

A quick fix? Solutions for animal behaviour problems in urban animal management

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Abstract

Everyone involved in urban animal management would like a quick fix for problem pets and people. New and innovative products are coming on to the market but their effectiveness in solving problems is mostly unknown. A variety of products and solutions to behavioural problems are examined within the context of animal management in the urban environment.

Introduction

Everyone involved in urban animal management would like a quick fix for problem pets and people. Unfortunately the frequency of nuisance behaviours in our communities and the number of animals in our pounds and shelters, with many people surrendering their pets due to behavioural problems, may indicate that this is simply not possible.

Yet there are so many products and services available or being developed in the marketplace that propose to deliver the quick fix. It can be difficult to tell which ones can fulfil this promise and also which products and services should be recommended for any individual situation.

Some of the most common animal-related problems that our communities experience include:

- Noise pollution – usually dogs, although cat fights can also create a lot of noise
- Roaming – usually dogs, although cats may also be a problem in environmentally sensitive areas or in particular neighbourhoods
- Destructiveness – of personal and community property
- Defecation – in public areas
- Threat and attack – usually dogs, with potentially serious consequences

In addition to these problems that affect our community, there are also many other problems that exist within our homes which may also benefit from available products and expert professional knowledge.

Solving problems

While there are a variety of people involved in the companion animal business and a great many opinions, the majority of qualified professionals are in agreement that solving problems requires an understanding of what is causing the problem to occur.

For instance, dog barking is a very common problem in our communities and we can use products and other measures to solve the noise issue. The cause of the barking may still be present, however, and the dog may then express this in ways other than barking. A bored dog may escape from his backyard and roam the neighbourhood. An anxious dog may become destructive around the home or the neighbourhood. Instead, if we address the cause of the problem we can find a solution that aims to target the animal's actual problem.

Often boredom is the cause of barking. In this case, boredom is what needs to be addressed, not barking. Often separation anxiety is the cause of barking. Then, anxiety is what needs to be addressed, not barking. Sometimes our attempts to take the noise away can fix the problem but in most cases the actual cause of the problem is not addressed.

This does not mean that quick fix products and services are not applicable but that they may be limited in scope.

There is no reason that the two cannot work together, however. With some behavioural problems, use of veterinary medication, together with a behavioural treatment program, gives better results than either one alone. In some cases, quick fix products and services can bring swift solutions to ongoing problems.

A variety of products and services

A variety of products and services will be showcased during this paper to enable participants to experience the range, the depth and the growth of the companion animal industry in Australia and around the world.

Table 1 lists a number of commonly available services and products for some of the common animal behavioural problems in our communities. These are considered by several criteria including whether the product or service satisfies (i) ethical concerns and the animal's natural drives (ii) the ease of use for the owner (iii) the cost involved for the owner and (iv) the extent to which this product or service offers a quick fix for the problem concerned.

It should be noted that the assessments given here are the opinion of the author, a professional in the field of animal behaviour. Other professionals may have differing opinions and products may change subtly or markedly with development and time. Only a selection of products and services are discussed. It is not intended to be a complete review of all available products and services.

Guidelines to the use of services and products

With a wealth of products and services available to pet owners and people who work with pets, it can be difficult to determine which are the most effective, which are appropriate for the problem and which will suit the users.

It can be useful to set some guidelines when considering where to turn to for help with companion animal problems:

1. Is the product or service legal? Some states have laws that forbid the use of electronic pulse collars for example. All products and services should be aware of legal requirements but anyone who recommends their use must also be aware of the legal implications.
2. Is the product or service in line with the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act? Whilst POCTA may not specify particular products or services, these should still fit with the recommendations of the Act ie. causing no harm to animals in their use.
3. Has the product or service been recommended or discouraged from use by authorised bodies? Such bodies may include the Bureau of Animal Welfare, local government bodies, welfare organisations such as the RSPCA or the Animal Welfare League. Ask for details if you are unsure of the nature of their recommendations or reservations.
4. Is the product or service covered by insurance? There are many good dog trainers in the community, giving advice at no cost but are they covered by insurance? If you recommend their service for an aggression problem and the dog subsequently attacks, then who is responsible?
5. Is the product or service recommended by your peers and other professionals whose judgement you trust eg. vets, animal behaviourists? Ask if they have had experience with a particular product. Just because the packaging claims wonderful cures, it does not necessarily mean they will work for the particular problem you have in mind.

6. Could the problem be solved by consulting the relevant professional in the field? With companion animal problems, the veterinary surgeon is the obvious professional to consult. He may help directly or refer the pet owner to other professionals such as animal behaviourists. Many pet owners also like to turn to other practitioners such as complementary therapists for acupuncture, herbal remedies, physiotherapy etc. Where owners are happier with the service or product, they are more likely to work towards solving the problem.
7. Has the product or service been reviewed in journals, scientific papers or magazines? Many journals are not concerned with reviewing commercial products but scientists may have carried out comparisons between products and services and if these are published in reputable journals, these are normally reliable sources of information. Product reviews in magazines and newspapers may not be indicative of success rate.
8. What is the cost of the service or product? Price is not necessarily an indication of superiority but may be clever marketing or an indication of the time that is required to truly solve the problem. It is wise to match up a realistic price with the pet owner's ability to pay, if the problem is to be solved.
9. Could the problem be solved without the use of any product or service? Could knowledge help the pet owner. Reading books, going to classes or getting complementary advice might be enough for many owners to go about solving a problem themselves.
10. What is your gut feeling about the product or service? Would you use it with your own pet? Would you use it with your child? If you are not happy with the use of the product then do not recommend its use.

Development of new ideas

New products and services are constantly coming on to the market place. This reflects the interest in companion animals in our community and the trend to outsource roles. As these create many opportunities in the workplace and often a greater respect for animals, they should be encouraged.

If you can find no reference to these products or services in the course of your work or investigations, it does not mean they should not be used. They may be tried if they still fulfil most of your guidelines. If you are still unsure you should contact your trusted information sources for a second opinion.

If you have access to a new idea or are an inventor yourself there are many development companies and individuals that would like to discuss your ideas with you, myself included.

The future of the quick fix

In general the pet owning public appear to be following human trends for their pets. For instance, pet owners are now more interested in complementary therapies. Pet owners are now beginning to show an interest in their pet's nutrition and in creating a better lifestyle for their pet. This interest in pets will hopefully be the catalyst in finding a quick fix for companion animal problems in our community.

NB. Solutions to barking problems are considered separately in paper 'Barking problems solved: Examples of successful management of barking problems in the urban environment'

Table 1: Comparison of products and services that offer potential quick fixes for companion animal problems in our local community.

Key	Does it meet animal's needs	Ease of use for owner	Cost	Quick fix of problem
✓✓✓	Ethical treatment, satisfies animal's needs, should solve problem	Extremely easy to understand and use	Free	Problem will be fixed extremely quickly
✓✓	Ethical, satisfies drive	Easy to use	Inexpensive	Problem fixed fairly quickly
✓	Acceptable treatment, partially satisfies drive	Fairly easy to use	Fairly inexpensive	Problem fixed but not quickly
-	Little or no harm caused, no drives satisfied	May be easy for some owners, not for others	May cost or alternatively may be free	May or may not be fixed quickly
✗	May be ethically questionable	Not easy	Minor cost involved <\$20	Probably not a quick fix
✗✗	Ethically questionable	Difficult to use	Costs involved \$20-100	Generally not a quick fix
✗✗✗	Causing harm	Extremely difficult for owners to use	Major costs involved >\$100	Never a quick fix

Problem: Roaming animals

Product/Service	Does it meet animal's needs	Ease of use for owner	Cost	Quick fix of problem
Training	✓	-	-	-
Exercise/Play	✓✓✓	✓	✓	✓✓
Dog walking/ minding services	✓✓	✓✓	✗✗	✓✓
Fences	-	✓	✗✗	✓
Cat park	✓✓	✓✓	✗✗✗	✓✓
Electronic fences (where legal)	✗✗	-	✗✗✗	✓
Vet medication (where appropriate)	-	-	✗✗	-

Problem: Destructiveness

Product/Service	Does it meet animal's needs	Ease of use for owner	Cost	Quick fix of problem
Training	✓	-	-	✓
Exercise/Play	✓✓✓	✓	✓	✓✓
Animal behaviour consultation	✓✓✓	✓	✗✗✗	✓✓
Vet medication	✓	-	✗✗	-

Problem: Defecation

Product/Service	Does it meet animal's needs	Ease of use for owner	Cost	Quick fix of problem
Poo bags	✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓
Pooper scooper	✓	✓	✗	✓✓✓
Compost farm	✓	-	✗✗✗	✓
Litter trays	✓✓	-	✗✗	✓
Cat toileting booklet	✓✓	✓✓	✗	✓
Animal behaviourist consultation	✓✓✓	✓	✗✗✗	✓✓

Problem: Attack/ Threats

Product/Service	Does it meet animal's needs	Ease of use for owner	Cost	Quick fix of problem
Training	✓✓	✗	-	✓
Exercise/Play	✓	✓	✓	-
Animal behaviourist consultation	✓✓✓	✓	✗✗✗	✓✓

Joanne Righetti

Dr Joanne Righetti is an animal behaviourist who educates the public and professionals in all aspects of the human-animal relationship. Her background is in zoology, with a PhD in animal behaviour and a counselling diploma – qualifications which enable her to work with all sorts of animals – including the human variety!

Joanne consults to organisations such as the Animal Welfare League, Delta Society Australia, local councils and private clients through the All Natural Vet Care Clinic in Sydney. Joanne is also “agony aunt” for Dog’s Life magazine and is heard regularly on ABC 702 Sydney.

Joanne’s latest venture is a series of pet behaviour booklets and the first of these “Barking Problems Solved” is now available. More details at www.petproblemsolved.com.au.

Joanne lives with a Dalmatian, 4 cats, mice and fish (as well as 3 sons and a husband).

Notes
