

10 things

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10 things your pets won't tell you

Owning a pet is a lot more than a walk in the park

By Kaitlyn Wells



Luc Normandin / WSJ

1. You'll spend a small fortune on me

May marks National Pet Month, and it's easy to see why consumers dedicate an entire month to their furry companions. We feed them like family, dress them like family, and even take them to play dates like family. Today 68% of American households own at least one pet, reports the American Pet Products Association (APPA), the industry's lead trade group, up from 56% in 1988.

As pet ownership grows, so does spending. Consumers will spend \$58.5 billion on them this year, projects APPA. That's more than we spend at shoe stores (\$32 billion); on video games (\$41 billion); and even on private school tuition (\$54 billion), reports industry-research firm IBISWorld. "A wider array of people are allowing their pets to play such an important role in their lives," says Bob Vetere, president and chief executive of APPA.

All of this pampering may help explain why the pet industry is one of the few believed to be resistant to economic downturn. The sector didn't stumble during the recession, and it has maintained steady growth since 1994, the earliest data available, reports APPA. From 2007 to 2009, during the recession, pet-industry revenue jumped 10%. In 2014 alone, it's projected to grow another 5%.

And for those 44% of pet households with more than one pet, the costs balloon even more. This can lead to a problem if pet owners spend more than they can afford on expenses like veterinary emergencies or pricey diets.

See: [Don't let your pets eat your nest egg](#)

2. Humans can't sniff out the differences in organic pet food

Consumers are more conscious of what they eat and some take similar care with their pets' diets. Today, there are dozens of pet-food varieties labeled as "organic," generating \$2.9 billion a year in sales, or 12.4% all U.S. pet-food revenue forecast for this year, reports IBISWorld. While organic pet-food options have existed for at least a decade, some experts saw a surge in interest in alternative pet diets following a tainted pet-food scare in March 2007 when more than 100 brands of pet food were voluntarily recalled. Pet food imported from China that contained melamine — which is used to make plastics and cleaning products — was sickening and killing cats and dogs.

"Organic" labels are approved by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) — although that only refers to how the ingredients are processed — and separate pet food standards don't actually exist. "These [designations] are primarily geared for food for human consumption," says USDA spokesman

Sam Jones-Ellard. "The organic standards do not address nutritional values or food safety; we are currently in the process of developing specific organic pet food standards."

Despite an often higher price tag, there's no scientific proof that organic pet food is actually better than high-quality commercial pet food, according to Louise Murray, a veterinarian and vice president of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) Animal Hospital. "We can't say for sure whether that's going to make your pet live longer," Murray says, adding that quality control in household pet studies are a challenge, and researchers have to follow the pets over their entire lives for results to be valid.

Weekend Sip: A new mixer for your 'Moscow Mule'

Stoli vodka is going in the mixer business -- and they're unveiling a ginger beer, designed for making "it" cocktail, the Moscow Mule. Catey Hill has this week's Weekend Sip.

3. That treat could kill me

Since 2007, the FDA has recorded more than 4,800 incidences of "adverse effects," such as vomiting or diarrhea, related to just one treat category: jerky treats. The last seven months alone (since October 2013) account for 37.5% of those reports, roughly 1,800. Over the last 7 years, more than 1,000 deaths have occurred.

Martine Hartogensis, an FDA veterinarian, says the rate of complaints dropped significantly after several well-known brands, including Milo's Kitchen Chicken Jerky Treats and Canyon Creek Ranch dog treats, were removed from the market (some voluntarily) in January 2013. But an influx of belated complaints came following the October 2013 report, as more consumers became aware of the situation, Hartogensis says. Since then, more than 70 varieties of jerky treats have been recalled due to various contaminant exposures, according to FDA records.

Despite the recalls (which some manufacturers, like Milo's Kitchen, say are unrelated to the FDA's investigation) and testing for contaminants, the FDA hasn't identified a cause for the reported illnesses and deaths. However, it has noticed a trend. "Chicken, sweet potato, and duck — those three ingredients have been the commonality in the reports that we've seen," and most of the reports have come from products manufactured in China, Hartogensis says.

While there's been an association between pet illness and jerky treats, the FDA hasn't confirmed it as the definitive culprit. "It doesn't mean that all of these [reports] are related to jerky treats or that all treats are harmful," Hartogensis adds. Nonetheless, experts advise consumers to supervise their pets when eating a new treat, and to seek veterinarian aid when needed.

4. My favorite toy is also dangerous

There are safe toys and unsafe toys for pets, and animals can become sickened or die if they come into contact with the wrong plaything. "There's no regulation regarding toys for pets," says Stephen Zawistowski, a science advisor with the ASPCA. "Consumers should look at these toys and products the same way they would look at toys for their children; make sure that it's a sturdy toy and something that's not going to come apart easily."

Owners should consider the size of the toy in relation to the pet's size, activity level, and environment. For example, balls and small toys may be choked on, plastic mice have glued-on eyes or tails that can easily detach and be swallowed, and even rope toys can fray and tangle in a dog's intestinal track. To avoid problems, experts suggest altering toys to make them "pet-proof" by removing ribbons, strings, eyes and other small parts entirely. Then, discard the toy when it starts to break down. And always supervise an animal during play time.

5. I don't really need that many vaccines

Just like people, pets need vaccinations to prevent disease. But they're not cheap, and no one wants to pay for vaccines their pets don't need. APPA's pet ownership survey (which the owners self-report) says that in 2012, \$231 was spent per dog for routine vaccination and wellness visits, while \$193 was spent per cat. Depending on the pet's exposure risk, vaccination requirements can vary. According to the American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA) and the American Association of Feline Practitioners — which create the vaccination guidelines — there are several optional vaccines for cats and dogs. For example, the bordetella vaccine is generally recommended if you plan to board your pet or have them professionally groomed; and the feline-leukemia vaccination is beneficial for outdoor cats and all kittens, while indoor adult cats may not need it.

Guidelines also suggest that some animals, such as small-breed dogs or those that are sick, shouldn't receive multiple vaccines at once because they're more likely to experience an adverse reaction. Thus, some vets choose to administer optional vaccines at a later date, when the risks are minimal.

Murray, of the ASPCA Animal Hospital, says that owners may not need to be as vigilant with vaccines for older pets as they should be with puppies and kittens because older pets have developed a stronger immune system, although she didn't provide a specific timetable. "We usually don't vaccinate among the older pets, unless you're talking about vaccines that are required by law, like rabies." However, there's no scientific evidence to suggest that an animal can be over-vaccinated over their lifetime, experts say. But they agree pet owners should talk with their vets to determine the best course of preventative treatment.

Jaffe: Big difference between not saving enough and not saving at all

Marketwatch's Chuck Jaffe joins MoneyBeat with some key advice for investors: There's a big difference between not saving enough and not saving at all.

6. It can cost a lot to insure my health

3% of pets in the U.S. are covered by insurance, but the pet-insurance industry is projected to grow at an annual average rate of 5.5%, from \$650.6 million in revenue in 2012 to \$850.5 million by 2017, reports IBISWorld.

Consumers will spend \$22.8 billion on pet health care in 2014, according to IBISWorld. As pet ownership and pet expenses are on the rise, so is the demand for pet insurance. Currently, only 1% to

Insurance premiums for pets can range from \$15 to \$40 per month, depending on the animal's species, breed, age, gender, and location. Higher coverage limits cost more, and owners with comprehensive plans typically spend more in premiums than they would for out-of-pocket expenses, according to AAHA. There can also be exclusions, including preexisting and hereditary conditions, and chronic conditions, like cancer, may require special coverage. Thus, many pet owners see it as a luxury they can't afford, says Kristen Lynch, the executive director of the North American Pet

Health Insurance Association.

But vets and other experts say insurance options are worth considering for some owners, as those with insurance are more likely to seek preventative treatment, which is better for the pet's well-being. "Talk to your vet before you get coverage," Lynch says. "It's good to know in advance that particular breeds have risks, and what those risks could cost." For example, large breed dogs are more susceptible to knee problems, while small dogs and cats may have dental issues, she adds. Some big-name insurance providers even exclude certain hereditary conditions, like alopecia X (hair loss) in Siberian huskies or heart disease in Maine coons. So read the fine print.

7. Blame my breeder if I'm sick

Pet-store puppies (and kittens) that come from puppy mills (and kitten mills) are more likely to have health problems, according to experts. These vet bills can last a lifetime since ailments related to interbreeding and poor care during infancy can manifest later in life.

While kitten mills are a problem in their own right, problems with puppy mills are generally more extensive and more expensive. Animal-welfare groups describe puppy mills in general as large-scale dog breeding operations that place revenue over the well-being of dogs. Thus, the animals are often neglected, and the breeding parents may spend their entire lives kenneled and breed perpetually, as the mills act without regard to responsible breeding practices. Also, puppy mills breed without consideration of genetic quality, while reputable breeders place an emphasis on breeding the healthiest puppies possible, according to the ASPCA. Mills are also less choosy about who buys the puppies they breed: the mills often partner with pet stores to move their inventory, or sell the animals online or in flea markets.

With an estimated 10,000 puppy mills in the U.S., many of them legal, according to the ASPCA, it can be a challenge to identify a reputable breeder. "Part of the problem is that there is no legal definition of a puppy mill, so if you walk into a pet store and ask if they get their puppies from a puppy mill they can say 'no,'" says Cori Menkin, the senior director of the ASPCA Puppy Mills Campaign

So how can consumers tell if their pet came from a puppy mill? Generally, unscrupulous breeders sell to consumers without meeting them, or they prefer to meet consumers in a parking lot where they can't meet the dog's parents, or there's no evidence that animals live in the breeder's home when consumers are invited in. Some animal-welfare advocates say that responsible breeders will never sell a puppy through any pet store because they want to ensure the puppy is going to the right home. "USDA-certified" and "AKC-registered" labels aren't guarantees, experts say. The ASPCA cites examples of USDA-approved facilities that were in deplorable conditions and the [Humane Society of the United States](#) points out that a handful of American Kennel Club (AKC) breeders have been convicted on multiple counts of animal cruelty, with convictions as recent as 2012.

Proponents of purebred breeding point out a few poor breeders aren't indicative of the industry as a whole. AKC spokeswoman Hillary Prim says it conducts its own kennel inspections. "Responsible breeders have the best chance of producing happy, healthy dogs...those few widely reported cases are not representative of the thousands of breeders whom the AKC inspects annually," she said in an email. Nearly 500,000 purebred dogs were registered with the AKC in 2013.

For consumers who do spend a small fortune on vet care, there may be some recourse. AVMA reports that 21 states have puppy "lemon laws" requiring sellers to reimburse vet expenses up to the purchase price of the puppy if it becomes sick within a certain time frame. Some purchase agreements even outline a return policy, although animal-welfare groups don't recommend returning a sick pet, especially if a puppy-mill operation is suspected.

8. My vet is running low on medications

Currently, there are four "medically necessary" vet products that are in short supply or were discontinued completely, according to the FDA. The medications include those for treating lameness in horses and insecticide poisoning among cats and dogs. But for some veterinarians, the reduced availability of heartworm treatment scares them the most.

Heartworms are contracted when a mosquito carrying infected larvae feeds on an animal and transmits the larvae through the bite wound. Symptoms include cough, shortness of breath, abnormal function of the organs, and even death.

But the treatment itself — Immiticide, an organic arsenical compound, and the only FDA-approved treatment to destroy adult heartworms in dogs — is not easy to get.

Since 2011, there has been a shortage of Immiticide because of issues faced by the U.S. supplier of the drug, Ben Venue Laboratories. The lab's contractor, Merial, also makes heartworm preventative treatments, including Heartgard and Frontline. In October 2013, Ben Venue said it was closing its U.S. facility. "Merial continues to work diligently to return Immiticide to full supply," says Natasha Mahanes, a spokeswoman for Merial, in an email. Merial declined to provide information on revenue and supply levels.

In the interim, the FDA exercises its enforcement discretion to ship Immiticide manufactured by Merial's European supplier to the U.S., but supply is still low. "This drug is medically necessary and there really isn't enough product to fill the U.S. needs," Hartogensis of the FDA says.

Stephen Jones, a South Carolina-based veterinarian and the president of the American Heartworm Society says that the restriction is good because it prevents a handful of practices from hoarding large supplies. He adds his practice has never had a problem obtaining Immiticide since Merial began shipping the drug from overseas. But in 2011, there was a 6-to-8-month span when he couldn't get the product at all, as well as when Ben Venue shut down last winter. "We treat 120 to 150 cases a year, but back then there was no Immiticide to be had; that's scary," he says.

9. Good luck getting an apartment

Apartment hunting can be stressful for consumers, and options are limited if they have a pet — especially city dwellers with large dogs. The New York City Housing Authority says dogs can't weigh more than 25 pounds, and it prohibits Doberman Pinschers, pit bulls and Rottweilers. Other apartments bar pets entirely. For some people, their only option for a roof over their heads may be to abandon their pets. "Families shouldn't be forced between finding a residence or relinquishing their beloved friends," says Wayne Pacelle, the CEO of the Humane Society, in an email.

Pet owners may have a little wiggle room when it comes to keeping their four-legged companions, says Hayley Greenberg, a partner at New York-based law firm Greenberg & Merola, LLP, who specializes in animal rights and landlord-tenant cases.

First, consumers can negotiate a new leasing agreement if a pet is over the weight limit, Greenberg suggests. Second, consumers can probably claim exemption under the NYC pet law, which gives tenants the right to keep their pet if no legal action has been filed during the first 90 days of occupancy. Third, consumers with emotional or physical disabilities who require a pet are protected under anti-discrimination laws.

10. I know more tricks than my trainer

That framed document certifying that an animal trainer is an expert may not mean much. There's actually no licensing requirement in the U.S. to become a professional dog trainer or animal behavior counselor. "In regards to certification, it's a touchy issue," says Mychelle Blake, the CEO of the Association of Professional Dog Trainers (APDT). "The most important thing to know is that there is no regulation of the field. You can print out a business card today and say you are a trainer."

According to APDT, there are more than 80 different designations or degrees a trainer can obtain, and the standards vary widely. Blake says some programs offer take-home tests for certification, while others teach outdated tactics — like using choke chains, relying on "alpha" models, or training that doesn't use positive reinforcement or allow the owner to participate.

Experts say that a consumer's best bet is to find a trainer who's certified by an independent, national certification board that isn't tied to a single school, such as the Certification Council for Professional Dog Trainers (CCPDT) (which APDT founded in 2001 and is now a separate organization) or the International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants. "It's really important for consumers to ask questions," Blake adds. "The most important thing is to look for someone you're comfortable with."

As for trainers hired through chain pet stores, the quality can also vary, experts say. Stores like Petco and PetSmart have their own accreditation programs. PetSmart trainers complete a "rigorous" program, while Petco says "many" of its dog trainers are certified AKC evaluators who can administer canine good citizen tests (what the AKC calls a "good manners" test for dogs), according to their respective websites. And Petco's employment portal says entry-level employees must be certified through the CCPDT or with the Karen Pryor Academy, which offers both education and certification. (Petco and PetSmart declined requests for comment.) But experts agree that even if a trainer's credentials aren't state of the art, the exposure to other pets and owners that your pet would get at most training facilities may be beneficial, as socialization is important to a pet's development.

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