

# Pet Business

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The business resource for pet retailers

## FOCUS ON PET TRAVEL

# Pets and People On the Go

The time has come for retailers to meet the growing demands of the many pet owners who are traveling with their pets.

By Jennifer Boncy

**B**efore the days of convertible baby car seats, designer diaper bags and ready-made travel changing kits, people made do with what they had. Babies were swaddled in blankets or held in mom's lap. Parents also had to be resourceful and forward thinking enough to ensure they had everything they needed for baby before hitting the road—even when they weren't going far.

Over the years, however, safety concerns, consumer demand for convenience and the increasing mobility of the American population lead to a different kind of baby boom. Manufacturers, recognizing the untapped sales potential in the baby market, introduced a flurry of products geared toward ensuring baby's safety and comfort on the road and in the air.

Pet travel product manufacturers are predicting a similar trend in the pet industry. Every day, manufacturers are coming up with new products to make traveling with pets safer and easier. As the number of people taking their pets on the road grows, these companies are banking on increasing awareness among these consumers that they need to not only make sure they're meeting their pets' basic needs during travel, but also keep them as safe as possible.

So with the category ripe for the picking, it's up to retailers to harvest the crop, manufacturers say.

### Why Now?

Retailers who are on the fence as to whether they should invest money and shelf space to the travel category needn't look too hard for evidence that this is a trend with legs. Experts



agree that not only are more people on the go, more people are taking their pets with them.

"It's more common and widely accepted to travel with your dog than it was years ago," says Tammy Ann Arnett, owner of Pet Flys, a manufacturer of carriers and other travel-related goods. "Now, if you spend time at an airport, you'll see ten to 12 pets go by."

Browse the web and, there too, is plenty of evidence that traveling with pets is becoming the norm. Consumers are hungry for information on how and where to travel with their animal companions, and several websites are answering the call. Pettravelcenter.com is a one-stop resource dedicated to helping people travel with their pets. Founder and president Tom James says the site offers worldwide resources for people who are looking for pet-friendly hotels, businesses and products.

"You wouldn't know that there is a recession by the strength of the pet industry, at least in travel," James says. "People have not stopped spending for pet travel accessories."

He reports that the travel segment of the pet industry is growing by leaps and bounds. Many hotel chains and bed-and-breakfasts are opening their doors to pets, and they're offering amenities such as plush pet pillows, pet beds and gift packages stuffed with treats and toys. Some are even opening up walking trails and other off-leash facilities.

### While the Iron is Hot

Manufacturers say the pet industry has a prime opportunity now to tap into this fledgling segment of the market. In fact, most pet specialty retailers these days have some travel-related

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products wedged somewhere among the growing spectrum of items on their shelves—maybe a car harness, a seat cover and a portable water bowl.

But manufacturers say the best way to generate the soaring sales they

### The Adventure Mat

According to the American Pet Products Association, 21 percent of dog owners and three percent of cat owners take their pets with them

when they travel by car. That means more than 8 million pets per year are gearing up

for some serious road tripping. Australian-based Kakadu Pet has come to the rescue with their unique line of pet travel products.

Launched last February, Kakadu Pet's mission is to outfit American pets with gear that suits every pet owner's lifestyle.

Among their line of specialty travel products, the Kakadu Pet Adventure Mat is kind of like a "doggy blanket" that rolls up like a yoga mat and travels with pets anywhere they go. It's machine washable and comes in four funky color combinations. Traveling with the Adventure Mat gives pets a sense of security and a familiar smell in unfamiliar locations, which is important in keeping pets calm.



believe are possible in this category is by grouping them together and merchandising these products in a way that customers can't miss. Retailers who do, says Gordie Spater, president of Kurgo Products, are selling substantially more travel products than their competitors.

"We see that they may sell four to five times the amount of pet travel products than other retailers," he explains. "The people in the store get trained on [travel] and the section becomes a destination. Customers who bought something there can refer someone else."

He adds that pet specialty stores are ideally positioned to benefit from this merchandising strategy. "It's a way to differentiate from the mass retailers, who are either not carrying these items at all or not at a sufficient level to meet the needs of a range of different dog and vehicles sizes," says Spater, whose company makes travel harnesses, doggie booster seats and a host of other traveler-friendly items.

Another manufacturer that is aggressively moving into the travel segment of the pet industry is Bergan, which makes a number of pet travel items, such as seat protectors and beds. Tibor Siklosi, a director of product development, says the company was impelled to "do a deep dive" into the travel products category by the mounting evidence of consumer demand revealed by the Bergan's proprietary consumer data research arm, Vox Capio. Siklosi adds that data also suggests that grouping travel products into its own section of a store may be the most effective way to sell them.

"We found that over 70 percent of pet owners expect every pet specialty retailer to have an on-the-go section already organized, and ironically most don't have one," he says.

### What to Stock

Figuring out what products to stock in this section, especially for small retailers, however, can be a challenge. Manufacturers suggest retailers stock a wide enough assortment of products to meet a range of needs. After all, items such as harnesses, carriers and car seat covers are not one-size-fits-all deals. But creating a store-within-a-store dedicated to travel goods may be too costly, both financially and in terms of space, to pull off.

Several manufactures are trying to make merchandising and purchasing decisions as easy as possible. Kurgo, for instance, take the guess work out for

retailers by offering display programs that range in price from \$369 to \$1,500 and include the company's bestsellers and merchandising racks.

However, retailers who want to pull an assortment together on their own

should know that some items are must-haves. Pettravelcenter.com's James says harnesses and pet carriers were in high demand this past 2009 holiday shopping season, and back seat protectors are trending up. He also advises retailers to

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focus on quality, because that's what shoppers are looking for.

"We're finding that manufacturers are continually improving their product designs, primarily based on feedback things like car seats that are more safe and secure and crash-tested harnesses," he says. "Consumers out there are really looking for products that are not only attractive and appealing to look at but will also provide that level of safety and security for their pets."

### Safety Firsts

There are few pet-travel regulations comparable to the infant car seat regulations that most states have these days, but safety is becoming a huge driver in travel product sales.

"More and more people are realizing that if I buckle up my child in the car, I should be doing something similar for my dog—both for the safety of myself and the dog and everyone else involved," Spater says.

When Bergan delved into the pet travel category, its product developers took safety to a new level by establishing a safety standard by which to measure the effectiveness of travel harnesses. Working with independent engineers, the company came up with a test to measure factors like product durability and the amount of force it can withstand. At the outset of the endeavor, even Bergan's own products didn't pass. However, the company is introducing up-to-standard harnesses under the Bergan and American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) Collection brands this spring.

Bergan and the ASPCA are also behind a new movement to encourage responsible and safe pet travel. Under the moniker Paws to Click, the two organizations, along with other corporate sponsors, will seek to raise public awareness on the issue and prompt people to buckle up their pets before hitting the road. **PB**