

Mark Your Territory in the Pet Industry

By June Campbell

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North America's pet industry is booming. A study released by MarketResearch.com predicts that the pet care and pet supplies industries will reach an \$8 billion market by 2007. Pet owners are demanding luxury products and services for their companion animals. Savvy entrepreneurs are jumping on board to meet the challenge.

In 2003, According to Bob Vetere, Managing Director of the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association (www.appma.org), pets are found in 64.2 million US homes. This is an increase of ten million since 1993. In Canada, StatsCanada reported that in 1992, 41200f households had a pet. Industry experts believe this number has increased since then.

Not only are more of us living with pets, but increasingly, we are regarding our pets as a member of the family. And, like family members, we buy gifts for our animal companions, pamper them with luxury health and grooming services and feed them the same nutritious foods that we select for ourselves.

"People are starting to look for high quality products," said Vetere. "Natural food, vitamin enriched food, toys, play things – one guy is manufacturing a line of designer couches for pets. He can't make them fast enough."

High end, luxury pet products are indeed hitting the market, and doing well. Think Hallowe'en costumes for Fido and Fluffy along with special treats for furry trick and treaters.

Think Christmas stocking stuffers for Kitty, self-cleaning litter pans, automatic feeders, a dog treadmill and even a container of turf to toss in the back of the SUV for Fido's convenience while you are on the road.

You will find pet pillows, lap mats to protect your good clothes while you cuddle your pet, car seats, a sling shot for throwing tennis balls....

Similarly, luxury pet services are in demand. Traditional boarding kennels are competing with pet hotels that pamper their four-footed guests with heated floors, couches, fluffy pillows and a VCR playing "animal-entertainment" tapes.

Grooming services now offer luxury treatments like massage, essential oils and aromatherapy. Pet psychics listen to your animal's vocalizations and interpret the hidden meaning of Fluffy's meows or

Rover's barks.

Veterinary clinics provide a wider range of services to meet consumer demands. Chemotherapy, a very expensive treatment, is now available for our companion animals, and dentistry has become a standard component of the veterinary practice. More of us are seeking holistic veterinary treatment, and more of us are purchasing health insurance for our animals.

It is a growing market for imaginative entrepreneurs, but as always, you have to do your homework. Julia Oulton, co-owner of DJ Pets (<http://www.djpets.com>), reports that she test-marketed her line of designer pet couches at craft markets before going into production. "Craft markets are great ways to test things, and to get your name out there," Oulton advises. "Just don't go expecting to make a million dollars."

Oulton has more advice for would-be entrepreneurs. Focus on a niche market and find a unique product. "Don't try to be everything to everybody," she says.

It is wise to expand your product line to include lower priced items. While not everyone will spend \$800 on a custom pet sofa, many will buy lower priced gifts and toys. Moreover, promote your specialty products or services in places where people are already spending money on luxury pet items. "We keep our products out of the traditional pet stores and instead, we approach the gift shops and doggie bakeries and day cares," Oulton explains.

One last piece of advice from Oulton: you will not need a huge sum of money to get started, but you will need a few thousand dollars to get launched and to make yourself look professional.

The booming pet industry offers opportunities for Internet marketers as well. Those without their own products or services can promote affiliate programs such as those found at Linkshare (www.linkshare.com), Commission Junction (www.cj.com) and Associate Programs (www.associateprograms.com).

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