

Boutique & Gift: Pet Boutiques on Cutting Edge of Eco Trends

Turning green to entice new customers and drive business.

By Sandi Cain

Natural, organic and environmentally friendly products are going to the dogs...and the cats. The green movement of the 1970s is being recycled, for both people and their pets.

"We've seen a big shift to eco-friendly products over the past few years," said Bo Nelson, owner and president of Wholesalepet.com. "In 2007, the rage was to bling your pet out...now it's hip to go green."

Companies such as TropiClean Naturally Green Pet Products in Missouri report that this trend is related to an increasing tendency toward humanizing pets.

"The more we can tie the pet to the pet owner in needs and buying patterns, the better it is," said Joe Zuccarello, sales manager for TropiClean.

In another example of this trend, New York-based Simply Fido is adding human lifestyle products to its line of organic pet toys to meet consumer demand.



Products in the green category are still selling well, despite the recession. *Photo courtesy of Bowsers pet products*

The potential for retailers is huge. According to the American Pet Products Association (APPA), there are 71 million U.S. homes with pets. Last year, APPA said the use of green products was one of the top trends of the year. In a November 2009 Gallup poll, 77 percent of respondents said they've switched to more environmentally friendly products, despite the recession.

Boutiques stand to benefit. Green products provide retailers the opportunity to educate a growing base of consumers seeking products they are likely to pay more for. Boutique stores are often "miles ahead" of big-box stores in product knowledge, said Spencer Williams, president of Bozeman, Mont.-based West Paw Design.

Some manufacturers are even bringing operations back to the U.S. from overseas to better control the manufacturing processes.

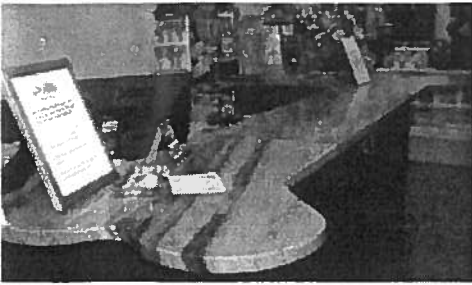
"We were blown away by the (unsolicited) response both nationally and internationally when we brought (manufacturing) back to the U.S.," said Stephanie Volo, president of Planet Dog in Portland, Maine, which makes a line of bamboo products.

This year, it's expanding its nontoxic Orbee-Tuff Recycle Ball and RecycleBone lines with new sizes and colors.

Distributors are adopting green ideas, too. Chicago-based Zeus And Company Inc. has seen almost a 50-percent increase in companies seeking products that use renewable resources, according to company President David Levy. In response, Zeus seeks out such customers and recently partnered with another company to share deliveries.

"We don't compete with the same brands, so if we can deliver each other's goods, it reduces costs and fuel and is good for the environment," Levy said.

In the past, retailers that adopted such practices, such as Green Pawz in Ann Arbor, Mich., which opened its doors in early 2009, sometimes had a hard time finding green products to stock.



Today, the bigger challenge is deciding which green products to stock. At Green Dog Pet Supply in Portland, Ore., the staff decided to seek products that were made of recycled materials that are durable, sustainable, locally made and/or provide a good value.

"We want to make customers consider where things come from and where they go when you're finished with them," said owner Christine Mallar.

New green products include everything from updated hemp collar and leash designs from Brentwood, Tenn.-based Earth Dog and new packaging from World's Best Cat Litter by GPC Pet products in Muscatine, Iowa, to a line of Eco+ pet beds from Toronto-based Bowers that includes a hemp bed with environmental information on the hangtag.

"It fills the void in eco-friendly, high-quality pet beds," said Bowers president Bob Wilkes.

Green cat litter and doggy training pads, such as the new Eco-Care Training Pads from Simple Solution, help reduce the amount of waste going to landfills each year. World's Best Cat litter, made of corn, is biodegradable, while Eco-Care Training Pads contain 85-percent recycled material.

Juno's Garden in Pacifica, Calif., soon will offer refillable and gallon-size containers of its shampoos and cleansers.

"It takes less packaging and still encourages sales," said owner Julianne Eskite.

TropiClean Naturally Green Pet Products has launched a consumer-friendly natural solution for pet dental needs with its Fresh Breath line that requires no teeth brushing, while San Rafael, Calif.-based Worldwide will introduce about 20 new products by mid-year. Those include the Purr Highness cat scratcher made of recycled corrugated cardboard, a 100-percent organic catnip, the Fresh Catch cat toy with organic catnip and the Knockout Tree that dispenses organic treats.

For dogs, Worldwide reported it is launching a line of soy-based beds with recycled content that will keep 50 million soda bottles out of landfills. Chairman Aaron Lamstein said Worldwide wants to increase the number of value-based products made with recycled, reclaimed, natural or organic products produced in environmentally responsible ways.

Boutique owners can do more than pay lip service to going green.

"Practice what you preach," said Lisa Pearce, co-owner of Green Pawz. She uses local resources, buying furniture from thrift stores and using local craftsmen to create a unique look. Pearce advocates community efforts such as sponsoring a dog park or setting up a recycling center for used pet supplies.

Sonya Ryan, president of Wagging Green in Melbourne, Fla., said shops could encourage customers to recycle by giving them a discount on new leashes or collars if they bring an old one to recycle or donate to a local shelter.

"The customer gets a great deal and you're helping a shelter, too," Ryan said.

Mary Beth Kvaka, owner of Scalawags in Kennebunkport, Maine, reuses packing materials, uses green cleaning products and sells green shopping bags to reinforce the environmental message. Shops also might consider stocking treats in bulk to encourage customers to return for refills.

Grouping organic, recycled and sustainable products in one area of the store calls attention to the green products, makes it easier for customers to find them and gives proprietors a platform to educate customers about them. Pearce combines the green theme with holiday themes—wrapping treats in biodegradable wrapping paper for Christmas or stocking toys of recycled materials in red for Valentine's Day.

Boutiques might offer a theme of the month featuring different types of green products.

Before stocking green products, retailers and manufacturers alike recommend that boutique owners do their homework about products billed as eco-friendly. Boutique owners may ask questions about how the product is sourced, manufactured and transported and learn its benefits—then educate their customers about these topics and tell them how they save money by using green products.

“They appreciate that kind of value when you provide it,” Mallar said.

Creative owners who can explain the benefits of green products are likely to gain repeat sales.

“If you give good advice, they’ll come back for other products,” said Bruce Kelling, co-owner of Big Shrimpy in Seattle.

Because higher quality green products cost a bit more, they also generate more income for boutique owners.

“They’re a fantastic way to increase profitability,” said Williams of West Paw. <HOME>