

Multi-Dog Homes Face Multiple Challenges

Retailers recommend solutions to customers with two-plus canines.

By Wendy Bedwell-Wilson

Though virtually any dog product on a pet store shelf could be targeted toward customers with more than one canine companion, food, walking tools and containment devices top the list of retailer-recommended products. Multiple-dog owners seek goods that make living with their pets easier, and savvy shop owners, such as Scott Powers of Barking Hound Village, offer solutions.

"What we mainly hear from customers with multiple dogs is that they have to separate them to feed them," said Powers, who operates a small chain of retail and grooming and boarding facilities in Atlanta, Dallas and Austin, Texas. "If they have a large dog and a small dog, the large dog may eat faster and then move over and gobble up the small dog's food, so a lot of times, the owners will want to separate their dogs and feed them in different areas."

That's where retailers can help.

Grain-free food formulated for all life stages, as well as crates, baby gates and leash couplers, are all products aimed at owners of more than one dog—and that's a strong buying group. According to the American Pet Product Association's 2009-2010 National Pet Owners Survey, 33 percent of pet owner respondents said they had more than one dog in their homes, though the segment has declined 11 percent since the organization's 2007-2008 survey.

Here are three tips pet professionals across the U.S. recommend to that customer base.

1 Feed the Pack, Not the Dog

The No. 1 solution multiple-dog owners seek is a high-quality food the entire pack can enjoy, retailers reported. Customers want to pick up one bag of kibble rather than purchase several different diets, said Victoria Park, owner of Park Pet Supply in Atlanta.

"The all life-stage formulas we have, like Natural Balance, Canidae, Orijen and Acana, are targeted toward all life stages, which means any aged dog can eat it," she said. "It's more cost effective for them to buy one big bag of food that everybody can eat."

Grain-free or low-allergen diets also cater to customers with more than one dog, said Trish Potosky, manager of Four Your Paws Only in North Conway, N.H.

"A lot of our customers have been feeding their dogs all the same kind of food, but because different dogs have different allergies, people with multiple dogs have a hard time feeding," she said. "So we recommend the grain-free diets with no corn, wheat, soy or by-products that are for all life stages."

Healthful treats hit the spot, too, Powers added.

"With multiple family dogs, customers want to have treats in the household, but they don't want to give their pets garbage that isn't healthy for them," he said. "With more dogs, you need more treats, so we suggest these healthy treats that come in all different sizes and varieties."

Season Mann, owner of Mann's Best Friend in Oklahoma City said her most popular food

items for multiple-dog households are her grain-free dog food, bakery goods and healthful treats.

"The Merrick Flossies are our top treat," she said. "Pretty much any type of dog can eat them. And they come in all different lengths—[from 6 inches] up to 2 feet long—so they're great for multiple ages, breeds and sizes."

Food makers, including Kari Liu, core brands managing nutritionist for Natura Pet Products in Davis, Calif., said the grain-free trend would continue to gain strength among the dog-owning customer base.

"People want more grain-free options in both food and treats," she said. "A lot of pets out there have grain allergies because grains have been so common in pet food, so the grain-free formulas provide that alternative for pets that may need that."

2 Keep 'em Contained

Whether they're battling over the food bowl or just wanting some space away from the pack, dogs in a multiple-pet household often benefit from crates and room dividers. Retailers said they recommend these solutions to keep the peace.

Jann Palach, owner of Paw Prince in Anchorage, Alaska, said she suggests division at dinner-time, too.

"I have three Old English sheepdogs and three Havanese, so I know what it can be like at meal-time," she said. "If my customers' dogs are getting into each other's food, I recommend putting them in a crate or in different areas of

the house to eat.”

Park echoed Palach’s remarks.

“We stock Midwest crates and suggest them all the time to multiple-dog owners,” Park said. “And with the pet gates, owners can separate their dogs if they need to have them in separate rooms and a crate isn’t working. It seems like the crate and gate makers are always improving them.”

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Companies such as Petmate and Richell USA Inc. have been continually upgrading their product lines and developing crates and room dividers designed to make containment functional. Sarah Julian, director of corporate communications for Petmate, which is based in Denver, said today’s crates are all about comfort.

“A lot of focus is paid to ventilation and making sure there’s enough air flow,” she said. “Retailers will see kennels with side vents, rear vents and the front gate open so the animals are getting ventilation from all sides instead of being completely enclosed in plastic. And a lot of the accessories, like the kennel pads and water dishes, are focused on comfort.”

Room dividers have evolved beyond the baby-gate eyesores of years past, said Barbara Button, product and marketing manager for Richell USA Inc. in Grand Prairie, Texas. The newest dividers blend with home décor, and pet owners can use them in a variety of ways, she said.

Pet gates are great to have around in single-pet homes, but especially useful in multiple-pet households, Button said, adding that her company just released its four- and six-panel Convertible Elite Pet Gate that converts from a divider to a pen.

“[Dogs] like to have their own little living quarters,” she said. “Dog owners can set up a pen or a crate with a water bowl and a little bed in there, kind of like their own little special space for them.

“Pet gates always come in handy to contain a pet to one area of the house or one room that owners want them to be in,” she continued. “The gates work really well to block that area off.”

3 Reach for the Coupler

When out and about walking their packs, owners with multiple pets may also need a tool to tame tangled leashes. Couplers, which are devices that split a traditional leash into two or three, come to the rescue, Potosky said.

“We recommend Lupine couplers or triplers,” she said. “You add it to the leash and it divides it into two or three, kind of like a pitchfork design, so you can walk multiple dogs. The company is so reputable; they guarantee all their products, whether they’re frayed, chewed or broken, and every couple of months they come out with new designs.”

Wacky Walk’r and EzyDog products offer walking solutions, too, Park said.

“We sell couplers and leashes that are designed for two dogs,” she said. “We even have a three-dog coupler made with bungee, rubber and nylon by Wacky Walk’r that’s pretty cool.

“The EzyDog products are neat because you have the handle with the short part of the leash, and then you can add one or two extensions to the leash and make it a coupler,” Park continued. “Then the dogs have more room to walk. The EzyDog leash seems to give a little more room than with other couplers.”

Powers added that training leads and training collars remain popular sellers among multiple-dog owners, too.

“We get a lot of requests for training collars, like martingales, Gentle Leaders or Haltis, so dogs can learn how to walk appropriately on a leash, which comes in handy when there’s more than one dog you’re trying to walk,” he said.

Gordon Spater, president of Kurgo Products in Salisbury, Mass., said that when it comes to multiple-use leashes for multiple-dog households, simplicity is key.

“A lot of dog owners have requested an easy-to-use multiple-use leash,” Spater said of his company’s Quantum Leash. “We wanted to make one that was dead simple: If they want to make it for two dogs, they just hook them onto each end and hold the middle with the cushy handle.”

Spater said the product has been on store shelves since the spring, and response has been positive.

“It’s doing really well,” he said. “People really like it.”

Many customers at Park Pet Supply fall into the multiple dog-household category, and Park noted that among her clientele, value and budget are important. With two or three—or more—dogs, costs rise, and she recommended that retailers do what they can to keep consumers content and coming back.

“Our customers are generally multiple-dog households, and many have three, four, even five dogs,” Park said. “We live in a neighborhood that has a lot of strays and many of our customers take in strays and keep them. So for them, the biggest issue is safety and making sure the dogs are working well in a pack and getting along.

“But it’s the medical costs, the

food and the general things they need, like heartworm and flea prevention, that can add up real quick," she said. ■



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Encouraging owners to purchase the same toy for each dog in their home can help eliminate aggression prompted by toy possessiveness.