

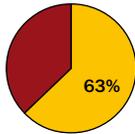
The Christmas Canine and Gift Giving

Capitalize on the trend of humanization

By: Charlotte Reed

U.S. pet manufacturers continue to capitalize on the trend of the humanization of pets by creating more holiday-themed merchandise to increase their annual revenues. Specifically, they are deliberately creating Christmas and other seasonal merchandise to exploit the gift-giving fervour of the season. Toys, treats and puppy products are the most popular items, sold as pre-packaged gifts.

Presents at Xmas time



According to the American Pet Products Association, approximately 63% of U.S. dog owners surveyed said they give their pets presents at Christmas time. Not surprising to Michael Dagne, owner of Ohio-based Moochie & Co., because 'during the holiday season, my customers like to treat their pets like their children and spoil them rotten.' In the November and December months, Moochie stores sell a large amount of toys, treats and ornaments as gifts.

But it is important to note that in years past, pet holiday merchandise was limited to pre-packaged, plastic, Christmas stockings containing a few holiday-themed toys. At that time, retailers worried that they would get stuck with holiday merchandise, but now, pet retailers like Dagne have a new, bring it on philosophy. He says, 'pet holiday merchandise is selling with ease everywhere you go.' Dagne feels that there are three contributing factors to this trend:

1. better quality merchandise;
2. the idea that the pet is a family member;
3. the me-too pet product craze.

For example, the Moochie doggie bakery does exceptionally well at this time of the year. His customers visit the store, see the decorated cookies in shapes of snowmen, candy canes and Christmas trees, and feel compelled to buy their dog a special treat that they imagine could be very tasty. And that is precisely the



reason that Michelle Clark of Floppers Bakery can't bake enough cookies during the holiday season. Although she doesn't supply Moochie stores with baked goods, she comments that 'at the holiday time, the bakery is working overtime because stores can't keep the treats on the pet store shelves. 'Clark also explains that 'they buy our treats because pet owners want to indulge their dogs with something extraordinary, as compared with their regular boxed treat that they eat every day.'

Gift Boxes

At the request of her customers, Clark packages the treats in gift boxes, but she also took the pre-packaging process a step further. Her market research prompted her to package treats on platters, too. 'In metropolitan areas, I discovered that pet owners were inviting their friends with dogs over to their homes for small holiday gatherings. To keep the ambience special and pet-friendly, I package platters of treats served on silver colored trays. 'She mentioned that she has even heard of an instance where platters of her baked goods were served to a group of Christmas carolers' dogs.

Holiday-themed toys

Other than treats, Dagney mentions that his customers are buying more holiday-themed toys than ever because 'they look fun', he says. Stephanie Volvo, co-owner of Planet Dog, explains that her toys are always visually pleasing because they mimic the human market place. 'Our company is about lifestyles and dogs', she says. 'We create for ourselves, or rather the modern dog and his owner. Our customers buy gifts for their dogs and their friends' poodles, so we sell gift bags. Last year, Tinsel Bones was the highlight of their Wag Bag; and this year, the company believes that the whimsical chew toys in the shape of Christmas tree bulbs and the fleece Naughty and Nice blocks will be a big hit. ▶





To dress up the dog



'Also, certain clothing can also be very popular at this time of year,' says Dagne.

He observes that, like parents who like to dress up their children, pet owners like to dress up their dogs.

Costume-like apparel of reindeer antlers, as well red, green and plaid scrunchie collars and party bowties have always been very popular, but now holiday-themed clothing is also in style. 'Believe it or not, we do an upsell on the clothing,' exclaims Dagne. 'At any other time of the year, it is the reverse; but during the holiday season, the client comes to buy a motif collar and we upsell the matching red sweater. 'He feels the clients buy the sweater because they believe the sweater is timely and stylish, but also has the functional purpose of keeping their pets warm.

Moreover, 'red clothing can continue to sell thru Valentine's Day', says Julie Abdo, owner of Thayer and Ridge, a New York-based pet clothing manufacturer. Last year, Ms. Abdo designed a beautiful, red, suede coat with a faux diamond decoration. The coat was so popular that pet boutiques continued to order it thru the cold winter month of February. As a result, Ms. Abdo will design another red coat which she will plan to sell as a winter specialty item.

Many individuals buy puppies! Lets to more baby products!

Lastly, at this time of the year, pet manufacturers are taking advantage of the fact that many individuals buy puppies. More than three years ago, Sari Remer, owner of Dog Chewz, created pink and blue porcelain bowls with 18K lettering that said 'Baby's Water' and 'Baby's Food. 'Although some stores were worried they would not sell these feeding bowls, they sold out quickly. Last year, she introduced pink and blue puppy blankets at the H.H. Backer Christmas Show, and stores bought them without reservation. Although she designed neither item to coincide with the increase of persons buying puppies, this year she specifically designed a new puppy



t-shirt that reads 'New Arrival' and will be sold at the H.H. Backer Show as a holiday item for those individuals who will buy puppies during the holiday time of the year. The t-shirts come in pink and blue.

Unlike Remer who was not concerned with the purposeful introduction of her products in the marketplace until recently, Planet Dog will be introducing 'baby products' for new pet owners on August 1st to coincide with the beginning of holiday and seasonal ordering. Planet dog has re-sized and re-designed their toys to fit the needs of puppies. They have even created a Bundle of Joy gift bag with a blanket, building block toys and a fleece man. Co-owner Volvo says, 'They will be make amazing gifts, whether for your puppy or for a friend who just had a new baby. She reminds me that her products are about human/canine relationship. 'We spend time with our dogs, and you spend time with your dog. We design for the active dog owner, but our smaller items can be used for small dogs, too! 'And, let's face it', says Volvo, 'everybody's pet is their baby.' ■

THE AUTHOR



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Charlotte Reed, a Fordham Law School graduate and former securities compliance officer, started working in the pet industry in 1996.

As a young entrepreneur in the burgeoning pet service industry,

Reed quickly established herself as a leading pet care expert offering top-notch service, personal attention to detail, and an infectious passion for pets.

Reed is an editor and columnist for several pet industry of magazines.

