

“I can give you a six-word formula for success: Think things through -- then follow through.”

- Captain Edward V. Rickenbacker

“The path to success is to take massive, determined action.”

- Anthony Robbins

“Patience, persistence and perspiration make an unbeatable combination for success.”

- Napoleon Hill

“The difference between a successful person and others is not a lack of strength, not a lack of knowledge, but rather in a lack of will.”

- Vincent T. Lombardi

EXCELLENCE: Some succeed because they are destined to. Others succeed because they are determined to.

These insights remind us that, with the right attitude and tools, success is achievable!

Sincerely,

Your friends at **Companion Habitats**



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This book was created for pet-retail business owners and managers dedicated to providing quality services and products for their customers and customers' cherished furry, scaled, and feathered family members.

Each of our contributing authors is known and well versed in their subject matter, and they share a combined wealth of pet knowledge. We hope you'll find many useful tips to help you gain the edge in pet retail.

Sincerely,

Your Friends at **Companion Habitats, Inc.**

Table of Contents

The Right Advertising Mix Can Help Ensure Success! Don Dominick	2
The Power of Good Merchandising, Store Layout & Animal Display Jim McAdoo	4
Manufacturers' Reps Can Be a Valuable Asset! Chuck Latham	6
Store Tips for Small Animals Debbie Ducommun	8
Feather Your Profits with Birds: Advice on Keeping Birds Happy & Healthy and How to Display Them Robyn Bright	11
Basic Care of Herps Brent D. Seegers	13
Animal Habitats & Displays: A Bit of Homework Can Go a Long Way! Nancy Reed	15
The State of the Retail Pet Industry Craig Rexford	17
Authors	18

The Right Advertising Mix Can Help Ensure Success!

by Don Dominick, president of Dominick & Dominick

trade area on a map in one color and add another outline denoting from where you would like to draw customers.

The trade area map will help determine the media that most effectively reaches your target market with the least amount of wasted coverage. Wasted coverage is advertising done in areas where people are least likely to travel to your store. Use your trade area map when negotiating any advertising contract.

Broadcast television is by far the most impactful advertising medium. It allows you to show your store, demonstrate products and be your own spokesperson. While very efficient for multi-locations, it may be difficult to justify for a single store. Co-op advertising dollars can ease the financial burden. Contact manufacturers or their reps and ask about their latest advertising programs. Advertising co-op programs, whether 50/50, 60/40 or 75/25, can make television more affordable even for a single store. The right offer combined with the impact of television can draw customers from beyond your trade area and give your store a real boost.

If television is “broad” casting, then cable TV is “narrow” casting. If you select cable advertising, only the cable subscribers in your trade area will see your message. The advantages of cable are its lower cost and its ability to target a specific market. You can choose the channel that best fits your target market. For example, Home and Garden TV (HGTV) reaches homeowners, Animal Planet attracts animal lovers, and CNN connects with older adults. As cable television is often sold in zones, your advertising may only reach part of your town, not your entire metro area. This tends to limit wasted coverage and better focuses your advertising dollars.

Most retailers have experience with newspaper advertising. Large metropolitan newspapers are like broadcast television in that they provide wasted coverage for the single store. Look for local newspapers that reach subscribers in the trade area. Ask for circulation numbers and determine what percentage of the area population receives the paper.

Rarely a day goes by that someone doesn't try to sell you, the pet storeowner, advertising via newspaper, radio, television, coupons, refrigerator magnets, or any one of a thousand other ways to advertise your business. With every “trinket” or “advertising opportunity” there is the promise of increased sales and traffic into the store. The fact is retailers need advertising; the challenge is determining which media makes the most sense.

To choose the most effective media, start by determining your trade area. Typically, it is about a three-mile radius from your store where the majority of your customers live. Outline your

Ask the local newspaper if they will do feature articles about your store, new products, or special promotions. Submit a photograph or news story about a store-sponsored event, such as an adoption-day visit from the animal shelter or a dog wash fundraiser by a local high school group. Write a pet column and discuss how specific products benefit pets. Many suburban newspapers also offer free editorial space to entice retailers to advertise, and manufacturers may provide co-op programs. Take advantage of every opportunity.

Direct mail is often the least appreciated, but most effective, advertising tool for pet stores. But don't confuse direct mail with Val-Pack or other stuffed coupon envelopes. Send your own direct mail card to people in your trade areas. Be sure to use both sides of the card to promote a sale, to showcase your storefront, to provide redeemable coupons, or to highlight new products and pets. And you can use a card as large as 5 1/4" x 11" for the same postage as a 3" x 5" card.

Most manufacturers will provide you with digital photos and artwork, as well as offering a co-op. Plan on several mailings a year timed with your best selling seasons. You can lay it out yourself, or better yet, contact local direct mail “houses.” Rates for layout and production are very competitive.

No matter what media matches your advertising needs and budget, always use as much co-op assistance as possible. Make sure your message is to the point and provides an offer that will make people want to come to your store. Always back up your offers with great customer service and product selection. Advertising brings a new customer into your store the first time...bringing them back over and over again is up to you, your associates, your products, and how good your store looks. 🐾

Direct mail is often one of the least appreciated, but most effective, advertising tools for pet stores.

The Power of Good Merchandising, Store Layout & Animal Display

by Jim McAdoo, retail business consultant

to be a compelling reason for customers to keep coming back.

Following are some fundamental guidelines to consider when operating your store.

Store Layout & Design Upon entering your store, your customers should immediately be hit with some type of positive “WOW” factor. Because time is a precious commodity for all shoppers, the strategic way your store is laid out is critical to the shopping experience. The first impression for the customer should always be, “This is a fun, clean store”. The store should be “departmentalized” to maximize the opportunity for customers to navigate the entire store. And if customers must walk to the back of the store, make the trip interesting for them.

Merchandising Merchandise should be grouped to inspire multiple purchases. Commodity items, such as food, should always have high margin “go-with” items nearby, such as treats, toys and other necessities. When selling new pets, ensure that all of the habitat components (proper size cage/tank, bedding, toys, food, etc.) are properly displayed and available. If you have the ability to “special order” certain items, be sure the customer is aware of this option. Merchandise should also be presented in a manner that allows the customer to make informed decisions.

Customer Service The key to excellent customer service is the combination of understanding the needs of the customer and knowing exactly how to respond. The mix of customers that shop in your store have a variety of needs, ranging from simple, quick and courteous service to helping a prospective pet owner make the decision whether owning a pet is a responsible choice. Likewise, the ability to provide exceptional customer service may not be inherent in the store staff. Training is imperative. Different areas of the

Pet store owners have a unique opportunity to provide an exhilarating shopping experience for their customers. Similar to other retail industries such as Toys or Consumer Electronics, the consumers are shopping for items that make up a hobby or recreational activity. Like many hobbyists, pet store customers are particularly interested in new products (pets), animal care information and specific advice. These interests, along with the understanding that customers are shopping for “another member of the family”, increase the need to be sensitive to sharp merchandising, eye-catching store décor and outstanding customer service. Every visit should be a “win-win” scenario for the customer and the retailer. Above all, there needs

store may even have different service requirements. Sometimes a friendly smile and simple “hello” is all that the customer needs. Regardless of the situation, it is essential to always make eye contact to ensure the customer knows help is available.

Animal Welfare A store’s reputation can be directly related to the conditions in which the animals live. All stores should have a regular maintenance schedule that ensures habitats are clean, safe and enjoyable places to live. Customers will more likely buy an animal that appears to be happy and well attended to. Additionally, keeping the habitats free of odor will certainly add to the overall appeal of the store.

Competition Know your competition. See what they are doing that is successful and see what you can do that differentiates your store from theirs. What is unique about their store that is drawing from your potential customers? Different product offerings, better prices and better service? Be aware, mindful and willing to take action.

Training A well-trained store associate is the cornerstone to a running a successful business. Whether you own a single shop or manage a group of stores, a formalized training program in each of the above elements is essential to running a profitable business. 🐾

The first impression should always be, “This is a fun, clean store”.

Manufacturers' Reps Can Be a Valuable Asset!

by Chuck Latham, president of
Chuck Latham Associates, (CLA)

Every pet store wants to have the best products, the best prices and the best promotions to keep their store looking fresh – and to bring today's customer back as soon as possible. One of the most overlooked assets to accomplish all this is the manufacturers' rep who, by appointment or drop-in, meets with the storeowner or manager to monitor the products he represents.

With over 17,000 pet stores across the country, manufacturers have turned to representatives, or "reps", to get their sales message out and to introduce new

products faster and more efficiently. For most retailers, contact with vendors is solely through manufacturers' reps.

Take "I'm too busy to talk to you" out of your vocabulary and learn to take full advantage of your reps. They are not in your store just "to sell you something"; their service goes well beyond selling. Good reps provide information on product features and benefits, set up in-store displays, suggest pricing and bring in sales materials. They can even set up demos and provide associate training. Reps are also problem-solvers. Whether it is an incorrect order, a return to the vendor or a credit, a rep is a retailer's first contact to solve the problem.

Use your manufacturers' reps! Your reps want to develop working relationships with you and your store. They want to become your "go-to" resource for new products, promotions, discounts and price changes. They are key to your having the latest promotions, shelf talkers, displays and products in your store...and this key opens the door to better sales at the cash register.

Remember, a rep's purpose is to ensure success in selling the product lines they represent. Everything a rep brings into your store, from samples to brochures to product knowledge, is designed to increase your store's sales and profitability.

When a retailer accepts an appointment with a rep, time should be allocated to focus on three key areas: the buying process, a store walk-around, and associate training.

Give the rep time to present new products and promotions, as well as any new packaging. This is your opportunity to make buying decisions that will increase profitability and have a positive impact on the look of the store. A manufacturers' rep can give insight into the latest industry trends and share with you what is working for similar stores in other markets.

A store walk-around with a good rep can be very beneficial. The rep may suggest new displays, different placement for key items, or improved product mixes to increase sales.

Improved product knowledge leads to improved sales, so plan to have as many sales associates as possible in the store when the rep visits. This is the perfect time for associates to receive information and training on new products

and to have questions answered. Reps receive constant product updates and training from manufacturers, and they will share this information at every store visit. Associates thrive on product knowledge, and store sales will benefit from these sessions.

The better rep firms have the better lines. This requires that the rep firm have the experience, national coverage, quality field management, reporting ability and services to maintain those lines. Chuck Latham Associates (CLA) manufacturers require a superior level of rep performance, ensuring that retailers experience reps who are well informed, up-to-date, and who can handle sales and problems with equal ability and competence.

"A good rep is an asset to retailers who want to be competitive and profitable." 🐾

A rep's purpose is to ensure success in selling the product lines they represent.

Store Tips for Small Animals

by Debbie Ducommun, author and founder of the Rat Fan Club and Assistance & Teaching Society

sional treat, and a variety of fruits and veggies make up an appropriate diet. For rabbits, guinea pigs and chinchillas, use commercial pellets for that species, grass hay, fresh greens and a small amount of fruits and veggies. For ferrets, a commercial ferret food is necessary.

Cages This habitat should be at least three times the body length of an adult. Most species enjoy ramps and multiple stories (low ones for guinea pigs). Solid floors and shelves are best, as wire floors can cause leg injuries and foot sores, especially in guinea pigs and rats. Wire cages provide the best ventilation, but care must be taken so the mesh is small enough to prevent escape. Cage pans measuring 3-4" deep will help contain mess.

Accessories Small rodents require a water bottle, a dish for fresh foods, and a dry food dispenser. For rabbits, guinea pigs and chinchillas, provide a non-tip food dish or dispenser, hayrack and water bottle. Ferrets need a non-tip water dish, a food dish and a litter box. Rabbits also require a litter box, while mice, rats and hamsters will use them occasionally.

Sleeping/Hiding Quarters Wood or plastic boxes/houses, or grass nests can be used. Ferrets and rats also love hammocks, and ferrets and guinea pigs enjoy fake sheepskin beds.

Toys All caged pets require toys for exercise and mental health. Increase toy sales by placing them in display cages. All the animals enjoy tubes. Small rodents and chinchillas enjoy exercise wheels; solid-surface wheels are recommended, such as the Wodent Wheels brand. Other good toys for small rodents are ladders, branches, ropes and food toys, which make them work to get treats. Many bird toys also work well. Rabbits like

The most common small pets in order of popularity are rabbits, hamsters, guinea pigs, rats, mice, gerbils, ferrets and chinchillas. With the exception of hamsters, all of these animals are social and do best with same-sex companions of the same species. Single individuals of social species need intensive human attention to be happy.

Diet For rats, mice, gerbils and hamsters, commercial blocks or nuggets for that species, seed mix as an occa-



small toys they can toss around. Ferrets like balls, toys that move or bounce back when touched, and toys they can carry in their mouth. **WARNING: Foam and rubber toys are deadly for ferrets; ferret chew toys must be either indestructible or digestible.**

Bedding/litter Pine and cedar shavings contain toxins that can damage the respiratory tract and liver. Safe products include those made of paper or aspen and other hardwoods. Pellets made from straw and hay, even rabbit food, can be used as litter for small rodents. Encourage customers to buy the safer products by using them in display cages.

Handling Always use two hands when picking up animals. Scoop up smaller animals with both hands, and provide support to the forequarters and hindquarters of the larger animals. Animals should only be picked up by the tail in an emergency, and then only by the base of the tail. In many species the skin will slip off the tip of the tail.

Socialization Animals sold for pets should be well socialized to humans so they are eager for human interaction. Effective socialization requires only that the babies to be handled by humans daily; socialization prior to weaning is usually more successful than after weaning. Guinea pigs are born in an advanced state (eyes open, a full coat of hair, able to run and eat solid food), so human socialization must begin the day they are born for optimum results.

A search may be necessary to find breeders who socialize their animals. Properly socializing babies takes time (although not as much time as socializing them later!), and for this reason, a breeder who offers such animals is justified in charging more for them. As a retailer, you are then justified in passing on the higher cost to your customers. Make sure your customers know that you have the friendliest animals in town! Use signs to explain why your pets are better than average.

Temperature and Light Chinchillas and ferrets are highly sensitive to heat and must be kept below 80°F. Other small pets must be kept below 90°F, with the ideal temperature range for all species being between 60-75°F. Keep all cages away from windows and heating/air conditioning units. Rats and other burrowing animals must have complete darkness at night.

Grooming All rabbits need to be brushed once a week; long-haired rabbits need to be brushed or combed daily. They may also need their toenails trimmed regularly. Guinea pigs need their toenails trimmed regularly and occasionally need a bath. All guinea pigs benefit from an occasional brushing, while long-haired guinea pigs need to be combed daily. Chinchillas require a dust bath 3-7 times per week, while gerbils need one 2-3 times a week. Rats sometimes need their tails scrubbed. Ferrets need their nails trimmed, ears cleaned and teeth brushed (with cat toothpaste and toothbrush) every 2-3 weeks. A bath once a month is adequate for ferrets, as more frequent bathing

All rabbits need to be brushed once a week.

actually increases their musky smell.

Health Problems The most common health problems are caused by improper care: spine fractures in rabbits (from mishandling); fight wounds in hamsters and mice; birthing problems (from being bred too old) and foot sores (from improper cage flooring) in guinea pigs; foot and leg injuries in rats (from improper cage flooring); tail injuries (due to tail grabbing) in small rodents; swallowed foreign objects in ferrets; and respiratory irritation in gerbils (from using pine or cedar shavings).

Special Species Traits Rabbits should be spayed or neutered to prevent behavior problems. Guinea pigs must have supplemental vitamin C in their diet. Hamsters will hibernate if they get too cold, which can cause them to appear dead. Domestic rats can breed at only 5 weeks of age, so males and females must be separated at this age. Male mice are aggressive and cannot live with other males, but the females are very social and do best in groups. Gerbils urinate very little so their cage needs to be cleaned only once a month. Ferrets must have a series of vaccinations similar to those for dogs and cats, and they must be spayed or neutered by about 6 months of age. (Unspayed female ferrets will die.) Chinchillas have no toenails.

Life spans Rabbits average 7 to 10 years up to 15 years. Guinea pigs average 4 to 6 years up to 10 years. Syrian hamsters average 2-2 1/2 years up to 5 years. Dwarf Russian hamsters average 1-1 1/2 years up to 3 years. Rats average 2-2 1/2 years up to 5 years. Mice average 1 1/2-2 years up to 5 years. Gerbils average 3-4 years up to 6 years. Ferrets average 6-8 years up to 15 years. Chinchillas average 8-10 years up to 20 years.

Provide Information Make sure customers have the best experience possible with their pets by making information available. Use handouts and stock pet care books. If pet owners have questions you can't answer, refer them to clubs. 🐾

*Gerbils live
an average
3-4 years.*

Feather Your Profits with Birds

Advice on Keeping Birds Happy & Healthy and How to Display Them

by Robyn Bright, pet, wildlife and nature consultant, author and photographer

When any new birds first arrive in the store, quarantine them from birds already in the store and make sure their eyes are bright, their feathers appear smooth, and their nostrils are clear. Once placed in their new cage, birds should sit on a perch upright, looking alert; by the end of the first day they should show some interest in what is going on around them. Signs of sickness can include: sitting quietly on the perch most of the day fluffed up; dull looking eyes; no self-care of feathers, so they don't look neat and flat; nostrils that are clogged and/or have a discharge; sneezing; tail "pumping" back and forth with breathing; excessive itchiness where the bird will pick at itself sometimes with quick movements; and

the area under the tail is not clean. Birds that are sick will not preen themselves (which healthy birds will do every day), not vocalize, eat little to nothing at all, and/or sleep most of the day with their feathers all fluffed up. Healthy birds will be active, chatter often - especially in the morning and late in the afternoon, preen frequently, and be very alert. Because birds try not to show any signs that they are sick, it is important to watch birds carefully for a few minutes two to three times a day to learn what is their "normal" behavior. Any bird that suddenly changes the way it behaves in the store, stops preening, or looks lethargic should be checked by an avian veterinarian immediately.

Droppings are also a good indicator of health. They should be well formed with the consistency of custard and contain both a white solid part and a dark color (usually mossy green) part. Although some birds will deviate from this slightly, and may have runny stools for three to four days after first coming into the store due to stress, the fecal matter should soon look more "normal". But if a bird has been in the store for weeks and suddenly has a drastic change in the color or consistency of their droppings with no explanation (such as color change due to eating fruits like blueberries), this may be a sign that something is wrong with a bird. It is always best to be alert to any changes so illness can be caught early instead of waiting until the bird is obviously



sick, at which point it may be too late.

All birds should get a variety of foods in their diet to stay healthy, along with a supplement sprinkled on the food that contains vitamins, minerals, and amino acids. Many of the finches, parakeets (budgerigars) and cockatiels do eat seeds as a normal diet in the wild; therefore, they can be given a high quality seed mix along with the appropriate type of pellets, or just pellets if that is what they have been fed before coming into the store. They should also be given millet, vegetables and fruit (except avocado, which is poisonous to birds). Finches, which include canaries, will especially enjoy dark, leafy greens. All food provided should be cut up into small pieces. Birds in the parrot family, however, do not need their food cut up as much. The parrot family includes all parakeets, cockatiels, conures, lovebirds, caiques, greys, amazons, cockatoos and macaws; these birds enjoy all kinds of food, including not only lots of veggies and some fruit, but also pasta, multi-grained bread, cooked eggs, and almost anything that is not sugary, salty, or greasy. (Absolutely no chocolate as it is poisonous to birds!) The more variety of foods a bird is given, the healthier it will stay. Be aware that “new” foods will not always be eaten right from the start, but need to be offered daily, sometimes for two to three weeks, before a bird will try them.

Display all birds in cages that are large enough for them to flap their wings easily, as they will do this now and then for exercise in the cage. Include perches in all display cages that have different diameters so the bird’s feet are not always gripping the same sized perch. Offer a beak conditioner and cuttlebone in each cage to keep the beak trim. Use any paper or bedding that is not too lightweight, as shavings will fly about, and avoid using corncob, as it may cause fungal infections in birds. Be sure bedding is changed often (two or more times a week, depending on the number and sizes of birds in the cage). Food and water must be changed daily and dishes should be scrubbed out two to three times a week or more, as needed. Lights over the birds can remain on anywhere from nine to eleven hours a day. Lastly, include in the display cages appropriate toy sizes for each bird, especially those in the parrot family, as these birds are extremely intelligent and this will keep them mentally healthy and active. 🦜

Healthy birds will chatter often, especially in the morning and late afternoon.

Basic Care of Herps

by Brent D. Seegers, president and CEO of Ectotherm

Introduction Reptiles and amphibians, collectively referred to as herps, are a very unique and highly complex group of organisms. There are over 13,000 different species of herps found on earth. A growing number of species are now being kept as pets. Caring for reptiles and amphibians can be a rewarding and fascinating experience, however certain basic guidelines need to be followed to

ensure proper health of these magnificent creatures. This article merely provides the basics on caring for herps. More information can be obtained through sources such as *Reptiles Magazine*, books, herpetological societies, and veterinarians.

Housing In general, the following groups of reptiles are commonly sold in pet stores: snakes, tortoises, turtles, and lizards. Amphibians include toads, frogs, newts, and salamanders. Cage/Housing requirements vary depending on the species. The first consideration when choosing a cage is to understand the animal’s natural behaviors and from what environment they originate. Cage selection can be broken down into four major categories based on the animal’s natural habitat.

Type*	Description	Common in Pet Trade
Arboreal	Lives in trees	Iguana, Tree frogs, Day geckos, Tree boas
Terrestrial	Lives on the ground surface	Leopard gecko, Tortoises, Most snakes
Fossorial	Lives underground, digs & burrows	Sand fish, Rosy boas, Some toads
Aquatic	Lives in or near a water environment	Turtles, Newts, Frogs, Some lizards

* Note: Many species require a combination of the above-mentioned habitats.

Substrates Similarly, the cage substrate (bedding) needs to match the herp’s biological needs. When choosing a substrate, the following considerations need to be met:

- Substrate is safe if ingested (will not cause impaction in intestine)
- Substrate can be easily spot-cleaned (removing fecal material)
- Substrate is not dusty
- Substrate has no toxic odors

The following chart represents safe substrates and substrates that should NOT be used.

Safe Substrates	Substrates to Avoid
Pelleted/Shredded aspen bedding	Cedar chips
Cypress wood chips	Corn cob bedding
Pelleted hays or plant fibers	Crushed walnut shells
Indoor/Outdoor carpet	Silica sand
Paper	Cat litter
Moss (toads/tree frogs)	Aquarium/Pea gravel

Cage Décor Decorating a herp’s cage is not just for cosmetic reasons. Cage décor provides environmental conditions necessary to maintain a healthy herp in captivity. A hide area is required for most reptiles; this can be as simple as a hollowed out log or commercial plastic hide box made for reptiles. Additionally, flat rocks can be configured to make multiple hiding areas.

Artificial or real plants provide shelter and make the reptiles feel safe and hidden. Every effort should be taken to reduce the animals' stress and create a natural setting in captivity.

Heating and Lighting Herps are ectothermic (cold blooded) creatures, meaning they rely on environmental energy to regulate their body temperature. Thus the pet store owner or pet owner needs to simulate natural heating and lighting requirements. There are two types of lighting used in conjunction with herps: fluorescent and incandescent. Fluorescent lights are used to provide ultraviolet light (UVB), which promotes the production of vitamin D3 in herps and is necessary for proper skeletal growth. Incandescent light bulbs serve a dual purpose, providing both heat and visible light. Precautions must be taken to protect herps from getting too close to incandescent bulbs, which may cause burning. Incandescent bulbs should not be the sole source of heat for the animal. Under the tank heaters, ceramic heat emitters and heat tape can be used to provide additional heat. Although reptiles and amphibians are ectothermic they need cooler areas to thermoregulate their body temperature, thus a thermal gradient (temperature range) needs to be established in the herp's cage.

It may be necessary to adjust the humidity level, depending on the needs of your herp. Misting the enclosure, providing standing water, or adding hydrophilic substrates such as moss or vermiculite can easily achieve this.

Diet Requirements Water dishes with fresh water should be provided at all times. Soiled water should be removed immediately to prevent the growth of bacteria. For insect-eating herps, live foods such as crickets, wax worms, super worms, and mealworms should be provided. Super worms and mealworms, in general, should be fed sparingly due to the high amount of indigestible exoskeleton and low nutritional value.

A majority of snakes feed on whole animals such as rodents. Rodent-eating snakes should only be fed pre-killed mice. This reduces the risk of injury to the snake and promotes less aggressive behaviors.

Herbivorous reptiles rely totally on plant material and do not eat animal protein. Feeding animal protein to herbivorous reptiles causes serious health problems and must be avoided.

Many reptiles, however, are omnivorous, meaning they consume both plant and animal material and require unique, varied diets. Commercially prepared foods can be a valuable addition to a herp's diet. However, certain ingredients such as soy, corn, sugar, and wheat should be avoided as they have been linked to health problems in reptiles and amphibians.

In captivity herps require dietary supplementation in the form of calcium, vitamins, and other minerals. Supplementation is an integral component to ensure proper care of reptiles and amphibians. The amount of supplementation needed varies among species and must be researched before administering. Over-supplementation can have toxic effects on reptiles and amphibians.

While there are many components required to maintain proper health in captive reptiles and amphibians, each is important and should be regulated accordingly. 🐸

Animal Habitats & Displays: A Bit of Homework Can Go a Long Way!

by Nancy Reed, strategic planning & marketing manager, Companion Habitats

What are some of the key things retailers need to know about small animal habitats?

One thing is certain: Healthy, happy pets will attract customers and will sell. Therefore, when a retailer has decided on, or is considering, carrying and selling pets in their store, it is vital that they recognize the importance of maintaining the health of these animals. By understanding the best way to feature and promote small pets, retailers will quickly find good homes for them. The care and nurturing that the retailer provides these pets directly reflects positively or negatively on a store's image in the community.

When deciding how to house and care for small animals, it is important to understand the difference between a cage (which is merely an enclosure to confine) and a habitat (which more closely emulates a pet's natural environment).

What should retailers look for when purchasing a habitat?

Retailers should seek quality constructed units that are easy to clean and maintain, will not easily show wear and deterioration over time, and will demonstrate the retailer's commitment to the health and welfare of its pets. Many products currently on the market do not provide easy access for cleaning and are primarily constructed of wood, which will deteriorate with mold and mildew over time. In the long run, retailers can actually end up spending more money by repeatedly replacing poorly constructed products, rather than initially purchasing a well-made product.

Select attractive habitats that will capture interest and enhance – not distract from – the pets' natural beauty. Enclosures should be well lit for optimal viewing and the health of its inhabitants. Many pets, such as reptiles, require full-spectrum lighting and humidity, which is critical for their health.

In addition, smaller habitat units should have an effective ventilation system to circulate fresh air throughout and diminish odors. The heating system should be easily regulated according to individual needs. Be sure to consider recommended feeding requirements, such as dishes, bottles, etc., for each pet's food and liquid intake. It is highly recommended that you research the proper care and feeding requirements for each species you decide to offer.

Don't overlook safety. Select units with proper locks and safety features to protect the pets and your business from theft. Lastly, don't forget to provide entertainment for pets, such as toys, things to climb on, etc. Customers will enjoy watching pets play and interact.

A hide area is required for most reptiles.

What are some helpful tips in caring for pets?

Proper employee training is critical to ensure consistency in caring for pets. With this in mind, habitats should be monitored throughout the day for cleanliness. Some odor is expected, but it should not be overwhelming. To control odor, habitats should be free of old feces, dead prey, food items and any other waste.

Avoid drafts and temperature fluctuations while maintaining an overall store temperature of about 75°F. Don't position animal enclosures in direct or constant sunlight, as heat can build up quickly, causing dehydration and/or death. Each species has specific heat requirements, with reptiles and birds, in particular, requiring additional heat.

Metal cages should be rust free. Research the best substrate for your various pets, as some can cause skin irritation or respiratory problems.

Provide fresh water in clean bowls or bottles that are absent of algae or scum, and ensure that they are never empty.

Watch for listlessness, diarrhea, dull coats and runny eyes, which can be signs of illness. Quickly separate ill animals from others sharing the same enclosure.

How can retailers help their customers to be responsible pet owners?

Our experience has shown that many customers purchase pets on impulse, and they may be quite unprepared for the responsibilities of their new pet once they get home and reality sets in. Retailers can seize this opportunity! Build a relationship with your customer and increase sales by strategically placing helpful related signage, literature, food and toy products near pet habitats. 🐾

*It is important
to understand the
difference between
a cage and
a habitat.*

The State of the Retail Pet Industry

by Craig Rexford, publisher of
Pet Business magazine

Much has changed in pet retailing over the last decade or so. In the early 1990s, independent pet stores still dominated the industry, controlling in excess of 70 percent of pet accessory product sales and about 40 percent of pet food sales. In certain categories, like fish, small animal and reptiles, independent pet stores had in excess of 90% market share in both food and supplies.

Today, PETCO and PETsMART have become household names and have grabbed substantial market share by promoting strategies that emphasize

price, convenience and selection. At the same time, mass merchandisers, specifically Wal-Mart and Target, have also grabbed market share in the pet category. These retailers have done so by carrying a broad selection of the most popular products at extremely competitive prices.

In the case of Wal-Mart, their strategy to gain market share has been supported by an impressive private label program in the pet food and pet care category that further reduces price points and creates broad customer loyalty.

Meanwhile, supermarkets, which once dominated the sales of dog and cat food, have lost a great deal of market share. Most of it went to the big box pet specialty stores and the mass retailers, but some has been grabbed by independent retailers who offer unique items tailored to the animal's specific age, health or needs.

Independent pet retailers, however, are quite resilient. While they have lost share to the larger chains, many have adjusted their merchandise mix to attract a more discerning clientele. These retailers are placing a much greater emphasis on service and, in many cases, concentrating on areas that are overlooked or poorly managed by the larger chains. Many independent pet retail operators have come to realize that they can still offer a higher price on most of their merchandise as long as consumers realize a benefit from shopping the store.

But service can also be the independent operator's Achilles heel. By failing to satisfy the consumers' needs, independent retailers put themselves at great jeopardy. Even one bad experience with a store clerk can turn a customer off to the establishment and cause a lost sale forever.

Furthermore, independent retailers must maintain the look of the store and develop an image that they truly have a unique shopping experience available for the consumer. While they must watch their costs, they must also be aware that by being penny wise, they may end up losing consumer support. 🐾

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