

Minding Their Manners

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Behavior-modification products can be essential in creating harmony between owners and pets—in some cases, spelling the difference between a pet that stays and one that doesn't.

It's no secret that people are busier than ever; it seems as if most folks are hardly ever home. This is one reason why food manufacturers have focused on developing products that can be eaten on the run. This is also why pet behavior problems—particularly among dogs who crave companionship and activity—have become so pronounced.

"People are extremely busy with jobs, kids and life in general. Unfortunately, the dog is the last thing to get any attention, exercise or training," says Pete Fischer, senior consultant with the Dogtra Company. Located in Torrance, Calif., the company produces electronic training collars. "Dogs need exercise just like any animal. Leave a human, a dog or any critter confined for an extended period and they will have behavior issue when they have free time."

Certain negative behaviors can drive even the most tolerant pet owner batty; others can turn downright ugly. Where can pet owners turn to try and combat these problems? Many will look to pet specialty retailers for relief. And with the number of effective behavior-modification products on the market, retailers have lots of potential solutions to offer.

Common Behavioral Issues

Vladae Roytapel is co-owner and co-inventor of The Pet Convincer product line, from Canine Innovations, headquartered in Mt. Clemens, Mich. He's also known as the Russian Dog Wizard, and has been featured on a variety of network news and talk shows. According to Roytapel, American canines are a rather unruly lot.

"I've never seen so many behavior problems with dogs in the world, until I came to the U.S.—especially when it comes to barking," he says. "Barking is the number-one problem."

Unrestrained barking causes dogs to think they're the "leader," creating what

Roytapel terms a "freedom frustration." If barking is left unchecked, he explains, this freedom frustration will lead to aggression. "Every dog who barks [in this manner] will eventually snap," Roytapel says. "It's just a matter of time."

Jumping, aggression, stealing and chewing comprise the rest of Roytapel's top-five problem behaviors list. As for Fischer, in addition to "nuisance barking," the most common issues he sees are dogs not coming when they're called and jumping on guests.

Anxiety—and the negative behaviors resulting from this—is another frequently encountered issue, says Lynn Stachnick, product manager for Nelsons. Located in North Andover, Mass., Nelsons USA is the sole North American distributor of the Bach Original Flower Remedies and the RESCUE Remedy family of products, which offer a variety of homeopathic solutions, including RESCUE Remedy Pet, formulated to ease anxiety/stress. Other behavioral problems customers will bring to your door include marking and spraying, clawing or otherwise destroying furniture and other issues—especially potty problems.

"[These] are an age-old problem with dogs," says Cheryl Pedersen, founder of PoochiePets LLC, Simsbury, Conn.-based manufacturer of PoochieBells, a dog potty training doorbell.

This issue doesn't end at the puppy/housebreaking stage, she adds. Instead, as dogs mature, sometimes into old-age incontinence, potty problems can reoccur; they can pop up at any stage throughout a dog's lifespan.

Providing Solutions

Consumers want more than just one suggestion, says Stephanie Syberg, owner of O'Fallon, Missouri-based Tulane's Closet, LLC, makers of Onesie by Tui, a pet calming garment. Carrying a variety of solutions not only gives customers a better chance of finding an effective countermeasure, it works to the retailer's advantage as well, she says.

"The more suggestive options with explanation on how the product could benefit their pet would help the retailer with customer loyalty," Syberg explains. "This is why I believe the retailer should look at all alternative products for pets, because their owners are out there searching for the best products to make their pets happy."

These products require explanation, which in turn necessitates retailer and staff education, says Emily Benson, marketing director for Starmark Pet Products, Inc. Located in Hutto, Texas, the company makes a variety of training products, including the Pro-Training Clicker, a positive motivation/reinforcement device.

"Learning the basic methodology behind the different behavior modification tools will help the retailer make an informed decision on what products they feel comfortable recommending to their customers," she says, adding that manufacturers should help by providing clear product information and concise instructions on use.

Ask questions, says Joe Stark, principal of Nala Barry Labs, manufacturers of training aid sprays, such as No-Scratch for Cats and No-Go Housebreaking Aid. In addition to the problem behavior, key areas to cover include breed, size, color and especially age—for example, the clicker method can be very effective for puppies and young dogs, since training can start as early as six weeks before bad habits have taken hold, says Benson.

"Even ask the pet's name," Stark advises. "Show that you care about their pet personally. Then suggest something specific that works for their special pet."

Questioning customers is especially important if the product under consideration is an electronic collar, says Fischer. Here, the dog's size is critical.

"If you put a large receive/collar on a small dog, it will be like a boat anchor," he explains. "[Also ask] if the dog has had any experience with e-training, such as an e-collar, bark collar or containment fence. If so, what levels did the dog require in order for it to respond?"

Be sure to ask where they'll be using the unit, Fischer continues. For example, if out in the country, working the dog at a distance, and where hills and trees are present (which will decrease the range), you should probably recommend a half-mile-range unit.

Other strategies recommended by the experts include:

- Offer products that give you a unique edge, says Stark. "A specific product for a specific pet problem that can only be found in pet stores. Products

should create an additional sale, not a substitute sale for something already carried." Example: if someone purchases a scratching post, suggest No-Scratch or visa versa.

- Demonstration creates sales, says Roytapel. Also consider offering classes, open houses, workshops and other events, suggests Pedersen. "[These] allow customers to spend time with retailers in a group environment, encouraging dialogue." This also helps in relationship and trust building, she adds.

- Think placement, says Stachnick. For example locating RESCUE Remedy Pet in high-traffic areas, like the register, sparks impulse sales. "Most pet retail consumers can relate to the behaviors resulting from unwanted stress, so the opportunity to gain these additional sales is very likely," she explains.

Providing effective solutions brings rewards over and above making the sale, says Benson. "Since behavior problems top the list of reasons people give when relinquishing their pets, training can be the difference between the pet being a lifetime member of the home or ending up in a shelter." And that's something to feel good about.