

Ownership trends and issues

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ABSTRACT

Research projects and surveys identify trends. Trends help us identify issues of concern that often result in serious problems for animals and problems for people. Knowledge of trends can be very helpful when we work to refocus and refine our programs to meet the needs of those whom we serve. Working to prevent problems and to deal with the consequences of the problems that trends help us to identify is a challenge to all animal rescue, sheltering, care and management personnel. This session will identify some contemporary trends related to pet ownership and will provide suggestions for using the information to capitalise on the current and advance knowledge we receive.

INTRODUCTION

No matter how quickly we adapt to and use today's highly advanced technological machines and materials to solve problems, the human factor is the key element on which we must focus to effectively solve animal problems with people and people problems with animals. Our field services, educational outreach programs, fund raising events, legislation projects, printed materials development and just about all other aspects of animal care and management practice, must be continually updated and tailored to meet the needs and interests of the people we serve if they are to be effective.

Last year Richard Avanzino of the San Francisco SPCA presented interesting information and facts relating to changing attitudes toward companion animals. This year I want to take the human factor topic up a notch and focus on short and long-term trends in pet ownership. The insights we can gain from the latest, up-to-date research on this topic should be very helpful in our efforts to work with the people and deal with the issues associated with the trends. I will reference the 1996 American Pet Products Manufacturers Association (APPMA) National Pet Owners Survey and will include some short video comments from a noted animal behaviour and protection expert that are related to key ownership issues.

The APPMA 1996 Survey is the most recent and, by far, the most complete study relating to the topic we are discussing. The Association began gathering information about pet ownership and pet product purchases, care practices and sources of goods and services, beginning in 1988. The survey is designed to identify short and long-term trends. It has been updated every two years.

THE SURVEY'S FINDINGS

In the interest of saving time, I will greatly condense the findings and focus on the areas most significant to our common interests. For those interested in reviewing the entire 1996 survey results or learning additional details on selected areas they can reference the APPMA 1996 Survey copy I have left with the UAM Conference organisers.

Slightly fewer than 58,000,000 households own a pet, a figure well above the 53,000,000 projected in 1994. The breakdown (millions of households) is: Dogs - 36.4, Cats - 31.5, Freshwater Fish -10.8, Birds - 5.9, Small Animals - 4.9, Reptiles - 2.9 and Saltwater Fish - 1.0.

The number of pets owned by Americans is clearly related to pet size and care requirements; pets that interact with humans, like dogs and cats, are owned in fewer numbers per household than small, contained 'spectator' pets, like fish. In very general terms Americans on the average own between one or two dogs or cats; about three reptiles, birds or small animals; and between eight and ten fish.

The average number of small animals has increased dramatically and steadily over the past eight years and the average number of cats per household has also increased slightly. If this same trend is true in Australia then shelter facilities may need to be adjusted accordingly to deal with unwanted pets.

- Pet owners differ demographically by the type of pet owned. The demographic tendencies for owners of the respective animal groups, relative to each other, should be of interest:
- dogs owners tend to be married, have smaller households, have no children living at home and earn moderate to high incomes (above \$25,000);
- cat owners tend to be older with a quarter previously married or single, own their own home and tend not to have children at home;
- small animal owners tend to be younger, married, have children at home, have larger households, have higher incomes and own their own home; and
- reptile owners are younger, from larger size households, tend to have children, own their own home, and live in metropolitan areas.

Four in ten pet owners own more than one type of pet. This is a decline from the five in ten dual pet owners reported in 1994 and in 1992.

Given the important role that pets play in the lives of their owners it is not surprising that 45% of all pet owners give gifts to their pets. Nearly 7 in 10 dog owners give gifts to their dogs. Treat purchases for dogs are on the rise. One half of all bird owners give gifts to their birds. The percentage of bird owners who give gifts has risen since 1992. Christmas gift-giving is a driving factor. Cat owners give nearly as frequently as bird owners. Small animal owners have a similar profile.

Based on the above gift-giving information it appears to me that organisations should include pet gift items for sale as fund raisers or as incentives to expand membership. Many groups have gift shops in their shelter or a thrift shop in town. Creating a special section in the shop for pet gift items will quickly capture a pet owner's attention.

In addition an appropriate thank you to a pet owner for volunteer services, legislative assistance, or any form of help would be a special gift or special treat for his/her pet. Such an item would certainly make the person feel recognised and appreciated. It may carry additional significance by acknowledging that you have recognised the important bond that he/she shares with a companion animal. The recipient would have an opportunity to reward his/her pet with a gift which would add to the overall enjoyment of the occasion. Some of the most popular items at a fund raising auction I set up for Animal Care Expo 97 in Orlando, Florida were pet gift items. The bidding on these products was very competitive and spirited, especially on the cushion beds and exercise/play products for animals.

WHERE PET OWNERS SEEK INFORMATION

Where pet owners turn for information about their pet was a major part of the APPMA Survey and should be of great interest to animal management personnel. Regardless of the type of pet owned, pet owners used veterinarians, books, friends and relatives, magazines, advertising, pet store personnel, groomers, breeders, animal shelter staff, pet clubs, the internet and aquarium shops for advice and information about pet care:

- 81% of dog owners and 68% of cat owners responding to the survey use vets for information on their pets. Books came in second followed by friends and magazines;
- owners of birds, small animals, reptiles and fish use books and pet store personnel most frequently for information;
- although still under-utilised, the internet is used for general pet care information by a minority of pet owners. Interestingly, small animal owners seem to be more on-line savvy than owners of other pets (according to the survey)

Since it is not possible to rely on pet shops to provide good and reliable in-service education about pet care for their employees it would be advisable, in my opinion, to invite pet shop workers to professional development workshops that focus on proper pet care. Many times animal management agencies invite specialists in canine, feline, bird, and exotic animal care to speak to their own staff members either at their animal shelter or as part of a local training conference. The next time you schedule such a program please consider inviting area pet shop personnel. When these workers complete the session they will be able to provide accurate information to new pet owners. I always made it a priority to invite pet shop workers to Animal Care Expo and we always had a good turnout from area stores.

THE COMPUTER CONNECTION

Because more and more people are learning to use computers and access the internet daily it is my guess that, when the APPMA 1998 survey results are released, we will see a substantial increase in the percentage of pet owners using the internet. The number of pet care forums, web page sites and chat room opportunities seem to be expanding as quickly as the number of computer users.

When animals are adopted to individuals or families by animal shelters it would be valuable to provide a brochure listing suggested internet pet care information sources together with access details. If mom and dad cannot locate the information then the kids will teach them how without a problem. The novelty of the source will surely generate interest in using it.

CONNECTING ON THE AIRWAVES

I was surprised that local and national radio and television shows that focus on animal behaviour and care were not listed on the APPMA Survey. These are excellent public information sources for practical, listener-friendly information. We have several local and national pet care talk shows that are broadcast by San Diego and Los Angeles radio stations. One outstanding program that reaches radio listeners in San Diego County is the Animal Talk show with Dr Dog on AM station 760 KFMB Talk Radio. It is hosted by animal behaviourist Dennis Fetko, PhD, and his wife, Darlene. The show is on each Sunday morning beginning at 9.00am Pacific Standard Time for one or two hours, depending on sports schedules, and it is accessible through the internet. You can receive it here in Australia on Monday morning at 2.00am. It would definitely be worth taping for your personal enrichment and enjoyment at a more convenient hour, unless you have insomnia and need some interesting dialogue to get you through the night. You can access the show through KFMB's web page <http://www.760kfmb.com>. Dr Dog's e-mail address drdog@inetworld.net. His web page <http://www.drdog.com>.

If you have knowledgeable and influential radio and TV personalities, like Dr Dog, working the airwaves in Australia, contact them by phone or mail and let them know you are available as a resource person to help provide information on contemporary issues and events. Most media personalities welcome input from the front line workers in animal care and control. Dr Dog often has his veterinarian, Dr David Zanders, or specialty veterinarians on the program with him to help field questions relating to animal medicine. It is not unusual to hear other resource people and specialists he invites to speak on his show.

The bottom line is: don't be bashful about using radio or TV. Interactive talk radio (the call-in talk show), in my opinion, offers one of the most powerful and effective ways to address serious issues relating to pet ownership. It is extremely personal and persuasive. I'd like you to meet my good friend, Dr Dog, on video. I asked him to comment on issues related to current ownership trends as well as his view on the power of talk radio. He meets many people in person at special events as well as on the air. His job as an animal behaviour consultant and trainer makes it easy for him to identify some of today's major hot spot issues.

PETS LEFT BEHIND

Another trend is related to our increasingly transient worldwide society. People are moving all the time for a variety of personal and business reasons. It can be across town, across the country or across the world. Unfortunately many pets often do not get to move with their owners. Some lucky ones find a new home with friends or relatives. Others are brought to the animal shelter. The unlucky ones are abandoned in their apartments or are dumped far from a friendly place. Animal management officers know better than anyone the range of cruelties and extreme suffering that an abandoned pet can experience and endure. All moving companies, truck rental companies, apartment managers and welcome wagon representatives should have a good supply of printed material clearly outlining the problems created by abandonment and its legal ramifications. Information for people who cannot keep their pets should be displayed in high visibility advertisements.

EDUCATING OURSELVES AND OTHERS

The International Harvester Company, a manufacturer of Caterpillar bulldozers and earthmoving machines, had a saying in its ads: *there are no simple solutions, only intelligent choices*. It is a very appropriate piece of wisdom on which to reflect for those of us who work to make this a better and safer world for animals and people. It should be one of our primary objectives to help educate ourselves so that we in turn can educate others, to enable them to make intelligent choices that fit the profile of responsible pet owners.

Francis Bacon once said that *knowledge is power*. But mere knowledge is only possibility. Action is power and its highest manifestation is when it is *directed by knowledge*. The action you take to help animal owners make intelligent choices must be directed by the most up-to-date information available to you.

Publications such as *Animal Sheltering Magazine*, the *Community Animal Care, Control and Protection Resource*, published by the Humane Society of the United States, provides readers with up-to-date articles on ownership issues in just about every bimonthly issue. For example, a recent article of relevance to our topic is: *As Reptiles' Popularity Grows, So Do Health Risks*. The following is a short section from the January/February 1997 issue article:

“According to the Pet Industry Advisory Council, reptiles represent the fastest-growing category of pets in the United States, making their homes in about three percent of America’s households. In 1993 alone, 900,000 iguanas were imported into the US, up from 100,000 in 1988. As a result, it’s becoming increasingly important for animal care and control agencies to inform members of their community about proper care of reptiles and to publicise the health risks posed by ownership of these exotic animals.”

A recent report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that nine out of every ten pet turtles, snakes and lizards carry Salmonella bacteria in their intestines, but show no signs of illness.

A three-week-old boy in South Bend, Indiana died of Salmonella poisoning in October 1995 after one of his parents handled the family’s pet iguana and then held the child. But all members of the public are susceptible: Last year at a Denver zoo, 65 cases of Salmonella poisoning were confirmed after zoo visitors handled a Komodo dragon or came in contact with the animal’s enclosure; officials estimated that hundreds more suffered mild symptoms but did not seek medical attention.”

The article goes on to identify additional problems and consequences. A list of practical suggestions to shelter personnel for dealing with the trend of increased reptile popularity are provided at the end of the article.

Another growing trend is the use of professional pet sitters in the US. The current issue of *Animal Sheltering* magazine included an article titled *Sitting Down on the Job (Pet Sitters and Animal Shelters Work for a Common Goal)*. As the article states “ *More and more pet owners are finding that pet sitters offer convenience at a reasonable price. And many pet sitters provide additional services that boarding kennels simply can’t offer: taking client’s pets for long walks, transporting animals to and from veterinary appointments, even watering plants and bringing in the mail while travellers are away*”. The article goes on to detail the many ways animal shelters and pet sitters can work together cooperatively.

The Pet Sitters Association of San Diego County has established minimum standards for its members to help ensure highly qualified, professional service. This association will be exhibiting at Animal Care Expo 98 to help promote and expand its cooperative programming with the animal sheltering and other organisations. We hope that other organisations choose to exhibit as well. If you are interested in learning more about pet sitters and ways they can fit into your programs you may contact the following groups for information and suggestions:

- National Association of Pet Sitters at 1200 G. St, NW, Suite 760, Washington DC, 20005 Tel (202) 393-3317.
- Pet Sitters International at 418 E King St, North Carolina 27021-1030 Tel (910) 983-9222.
- Pet Sitters Association of San Diego County, 3089-C Clairemont Dr, Suite 254, San Diego, CA 92117. Pamela Begeal is the Director/Founder.

In the November/December 1996 issue of *Animal Sheltering Magazine* statistics on animals received by animal shelters and their disposition was provided in a report of the National Council of Pet Population Study, conducted by a diverse group of ten animal related organisations including The Humane Society of the United States.

In the same issue there was an excellent report on two studies that examine why people surrender animals to shelters. Authors of the studies believe the value of their studies is that knowledge of the ‘risk factors’ involved in relinquishment of animals will allow pet owners, their veterinarians and humane organisations to decrease the risk that a dog or cat will become unwanted by his or her owner.

STAYING ON TOP

In closing a point I want to reinforce is that it is extremely important for animal care and management officials to stay on top of the latest information on pet ownership trends and issues. The kinds of data and facts available from sources such as I have referenced can be extremely valuable when preparing reports, grant proposals, or news releases. By using the resources and information available to them, animal management leaders will be better able to apply their limited time and funds to take the kind of action that results in the greatest return.

Remember: *action is power* ... and its highest manifestation is when it is directed by knowledge. I applaud the efforts of the UAM Conference organisers for helping participants gain a wealth of knowledge and new skills to help build more effective action projects and programs.

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John J. Dommers graduated from Valparaiso University in Valparaiso, Indiana with a degree in Biology. He was employed by the New Haven (Connecticut) public schools from 1966-1972 as a special assistant to the Supervisor of Science. He was based at the city's West Rock Nature Recreation Center and developed the country's first full-scale park-school environmental education program for elementary level students.

In 1972 John went to work for The Humane Society of the United States as the Director of Education for the New England Regional Office, covering a six state area. He later became the Society's National Director of Education and he headed the National Association for the Advancement of Humane Education, now called the National Association for Humane and Environmental Education. Later he became the New England Regional Director for the Society. In 1991 John became the Director of Animal Care Expo, the world's first full-scale trade show designed for animal rescue, sheltering, care and control personnel. The show holds the record for the largest gathering of animal sheltering and care professionals and volunteers in the world, averaging well over 1300 participants per year in its seven years of operation. Before moving to San Diego, California from Madison, Connecticut in 1989, John taught a graduate course for teachers, Environmental Education 404, at Connecticut College in New London, CT.

John wrote and photographed a four colour book series for young people titled Focus on Pollution that was published by Xerox Education Publications. He has also written and photographed articles for the national Wildlife Federations' Ranger Rick nature magazine and several professional teacher magazines. John's wife, Gail, is a full-time middle school teacher in La Jolla, CA. Their four sons all reside in the San Diego area.

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