doesn’t have to run the practice,” Mongioi said.

The partners also help vets with such matters as protecting a vet’s license as a valuable asset, especially in matrimonial proceedings, and advising new vets as they learn how to run a business. There are other matters including keeping up with recent regulations and navigating the

field of employment agreements, and employee handbooks. They advise when vets are ready to sell and with buy-sell agreements. And there are other issues about financing and working with banks.

The practice strives to educate vets so they know to anticipate certain regulations, and keep up with new changes.

“Consolidation changes the model, we keep up with the industry as it changes,” Dornfeld said.

That kind of expertise is invaluable, said Brian McKenna, the hospital administrator at Plainview-based Long Island Veterinary Specialists, which has leaned on Forchelli Curto for agreements, contracts and zoning issues.

“They have the knowledge of industry that most lawyers do not have – that’s huge,” he said.

Meanwhile, the vet industry continues to rise.

“It’s a very profitable industry,” Dornfeld said.