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## Pet care takes bigger bite of consumer spending

Posted by [BEN LAMOTHE](#) August 30, 2007 01:00AM

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Organized animal fighting rings such as that involving Atlanta Falcons quarterback Michael Vick aside, pet owners today are more likely to spend big to ensure their pet's health and comfort.

Veterinarians and entrepreneurs are there for them with technology formerly reserved for humans, special diets and care products.

Americans will spend about \$41 billion this year on their pets, according to consumer research company Packaged Facts. And in the next two years, that number is expected to hit \$52 billion.

"Why are we spending more on pets? It's because pets are now part of the family," said Pat LeBlanc, director of the Veterinary Teaching Hospital at Michigan State University.

Over the years the way families treat their pets has changed, he added.

"I go back three generations in my family to my great-grandparents," LeBlanc explained, "and they had a farm and a dog and it never left the farmhouse. And when (the dog) got sick, they killed it."

Today pet owners are more interested in helping their pet through sickness, often at a steep cost spurred by the same factors that human health care is more expensive. "I think part of it is our technology is catching up more," LeBlanc said. "People are willing to go into debt to pay for their animal's care."

VTH recently acquired a radiation therapy unit from Massachusetts General Hospital for VTH's cancer care wing, LeBlanc added.

Two years ago, VTH treated about 24,000 pets. And last year it treated about 27,000. Numbers from this year suggest the hospital is on pace to exceed last year's figures, he said.

"Dissolving a kidney stone through a laser without any kind of incision - we have the equipment to do these kinds of procedures now," he said. "In the past people have not wanted their animals to undergo surgery - now we are serving the needs of these types of clients."

In contrast, veterinary schools today report increasing difficulty in attracting large-animal vet students, who typically work on farm animals. The American Veterinary Medical Association said it is helping sponsor a Kansas State University study to gauge the scope of the problem.

Consumers' increased interest in making sure their companion animal is well looked after, at least, has created a larger market for pet pampering.

That includes Shaggy Chic in Birmingham, which sells decorative collars, pet apparel and pet-themed home decor. Though open for less than a year, owner Lisa Pullman says she has experienced positive growth and consistent clientele.

"Many people are enjoying their pets," she said. "They're an extension of the family and they're really willing to make their comfort paramount."

Achieving that level of comfort for your pet comes at a price, but that hasn't deterred pet owners, as the pet supply industry has become a major force in a short period of time.

There are about 58,000 licensed dogs in Oakland County, which accounts for about 75 percent of dogs in the area, according to the Oakland County Animal Care Center. "In conversations I've had with pet store retailers and sellers, what I've come to find - and I suspect the data would demonstrate this - is that pets have become recession-proof," said Michael Bernacchi, professor of marketing at University of Detroit-Mercy.

Desperate times call for desperate measures, just not when it involves pets.

"It's actually kind of surprising considering the economy is so horrible," said Catherine Saunders, manager of Premiere Pet Supply in Beverly Hills. "You'd think people would cut back, but I haven't seen any difference."

Consumer buying habits have evolved in such a way that pets have become part of a family's fiscal equation, Bernacchi added.

It's the same method retail has used for years to encourage shoppers to buy things they want, in addition to things they need.

"I can't tell you exactly over what period of time, but certainly it's been the case over the last 10 years that we've become better educated on the expenditure with relevance to pets," Bernacchi said.

That new attitude has helped Premiere Pet Supply record consistent growth, Saunders said.


Adding to that growth was the recent scare over contaminated pet food from China, which caused pet owners to consider spending more money on specialized pet foods.

"We had people wanting to switch to something more natural and that's impacted our business," Saunders said. "A lot of eyes were opened ... and people were willing to pay



By Heather Rousseau

Lisa Pullman in her Birmingham store, Shaggy Chic, with her Havanese pooch, Sophie.

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