

It Pays to Welcome Travelers with Pets

[BY JON BOROSHOK]



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If you ask guests at your property to name their family members, don't be surprised to find their pets mentioned on that list. For many, leaving a pet at home or in a kennel when they travel is akin to leaving a child behind. Now ask yourself if your property also treats pets like welcome guests. The answer could impact the bottom line.



According to a recent Travel Industry Association of America study, 29.1 million of all U.S. adults (14 percent) reported traveling with a pet on a trip of 50 miles or more, one-way, in the past three years. Seventy-eight percent of those pets were dogs, while 15 percent were cats.

On the other end of the leash or cage is often someone aged 40-60. Baby Boomers generated the highest travel volume in the U.S. in 2003 (registering 268.9 million trips, more than any other age group), and households headed by someone age 35-54 are the most likely to stay in a hotel, motel, or bed and breakfast establishment on overnight trips (59 percent) and travel for business (29 percent) according to the *Domestic Travel Market Report*, 2004 Edition.

The numbers don't surprise Bob Vetere, president of the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association (APPMA), a trade association made up of nearly 850 pet product manufacturers, their representatives, importers, and livestock suppliers. Vetere says there is a big increase in the number of people wanting to bring pets along, and that increase is driven by the Boomers. Boomers are mobile, and a pet-friendly property is attractive. "The kids are gone, and pets are filling the void," says Vetere. "Pets tend to play an important role in a Boomer's life." He also sees young professionals putting off having children, and becoming pet owners first. This is also a highly mobile demographic.

AAPMA's 2005-06 National Pet Owners Survey reports that 19 percent of dog owners bring their pets on trips, up from 16 percent in 2002. There are 73.9 million dogs and 90.5 million cats owned in the U.S. Of pets traveling, 85 percent are dogs reports Len Kain, cofounder of DogFriendly.com, a provider of nationwide city guides and travel guides for dog owners. He says that cats are not good travelers in general, and that when people do travel with cats, it's because they are moving, not vacationing or traveling for work. While most pet-friendly properties permit both dogs and cats, dogs are the preferred guests, as they are less likely to cause allergy problems.

RATIONAL RATIONALE

The statistics send a clear message that pet-friendliness is more than just a market-

ing gimmick. Can the hospitality industry meet the demand and cash in? It makes dollars and sense to Roy MacNaughton, president of MacNaughton Partners (Florida, Washington State, and British Columbia), a hospitality niche marketer with more than a quarter century of international hotel, food service, and hospitality industry marketing and operations experience. He says that welcoming guests with pets is a direct opportunity to increase revenue per room and profits. Guests with pets increase occupancy rates, and will pay more for a room. They also may extend their stay, since they don't have to rush home to a boarded pet.

James Chung, president of Reach Advisors, a marketing and research firm in Belmont, Massachusetts, sees many of his resort clients going pet friendly or at least considering it. "Hotels and resorts are seen as commodities unless they can distinguish themselves," he says.

An affinity with animals gives an edge, but doesn't necessarily raise RevPar. "It won't raise rack rate, but it can motivate a segment of the population," says Chung. Allowing pets on site will increase cost of service delivery, and may increase the occupancy rate, with less discounting. He sees pet-friendliness as a good differentiator for long-stay destinations and properties that do last-minute business.

THE SUPPLY

Many properties, including some chains, have adopted pet-friendly policies, some even giving Rover or Muffy the VIP treatment.

When Kimpton Hotels started in 1981, founder Bill Kimpton had a dog named "Chianti" who sometimes walked through the hotel, and eventually guests just started showing up with their pets. Then about ten years ago, a sales director brought her dog to a Kimpton property as a "mascot" and kick-started a pet-friendly program, explains Steve Pinetti, senior vice president of sales and marketing for the chain.

"Single people who own pets go through separation anxiety," says Pinetti. "As Kimpton looked more into the psychology of pet ownership, we decided on formalizing a pet-friendly program. Kimpton is always attuned to niche marketing opportunities, and pet friendly is a good example."

The average stay of a pet owning guest

at a Kimpton property is about 2.56 nights, compared to 2.1 nights for guests without pets. Some business travelers bring pets with them too. About 90 percent of animal guests are dogs.

Being pet-friendly has filled weekend rooms in the chain where most of its revenue is driven by mid-week corporate/business travel. "There is definitely an increase in weekend business in our hotels across the country" Pinetti declares.

The Loews chain is also pet-friendly. Bill Doherty, director of sales and marketing for the Loews Annapolis Hotel in Annapolis, Maryland also sees incremental nights from business regulars traveling with pets. "People are picking our hotel because they're attached to their pets," says Doherty.

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Roy MacNaughton, president of MacNaughton Partners

The successes of pet-friendly policies aren't limited to the chains. "We were chosen over some other resorts because of that reason," says Bob Smith, director of marketing for the Sebasco Harbor Resort in Sebasco, Maine. People seem to be staying longer, and he observed a "significant jump" in March, a normally quiet month, once pets were allowed in some of the resorts cottages.

SETTING POLICIES

MacNaughton says that properties need a well thought out plan for handling the logistics, ranging from where to place guests with pets and how to "welcome" the pet to disposing of pet waste in a cost effective and ecologically friendly manner.

"Looking after these guests is not difficult, just different," says MacNaughton. Once you understand their needs and wants, it is relatively easy to set up a system of satisfying those wants." It makes sense to

provide some basic welcoming touches, such as dog bowls, bottled/distilled water, treats, directions to area dog-friendly restaurants, parks, and a list of area veterinary services.

Scott Beddall of Pets Can Stay Travel Services in Victoria, British Columbia, a full-service travel agency for people who travel with pets, recommends that properties adhere to certain standards. He points out that while the hospitality industry usually puts people with pets in smoking rooms, 85 percent of travelers with pets want nonsmoking rooms. Therefore, it is better to set aside pet-designated rooms, which can help other guests with allergies to stay away from those rooms.

Lowes Annapolis sets up its pet friendly rooms in an area convenient to pet parks.

Chung advises a separate, special entrance to the property for pets. It's functional "eye candy," making pets and their owners seem special and pampered, but actually sequestering them from the main entrance. Pet rooms can also be concentrated in one area.

Beddall says that travelers understand a reasonable fee due to cleaning costs, but no more than \$20-\$25 per night. He advises keeping the fee per night, not per stay, with a cap. Use a waiver form, with a refundable deposit, that covers the hotel against liability, and also allows a lower fee.

Kain warns that while a pet fee policy seems to make economic sense, it doesn't appear particularly accepting or friendly, and can sometimes work against a property. Loews Annapolis spends four to five hours cleaning a pet room, compared to about an hour for a non-pet room, but does not charge fees to guests. Chung advises calling any added charges a "guest fee" that comes

with some amenities for the pet, but not referring to it as a cleaning fee.

"If you have a dog that barks, you won't take it to a hotel," says Deborah Matsumoto, director of sales of Le Merigot Santa Monica Beach Hotel and Spa in Santa Monica, California. Like most properties, Le Merigot has never had an animal fight, and very few other problems.

James Lenci of Hidden Meadow Ranch in Greer, Arizona agrees. "If a person is not sure about bringing a pet, they probably won't bring it." Dogs are allowed in public areas on a leash, and there is a two dog limit per cabin.

Lenci says that his property also has had a mostly pleasant experience, with few barking annoyances. Rooms are meticulously cleaned, and guests are asked about allergies. There is a \$20 fee per night, which covers cleaning. (Housekeeping comes while the guests are out, so pets must be crated or kept outside. Housekeepers are never exposed to loose pets.)

Actually be pet "friendly." Kain says that too many properties consider any acceptance of a pet as being friendly, but too few are truly hospitable. One hotel in Virginia considered pet-friendly to mean that a kennel was nearby! He advises properties to have dog treats ready at check in. "It's the cheapest, easiest thing to do, but it says you're pet friendly. It says I'm not just tolerating dogs, I like them."

Some properties go even further. Le Merigot offers "Club Meg," named after the hotels mascot, a yellow Labrador. It provides a "red carpet treatment" featuring special snacks and menus.

Kimpton features a chalkboard in the shape of a dog or cat, welcoming the pet by name. Pinetti says that even non-pet people think it's fun, but for the pet owner, it's a big deal. There are doggie beds, bowls, treats, and scratching posts.

There's even a special 'do not disturb' sign for pet rooms, and housekeeping does not go into rooms while a pet is there. Pinetti reports no incidents. "Most pets are better behaved than some guests' kids," he joked.

Kain echoed similar sentiments. He spends about 60 nights a year on the road (accompanied by his dog), and has never seen "an incident."

Most properties and organizations interviewed for this article say there's no



reason to have a size or weight limit on domestic pets. There is no correlation between size and behavior—in fact, some smaller dogs tend to bark more than larger ones. While some properties do have arbitrary weight limits on pets, these appear to be unnecessary, difficult to monitor/enforce, and may even offend potential guests.

Of course a larger pet may create larger waste. Access to open areas for pet exercise or a “nature call” is a big plus. Some urban hotels don’t have any green space. “Have a place for the dog to go, even if it’s the corner of a parking lot,” said Kain. Many hotels have found that providing disposal bags is an inexpensive amenity that goes a long way toward guest satisfaction.

An increasing number of properties also use this as a way to be more environmentally friendly, a fact that also appeals to pet owners. “Pets eat and drink and they create waste and odor,” says Jeff Slye,

founder of Business Evolution Consulting, a firm specializing in helping hospitality businesses profit from being green.

“Doggy poop bags, pet shampoo, and food can all be environmentally friendly.” So can room cleaning products.

Some properties have even begun using environmentally safe doggy bags, such as the EcoSafe Doggie Bag, which pet owners can dispose of properly for safe and complete biodegrading.

Slye says that being environmentally friendly is also business friendly, with limited or no operations impact, at no higher costs, and at equal or higher quality of previous products. He says that from a messaging standpoint, there is a huge value-add for hotels – it shows care, love, and sincerity, all factors that appeal to pet owners.

PETS WELCOME—GETTING THE WORD OUT

Once a well-planned pet-friendly policy is

in place, it’s time to let the world know about it. MacNaughton advises starting with travel agents that send guests to your property. Also update the property’s Web site to make sure that the pet-friendliness is prominently presented in a warm manner.

Don’t discount the importance of Web directories, such as dogfriendly.com and petscanstay.com. Beddall warns that while lots of directories exist, there is no definition of exactly what pet-friendly is. Pets Can Stay offers properties a certification and marketing program, providing a set of national standards and defining pet-friendly. Beddall says this can result in longer stays and new business, as it provides quality assurance for the traveler.

MacNaughton recommends making sure the pet-friendly policy is advertised in every room. “Pet owners might be on business trips where a pet is understandably not allowed, but they take notice of your property and make up their minds that since you are pet-friendly, they will choose your property when returning to the area to vacation with the family.”

Play up any “green” or environmentally friendly policies and products in use at the property. This also appeals to pet owners who are concerned about their pet’s (and the planet’s) health.

Monitor blogs and participate in online groups. Pinetti points out that some online groups talk about pet-friendly properties. He even has staff members look at the sites to see what customer needs and wants are.

Kain says that it’s wise to skew promotions toward dogs as they are the vast majority of traveling pets. He warns dogfriendly.com advertisers that psychologically a pet fee works against a property.

Location is important too. “Dog owners need to know where they can stop each night on a trip,” says Kain. Being right off a highway exit is a plus.

Make sure the entire staff knows and understands the pet policy, and can explain it to guests. Policies should not change suddenly—there should never be an unpleasant surprise for guests. Keep the Web site up-to-date at all times.

Above all, make sure that when guests register with a pet, they’re never made to feel isolated or singled out. As Vetere says, the message should be, “You brought a pet. Wow, are we glad to see him!” ■