

Pet owners increasingly dote on their little charges

All in the family

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PetSafe Village in West Knoxville, which offers a day camp for dogs that includes a twice-daily play time, is among a growing number of businesses serving a four-legged clientele. For a fee, owners can leave their pets at the supervised day camp while they work.

Ask retired military man and Morristown resident Elmer Fleenor about his two miniature Yorkshire terriers and he'll be the first to admit: They're "the last two kids in the house - besides me."

Dakota and Savannah have their own toy box, and enjoy monthly trips to the groomer as well as regular trips to the veterinarian for shots and checkups. That doesn't include sojourns to PetSmart in West Knoxville for treats, toys and, on this day, an electric heating pad for Savannah "because she's always cold," said Elmer's wife, Joyce.

When the family - which includes the Fleenors' grown children and grandchildren - gathers for Christmas this year, "I know him," said Joyce, nodding to Elmer. "They (the dogs) will have more under the tree than anybody else."

Elmer has plenty of company - from Hollywood stars like Paris Hilton to more regular folks like Karen House of South Knoxville, whose three miniature schnauzers get ice cream, liver bits, bacon strips and a special Christmas dinner.

There are JJ and Sandy Tracy of West Knoxville, whose 4-year-old basenjis enjoy a birthday party, tree trimming party and Christmas stockings each year.

And there's Terri Watson of Lenoir City, who has spent \$11,000 on veterinary care for her dachshund, Patty Cakes, on a variety of ailments that include a ruptured disc in her back, damaged kidneys and broken toes.

Diana Bishop of Fountain City has a 2-year-old cocker spaniel that spends two days a week at doggie day care, has a pet sitter and this year received a pink Coach collar for Christmas.

In fact, an all-time-high 63 percent of U.S. households now own pets, up from 56 percent in 1988, according to the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association.

Spending on those pets has ballooned even faster.

Pet-related expenditures are expected to reach \$35.9 billion this year, double the spending of a decade ago, according to the manufacturers association.

"The growth is obviously dramatic," said Bob Vetere, APPMA chief operations officer. "It's become one of the top 10 retail segments in the United States. It's bigger than jewelry, it's bigger than toys, it's bigger than hardware."

A majority of those dollars go for dogs and cats - although fish spending is prominent because of expenditures on equipment and tanks.

"I would say dogs are the largest niche," said Vetere. "Cats are not too far behind."

That spending breaks down into several categories, including food at an estimated \$14.5 billion this year; veterinary care at an estimated \$8.8 billion; medicine and pet supplies at \$8.8 billion; and pet services, including grooming and boarding, at \$2.4 billion.

These expenses dwarf the cost of purchasing the animals, which the APPMA estimates will total \$1.6 billion this year.

From cashmere sweaters, name-brand accessories and five-star dog hotels to thousand-dollar veterinarian bills, Americans are forking over high dollars for the creatures of comfort that have become highly valued members of the family.

That has translated into a crop of new businesses responding to the demand.

Big-box retailers such as PetSmart and Superpetz are continuing to expand, while new boutique stores specializing in dog treats, specialty foods and high-end pet products are opening across East Tennessee. Veterinary schools, including the University of Tennessee's College of Veterinary Medicine in Knoxville, are churning out a growing number of specialists, new treatments and cutting-edge diagnostic tests for pets.

Fifty years ago, dogs and cats were barnyard and backdoor animals, secondary to the more valuable species like cows and pigs that ended up in the human food supply, said Michael J. Blackwell, dean of UT's College of Veterinary Medicine.

"But something strange happened along the way - some would say strange, some would say beautiful, some would say logical, and that is the movement of companion animals really into the hearts of people," he said. "Companion animals have moved from the barnyard to the bedroom. Literally, they're just integrated into the family."

On any given day at big-box chain retailer PetSmart you'll bump into this new generation of pet owners, perusing racks of dog sweaters, buying specialty-brand food, stocking up on snacks and squeaky toys.

According to APPMA statistics, the typical buyer of pet products is a 46-year-old woman.

That average buyer actually breaks down into a couple of key demographics, said Mark Michalowski, store manager at PetSmart's Morrell Road location.

"The primary pet parent is a female between the ages of 24 and 45," he said. "Most of them are married and don't have children. Their pets are their children."

"You have the baby boomers whose kids are now either in college or out of college, so the dog or the cat is their primary companion," he added. "You take the statistics that people are getting married later in life and having children later in life, what do you fill the gap with? People are picking animals."

Retailers and pet-centric businesses have responded to pets' new status as full-fledged members of the family.

Pet day-care businesses allow dogs to socialize, an important component of development and similar to play groups organized by conscientious parents.

Pet product companies are focusing on the creation of interactive toys. Radio Systems, a Knoxville-based company that primarily develops technology-based pet products that include wireless pet fences, automated feeders, bark collars and dog doors, is exploring the pet toy market with an eye on technology-driven gadgets that respond to the pet and react to different animal behavior, said Doug Grindstaff, the company's vice president of marketing and new business development.

"It's a different relationship now" between consumers and pets, Grindstaff said, and buyers are seeking more educational, interactive products. "The technology is such that the toys of the future can really be very exciting and fun, like what kids have today."

Other companies are creating matching products for pets and owners. One global company, Doggles, sells matching charity bracelets and sweater/scarf sets for the fashion conscious.

At PetSmart, customers are called "pet parents" rather than owners.

UT's veterinary school has created a social work program to aid students and pet owners in resolving issues of grief and loss when it's a pet's time to die.

"If you stopped and asked (a pet owner), 'How do you consider your dog?' " Michalowski said, "they're going to say they're part of the family rather than, you know, just a dog."

That mentality has led some new and existing businesses to cater an array of luxury services to that ever-growing group of pet owners.

Local veterinarian Mili Bass said more pet owners not only expect but demand the best for their "four-legged family members."

That includes everything from massages and day care to portraits and luxury boarding accommodations like those provided by Dream Katcher Lodge, which costs a minimum of \$39.50 a night for a dog and \$19.50 for a cat.

"We're not a boarding facility for everybody. We do feel that people who come to Dream Katcher Lodge are not really going to be as concerned about price as they are how their dog or cat is treated or housed," said Bass, who owns the upscale boarding facility in Farragut with her husband, Richard, and Chuck and Betty Charlton, who also own All Kreatures Pet Care.

Amenities in some of the canine facilities at Dream Katcher Lodge include color televisions, heated floors, Web cameras and a window view of the courtyard. Cats can curl up on a handcrafted, four-poster bed while drinking water from a Neiman-Marcus crystal dish.

At Claxton Canine Clips, a full-service grooming facility that touts itself as "a doggie day spa," dogs can get their teeth brushed, their nails painted and trimmed or bathed with special moisturizers and shampoos.

Dogs await their turn in a play room instead of a cage. Afterwards, pet owners are given a report card grading the overall health of the pet, owner Perri Waiwaiole said.

"People absolutely love them. They put them on their refrigerator just like people with kids in school do," Waiwaiole said.

PetSafe Professional Solutions, recently started offering pet sitting and pet waste removal services.

Richard Mann, trainer and co-manager, said the demand is huge.

"There are a lot of pets who can't be boarded because of physical or social issues," Mann said. "Other customers would prefer to keep them out of a kennel environment."

All of their pet sitters are trained in canine CPR and pet first aid.

Beginning in January, PetSafe Villagewill offer pets full-body massages and "Yappy Hour," a singles night for owners and their pets.

The complex, which is owned by Radio Systems, includes an indoor training center, a dog fitness center, grooming space, cat condos and dog suites. It also offers doggie day care and doggie day camp.

"It's a whole culture shift," Mann said. "More and more pets aren't the backyard animals we play with. They're part of their family. It's not dog and cat. It's an extension of the family."

What money doesn't go for food and fun ends up being spent at the veterinarian's office.

Take Patty Cakes, the 14-year-old dachshund belonging to Terry Watson, an Oak Ridge lawyer who lives in Lenoir City.

"I'm not married, don't have kids, and she's my kid," Watson said.

That relationship has translated into \$11,000 in medical bills, beginning when Patty Cakes was 4 years old and ruptured a disc in her back. Watson made a decision to surgically repair the injury rather than put the dog to sleep. In addition to a slew of other injuries resulting from the dog's bad back, Patty Cakes has recently developed kidney problems.

"It's something all the time," Watson said.

As a result of pet owners like Watson, the animal health-care business has seen a huge shift in recent decades, said UT's Blackwell.

In the past 50 years, veterinary medicine largely conquered the problem of infectious disease in pets, such as distemper, which often took pets at a young age.

Now, with animals less likely to die due to so-called "childhood diseases," Blackwell said, they're living longer and, like humans, succumbing to diseases like kidney failure, diabetes, cancer, hypertension, arthritis and heart trouble.

This, combined with an increased emotional attachment to pets, has driven new developments in diagnosis and treatment of disease in household animals and a spike in the amount of money spent on health care, he said.

UT, like other veterinary colleges, is rushing to respond.

With construction on a 62,000-square-foot, \$8 million addition planned to begin next year, the veterinary school will expand its oncology, physical therapy and critical care programs.

And a growing number of veterinarians are choosing specialties such as neurology, radiology, dermatology and surgery in response to the increasingly complex demands of veterinary care.

What's less easily addressed is how to pay the bills.

Pet insurance is one solution to the problem, and more people are opting to take out policies on their pets, Blackwell said.

But he doesn't want the human model of modern-day medicine replicated for animal care to the detriment of today's hands-on, personal veterinary medicine.

"We are going to have to find ways to manage that care in a more economical way to keep the costs within reach of most people," he said.

The question of why we have become so attached to our animals is one Dr. Elizabeth Strand, who heads the social work program at the University of Tennessee's college of veterinary medicine, has been pondering for several years.

One reason, she said, may be that "they provide a little respite of escape," from our busy lives and often more-complicated relationships with humans.

Many times, she said, pets help people cope with loss or loneliness.

And why we pamper pets, she said, may be because "it's very easy to satisfy (them), and we just feel good about ourselves."z

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TOP TRENDS

- New pet services: From new beauty treatments, training services and sitting to massage therapists and travel agents, companies will strive to meet animals' physical and psychological needs.
- Medical advancements: The number of human-class medical procedures available for pets is on the rise, with a growing range of diagnostic and treatment options that include brain surgery, cancer treatment, cataract surgery and even contact lenses for pets.
- Animal-assisted therapy: With new research showing the benefits of animals to humans, pets are being used for therapy. Dogs comfort Alzheimer's patients, riding horses improves the motor skills and coordination of the disabled and dolphins are being used to aid autistic children.
- Licensed pet products: SpongeBob SquarePants, Blue's Clues and Clifford the Big Red Dog are showing up on aquariums, dog toys and pet apparel.
- Private labeling: Retailers are introducing their own brands of pet products, with 11 percent of cat food, 12 percent of dog food, 13 percent of pet supplies and 21 percent of cat litter now being sold under in-house brands.
- Mergers and acquisitions: Explosive growth ultimately leads to consolidations. In addition to the combination of larger national pet manufacturers, just last week Knoxville pet product company Radio Systems announced it was buying the Staywell brand of dog doors, an English company.
Source: American Pet Products Manufacturers Association

U.S. HOMES WITH PETS

- 43.5 million: dogs
- 37.7 million: cats
- 13.9 million: freshwater fish
- 6.4 million: birds
- 5.7 million: small animals
- 4.4 million: reptiles
- 4.2 million: horses
- 800,000: saltwater fish

U.S. SPENDING ON PETS

- 2005: \$35.9 billion (estimated)
- 2004: \$34.4 billion
- 2001: \$28.5 billion
- 1996: \$21 billion
- 1994: \$17 billion