

## Briefs

The **Association of Pet Dog Trainers** (Greenville, S.C.) posted nearly a dozen free webinars featuring well-known pet training and behavior professionals at [www.trainyourdogmonth.com/events](http://www.trainyourdogmonth.com/events) in conjunction with National Train Your Dog Month. Although the event was held in January, the webinars and additional resources are still available.

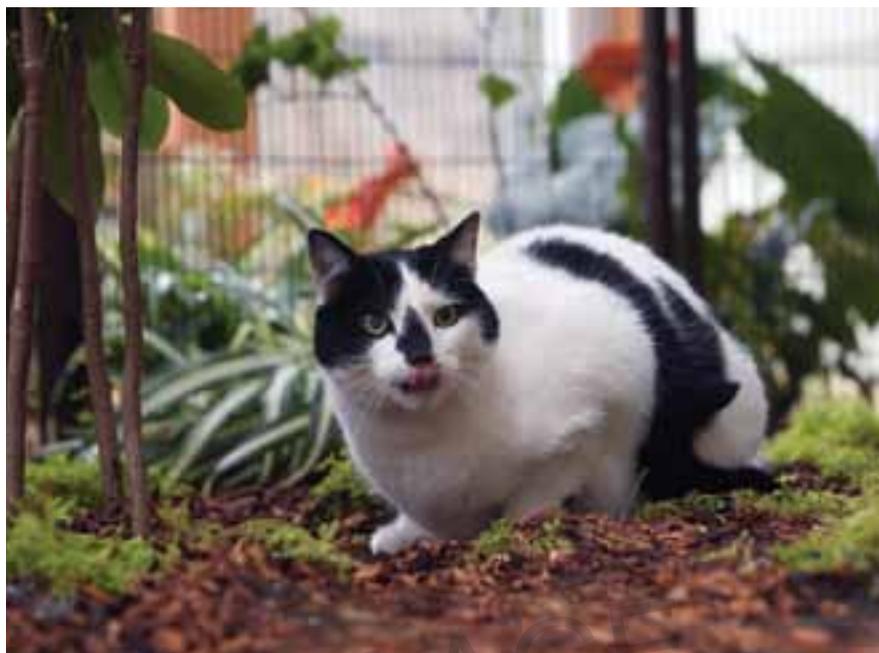
The World Team Grooming Championships will be held in Barcelona, Spain, in September 2013, according to Chuck Simons, director of public relations for **GroomTeam USA** (Oswego, Ill.).

The **International Judges Association** (Mechanicsburg Pa.) now offers certification to professional stylists, groomers and bathers. Candidates may use their competition results at IJA-sanctioned events to apply for certification in that breed, or allow judges to review online before-and-after photos. Additional certification opportunities will be hosted by **Nash Academy** (Lexington, Ky.) and other IJA-affiliated venues around the world.

For more information, contact Andrea Lane at [alane@ijaonline.com](mailto:alane@ijaonline.com).

The **National Dog Groomers Association of America Inc.** (Clark, Pa.) added new written exams and a schedule of upcoming workshops and test sites to its website, [www.nationaldoggroomers.com](http://www.nationaldoggroomers.com).

Stacey Marrs recently opened **Raleighwood Pet Sitting** in Raleigh, N.C. She opened her first pet business, **Queen City Pet Sitting**, in Charlotte, three years ago. ■



Today's successful pet-care facilities offer amenities commonly found in human resorts. For example, Pet Camp Cat Safari in San Francisco offers gardens and suites with enormous windows and great views for its feline guests. No dogs are allowed, emulating human resorts that offer quiet, child-free areas.

## Boosting Boarding Revenues

Here are four proven strategies you can use to compete effectively and dramatically increase your bottom line. By Laura Laaman

Despite a challenging economy, the pet industry continues to grow. In fact, the latest estimate by the American Pet Products Association (Greenwich, Conn.) puts the industry's size at \$51 billion. When you dive into the numbers, however, you discover that the boarding segment is not growing quite as quickly as the pet food and veterinary care segments.

Contrary to common belief, the boarding segment's slower growth is not due to a slowdown in travel, but rather a lingering perception that kennels are scary places to leave a pet.

Any and all of my clients will tell you that they have countless people cry in their lobby when leaving their pet. A huge segment of pet owners would not think of using a "kennel." With the help of an independent research firm, my program, Outstanding Pet Care, is

currently conducting what I believe will be the largest consumer study to confirm, quantify and better understand many pet owners' reluctance to bring their pet to a pet-care facility.

In addition, the boarding market is now much more competitive. Major chains that focus on large volumes, high efficiency and cross-marketing are certainly making inroads. The good news is that owners of independent pet-care businesses who anticipate, recognize and embrace new market trends are flourishing. In fact, they are increasing their revenues by 50 percent to 100 percent or more by offering the right services to the right pet owners. Here's how you can, too.

### Offer Something for Everyone

Three segments of pet owners have emerged in recent years. The first group

considers their animal companion a child in furry clothing. They believe “nothing is too good for my baby.” These are profitable customers for a boarding business because they are willing to make great personal sacrifices to have their pet pampered—just like at home. These sacrifices include giving up dining out or their daily latte habit just so Cocoa doesn’t go without her favorite premium food or treats. These people often forego travel if they can’t afford their pet’s premium care.

The second group considers their pet a member of the family, one which they will care for within reason. They will still make some personal sacrifices for their pet but will not go to extremes.

Finally, the third group believes their pet is “just a dog” and “he’s fine in a cage.” They don’t spend much money on their pets and rarely anthropomorphize—attribute human characteristics to their animals—as much as members of the first two groups.

Where is the growth? The top segment is growing rapidly. The middle group is growing, but more slowly than the top. And the bottom group appears to be spending less per pet than ever.

Offering the *right* services in the *right* way will help attract all groups simultaneously and help attract skeptical pet owners.

The first step is to provide quality, basic lodging services that make pet parents feel comfortable about leaving their pet in your care. Then offer an expanded menu of services and amenities that feel more like a resort than like a kennel.

Think about the last time you visited a resort. What services and add-ons did you enjoy? Dogs’ favorite activities include romping with friends, playing fetch, swimming or splash time, and getting cuddles and belly rubs. When you make these services optional, pet parents can choose whether or not to purchase them and everyone still feels good about the lodging experience.

#### Adopt a Hospitality Mindset

As primary caregivers, women are the drivers within this industry. Women call for reservations more frequently, and they are usually the ones who cry in your lobby. The thought of leaving their baby behind and concern over its potential distress often produce gut-wrenching guilt and anxiety.

Successful businesses attempt to

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assuage these heightened emotions. Many create a spa- or resortlike culture and atmosphere. They understand that every word—both printed and spoken—paints a mental image in the minds of their potential clients.

The term “boarding,” for example, is actually a revenue roadblock for pet-care facilities. It implies that the facility merely meets basic needs without homelike TLC. Businesses that advertise their “boarding” services are falling by the wayside.

“Lodging,” on the other hand, connotes upscale care and a fun vacation experience.

Human-centric terms and hospitality terminology will help consumers embrace the boarding industry as a whole—and your business in particular. To please potential clients, refer to pick-up and drop-off times as arrival and departure times. Call snack time with a roomful of canine guests Happy Hour. Offer suites and accommodations rather than cages or pens.

Many of my clients offer amenities commonly found in human resorts, such as premium bedding upgrades, themed suites and rooms with views. For example, Pet Camp Cat Safari in San Francisco offers suites with enormous windows for feline guests and views that cats enjoy. The entire building is visually and audibly stimulating for cats. Fascinating foliage, aquarium towers full of colorful fish and soothing music make it a memorable experience. Best of all, cats rule at Cat Safari: No dogs are allowed, emulating human resorts that offer quiet, child-free areas.

Truly embracing the hospitality concept is a path to robust revenues, significant market share and increased profitability.

### Offer Fun Activities

Another powerful, proven and profitable way to attract customers who haven't quite embraced the idea of lodging their pets: Offer fun, festive activities that help pet parents feel good about leaving their pampered pooch in your care. Group or individual playtimes are big hits with these potential clients:

- **Group play.** Since people are treating their animal companions like treasured family members, plan your activities the way you would for people.

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—Laura Laaman

Anthropomorphizing? Absolutely! What would you do to keep a nervous friend's toddler busy throughout the day? If you had several toddlers, you would group them together and offer fun, safe activities to keep them busy. You would provide safe toys and playground activities. You can do the same for dogs.

But before you allow a group of dogs to play together, it is important to make sure they are compatible and socialize well together (probably a good idea with toddlers as well!). Therefore, having a well-trained supervisor of group play is vital to minimize risk.

- **Individual play/activities.** If group play isn't a fit for your facility, now or in the future, individual activities are a small stepping stone to make sure your clients feel better about their pet's time away from home. Individual playtimes can include fetch, story and snuggle time, special treats, scheduled games and other activities.

The payoff? We have been tracking over \$50 million of consumer spending from pet-care facilities in the United States and Canada for numerous years. Our new clients come to us with a nightly average fee of \$27. After successfully incorporating add-on services such as group play sessions and customizable individual playtimes, these same clients now average \$55 per night. That translates to hundreds of thousands of dollars of increases for each of our clients.

Many even double their lodging revenue with activities. So a pet lodging business with annual revenue

of \$500,000 can realize an additional \$500,000 by successfully promoting fun activities. The best news of all is that after years of doing this, my clients are convinced that the pets in their care are happier and healthier. In addition, their employees are having even more fun playing with pets much of their day.

### Diversify

Offering additional services is another strategic step that smart boarding facility operators take. Here are a couple of services that offer great opportunities for expansion:

- **Doggy day care.** Long gone are the days of dogs being relegated to the yard for most of the day or night. Most pets are practically full-time house pets, even sleeping in their owner's bed. Simultaneously, most Americans are working longer hours and commuting to and from work. Even in households where someone is home during the day, dog owners are recognizing the happiness and fulfillment of tired and well-socialized pets. Now, doggy day care is an important service for pet-care facilities.

The thought of Barney romping, playing and making furry friends entices pet parents to pay for this service—and even travel to make it happen.

Since more people travel and therefore need pet lodging over weekends, day care fills a weekday capacity and revenue void at the same time.

- **Bathing and grooming.** It's in everyone's best interest if a pet leaves a boarding facility looking and smelling great. Some facilities feel a need to give away these services. Absolutely unnecessary. A high percentage of pet parents are thrilled to pay for these services when they are promoted in the right way and at the right time.

Remember the question the cashier at McDonald's always asks: “Would you like fries with that?” All businesses should have such a consistent sales approach. McDonald's obviously does very well with its closed-ended question—a question that can be answered with a yes or no. However, pet lodging facilities will be better served by using an alternative-choice question: “Which bathing option would you prefer—our premium bathing service or our basic bath?”

Once your company is effectively offering grooming services, the sky is the limit. Special facials, coat treatments and massage treatments are right around the corner. Offering seasonal scented facials and bandanas make the experience even more fun for all.

### Promoting Additional Services

Generally, the first point of contact with prospective clients comes over the telephone while they're making their lodging reservations. The second is at the front desk when they drop their pet off.

You'll be more successful in scheduling extra activities and services during that first phone contact. Drop-off times often are chaotic and emotions can run high. Everyone's in a rush, anxious to make their plane, and worried about leaving their pet. And let's not forget that customers typically tend to come in waves. It's challenging to have an unexpected, detailed conversation while clients are lining up in droves—or trying to rush out the door. Therefore, having

the "extras" conversation when the caller first phones your facility makes great sense.

Simply offering add-ons will not guarantee that people will purchase them, however. Successful execution requires that the person taking phone calls has the right characteristics and skills to positively promote them. This person also must know the right types of questions and techniques to use to overcome minor, predictable objections. Finally, this person needs to use hospitality terminology to convey your facility's upbeat and warm environment.

Additional, diversified services and more activities mean healthier, happier pets. This is a win for the pet and the pet parent—and a well-deserved win for you. Abundant activities and pet interaction also have a positive effect on staff performance and morale.

Pet ownership has certainly evolved in recent years. Successful pet-care facility ownership needs to change as well. These necessary changes are both complex and comprehensive—and require careful planning and proper execution to minimize risk. But in my opinion, the risk of doing nothing far outweighs the risk of adapting.

Successful implementation of these strategies will mean watching profits soar along with customer satisfaction—on both the two- and four-legged front. ■

*Laura Laaman is a consultant, trainer and award-winning speaker specializing in the pet services industry. Her Outstanding Pet Care Program guarantees to boost revenues for progressive facilities in the United States and Canada. For additional tips and strategies to move your business forward, go to [www.outstandingpetcare.com](http://www.outstandingpetcare.com).*

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