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US MARKETEERS ARE CHASING THEIR TAILS IN ORDER TO SATISFY GROWING NUMBERS OF PET OWNERS.
HY MARIAMPOLSKI REPORTS

DOGGED SALES

It's true. America has gone to the dogs. Spending on pets is growing at faster rates than ever. At over \$34 billion in 2004, according to the American Pet Products Manufacturing Association (APPMA), purchases for Fido and Fifi have doubled in the last decade. In 2004, 62% of US households played host to a critter. Populating this trend are aging baby boomers whose wallets are expanding as their own nests are emptying and

young professionals for whom pets appear to be compensating for delayed childbirth. Parental behavior toward pets - 83% of owners refer to themselves as their pets' Mom or Dad, according to the American Animal Hospital Association - is a projection of owners' egos, fantasies and aspirations. As a result, there seems to be a product available for everyone's taste and preferred price point. Trendy global home furnishings retailer

Ikea, for example, has introduced its 'Pets and People' line this year allowing pet lovers to coordinate their own dinner ware with their pups' plastic bowls and their bedspreads with kitty's sleeping cushion and collar. At the other end of the social scale, any aspiring aristocrat can buy a sterling silver bowl with a gold-plated interior, inscribed with the words 'Gucci Cat' for a mere \$1,270. They are not alone in the pet luxuries

niche but must angle for space next to such marquee names as Louis Vuitton, Prada, Chanel, Burberry, Tiffany, Coach and Harley-Davidson.

Those who insist on flashing the signature polo-player symbol on their clothes can buy Ralph Lauren shirts in dog sizes which come in a full palette of colors. For the outdoors-pet, Land's End offers the Pet Squall Jacket whose highlights include a water-resistant nylon shell and polyester fleece lining to protect the pooch against rain and snow.

Although Americans are top-dog in this category, Europeans and Asians have not been laggards. The UK, France and Germany maintain high pet ownership habits and steady growth in the pet accessories market, but countries like Italy are experiencing spectacular growth - about 70% over the last 10 years in the pet market representing more than double any other EU country.

This trend is not without its dissenters. Carol Wade, blasting the increasing tendency for advertisers to include a participating pet in ads for cars, jeans and rugs, calls attention to the socially isolating effects of pet ownership - something else to keep Americans housebound alongside their home entertainment centres and personal computers. She also underscores data demonstrating a record 4.7 million dog bites each year in the United States. Still, Americans are never far from a health-related claim to substantiate just about anything.

Citing statistics from a range of medical studies, the APPMA touts reduction in blood pressure and stress, greater psychological stability, lower levels of depression and a measure of protection from heart disease as reasons to cultivate a meaningful relationship with a companion from the animal kingdom. This trend will be self-limiting, of course, but for the time being it still seems to be running wild.

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