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Companies Catering to the Pampered Pooch; Affluent Baby Boomers Driving Demand for Luxury Pet Treatments, Experts Say

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Diane Benson had always adored the family dog, Pepper, a black Labrador who would excitedly greet her on the driveway when she came home. But their bond grew particularly strong after her kids grew up and moved away.

"Some people say they can't wait to be an empty nester, but this dog filled a void for me," said Benson, 53, a high school Spanish teacher in Potomac, Md.

Recently, Pepper died of cancer. Now, Benson and her husband have Lucky, a new Lab. This time around, Benson says she would strongly consider cancer treatment, regardless of cost, if Lucky became sick and there were a good chance of success.

"I took Pepper's death very hard," she said.

Fed by a growing bond between owners and their pets, companies are building up their offerings of pet care and luxury services, such as cancer and arthritis treatments, cat and doggie massages, acupuncture and specialty room service.

Analysts say much of the demand is being driven by more affluent baby boomers, born between 1946 and 1964, whose children recently moved away but who do not yet have grandkids to indulge.

"An empty nest is a pet's best friend," said Ken Budd, features editor at AARP The Magazine. "Boomers are more inclined to spoil pets. Just as their kids had to go to the best camp, the dog or cat has to have the best toy, the latest gadget."

The average age of a pet owner is 46. They contribute to a \$31 billion pet care industry, according to the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association.

A recent report by the McKinsey Group predicts that the pet care industry will grow 4.5 percent annually to reach about \$36 billion by 2007. It cited strong potential in basic pet medications, such as those that stave off parasites; treatment of age-related diseases including arthritis, kidney problems and cancer; and products for "lifestyle issues" such as reproduction control and anti-obesity drugs.

Companies are already responding.

Addison Biological Laboratory Inc., for example, recently began offering a sterilization shot for puppies, called Neutersol, to replace surgical castration. Pfizer Inc. has developed an arthritis pill for dogs in 1997 that comes in a tasty chewable liver flavor.

The goal: make medical treatments not only more effective but also less painful for pets, allowing owners to have greater peace of mind.

"We get calls from consumers who say, 'Geez, my dog has cancer, diabetes, this problem or that, is there something we can do?' " said Bob Fauteux, a spokesman at Pfizer Animal Health. "We are indeed very actively trying to address these problems."

In Westbury, N.Y., a new Center for Specialized Veterinary Care offers treatments -- most of which are paid for out-of-pocket -- that include an estimated \$300 to \$600 root canal, a \$112 acupuncture and \$812 for a corneal transplant. Treatment is also available for cancer and brain tumors.

Diane Levitan said she opened the center six months ago with the idea of putting more compassion into pet care, such as by designing rooms so owners can be with their pet after an operation as the animal recovers.

"Like any child, pets should be treated as part of the family," Levitan said. "We're able to offer equal care, the same kind of care we would expect for our human kids."

At the luxury Loews hotels, guests are not only welcome to bring their dogs and cats but are also offered room service with a menu ranging from \$19 Bow Wow Tenderloin of Beef to \$17 Kitty's Salmon Supreme and \$17 Grrreat Vegetable Feast. All meals come with Evian water and complimentary treats.

And at the **Olde Towne Pet Resort** in Springfield, Va., owners can drop off their pets for day-long spa treatments or a multi-day resort stay. Among the offerings: \$1.75 per mile limousine service; a \$30 half-hour sports massage; spa baths with pulsating jets; and \$75-per-night suites with televisions. The rooms also come with a complimentary shopping spree in which dogs are unleashed in a room full of stuffed animals and treats and allowed to grab for keeps whatever interests them.

The resort, which can accommodate about 250 dogs and 60 cats, has been running at near full-capacity since opening 11 months ago, with boomers representing about 30 to 40 percent of the clientele, chief operating officer Joe Rinaldis said.

"Pets are no longer something you keep chained up in the back," he said.

Vinz Koller, 40, a sociologist in Carmel, Calif., agreed. He and his wife, Ann, admit to doting on Roxie, their Doberman-Rottweiler mix, who has more than her fair share of toys and stuffed animals.

"Sometimes we joke about the poor dogless couple who have to have children," Koller said. Roxie "is like a lower-maintenance kid. She certainly doesn't complain very much, and she's always adoring."

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