



No Pet Left Behind

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More consumers are traveling with the family pet, creating sales opportunities for pet-travel product manufacturers and the retailers that sell their wares.

Phone calls, text messages and hoagies are not the only things that create potentially deadly driver distractions; dogs, and even the occasional cat, are increasingly the culprits behind inattentive driving. An AAA/Kurgo survey reveals that one out of three dog owners confessed to being distracted by their dogs while driving. Two out of three admitted that they actively engaged in distracting activities with their dogs, like playing or feeding, and letting them sit in their laps.

The AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety says that looking away from the road for just two seconds doubles the risk of being involved in a crash. According to the AAA/Kurgo “Doggie Distractions Fact Sheet,” there are at least 45.6 million dog owners in the U.S., and the vast majority bring their dogs along for the ride. Meanwhile, only 17 percent of owners use some sort of restraint.

“The AAA indicated that 6,000 people per year are killed due to distracted driving,” says Gordie Spater, president of Salisbury, Mass.-based Kurgo. “Texting is the leading part of this problem, but based on [the survey], it is also clear our dogs are sometimes part of the problem.”

Fueling Demand

Little wonder then, that states across the country are considering implementing laws that require drivers to restrain their pets and keep them off of their laps. This creates a good opportunity for pet-travel products manufacturers and the retailers who sell those products.

There are also other trends in play that show promise for this category.

“Airlines and hotels are increasingly catering more to travelers with small pets,” says Michael Leung, co-owner of Sleepypod, located in Pasadena, Calif. “Many airlines allow in-cabin travel now.”

Pets are being treated as part of the family and, consequently, they are going wherever the family goes, says Gretchen Seitz George, president of PetRageous Designs, located in Burlington, Mass. This has sparked a growing demand for products that meet the needs of pets on the move.

Vehicle manufacturers are also responding to the pet travel trend, says Rick Messmore, director of marketing for Covercraft Industries, based in Pauls Valley, Okla. Several automotive

manufacturers, such as Honda and Volvo, offer canine-friendly designs in certain models, and others, such as Subaru, are working on doing the same, he says, adding that efforts are also being made on many fronts to educate the public about pet travel safety.

“As awareness grows, the market grows,” Messmore says.

Retailing Right

On the one hand, the fact that pet travel products are increasingly moving into the public’s awareness is good news for pet retailers; on the other hand, the trend has also made the category more attractive to non-pet-related retail chains and even automotive retailers, says Tibor Siklosi, director of marketing and new product development for Bergan, located in Monkey Island, Okla.

“[These chains] are understanding the preferences of the pet owners already shopping their stores,” Siklosi says. “As they get better at converting traffic, it directly impacts traditional pet retailers.”

An effective counterattack requires that pet retailers thoroughly understand their customer base and tailor their inventories accordingly, while being sure to offer the latest and greatest, he says.

Siklosi suggests that retailers create a pet-travel solutions section, citing a study that Bergan commissioned revealing that over 60 percent of shoppers surveyed anticipated travel products to be organized this way, but that not a single retailer had done so.

“Merchandising around the pet travel experience opens the mind to see the whole story,” he explains. “Consumers are inspired to see the whole travel experience and then connect with more product solutions.”

PetRageous’ George seconds this approach. She says creating a section increases pet owners’ awareness of the various essential products that could make their life easier and the pet’s life more enjoyable.

Eye-catching, informative displays help drive this point home. Take advantage of manufacturer POS materials and brochures. Posters, signage, banners, racks and headers can all help retailers promote the category and are things that manufacturers make readily available.

When building the store’s pet travel inventory look for easy-to-use, high-quality products that come with a guarantee. It also helps to try out unfamiliar products before deciding whether to stock them, says Leung, of Sleepypod.

“Personal experience is extremely valuable when choosing and selling products,” he explains.

Establishing a Connection

With some personal experience under their belts, it is time for retailers to share what they know with customers. Talking to customers and asking relevant questions are key to competing with big-box and Internet retailers, Siklosi says. The one-on-one communication helps pet retailers establish themselves as pet travel experts—something non-pet-related retailers might find

challenging. He suggests talking to customers about what pets they have, their previous experiences traveling with pets, where they are traveling to and for how long. “Travelers are often unaware of such issues as pet odor, safety, security, nausea, pet hair, feeding and watering,” he adds.

It is important to engage the customer in conversation, since every one has a unique circumstance in terms of the types of pets and vehicles they own, Spater says.

“By determining what the consumer’s needs are, the retailer can focus on the right products,” he says. “[Retailers should also] offer a broad enough product line so that every unique combination of dog and vehicle can [be matched] with a product that suits their needs.”

Be sure to learn the key features of the travel products the store carries, as well as their benefits and how they are used so that you can confidently educate customers on the importance of pet travel safety—after all, what a retailer tells and sells them could save their lives and the lives of their pets. To prepare, be certain to take advantage of manufacturer training, when available, for yourself and your staff.

Also suggest to customers that they test out the products on their pets at home first, says Leung.

“Let them become acclimated to the products for at least a week and make sure the products will perform before any trip,” he says. “We wouldn’t want to find any surprises during a trip.”

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