



# PASSIONATE ABOUT PETS

by Jennifer Walla

*Today's pet owners are a whole different breed. Their love and devotion toward their faithful companions know no bounds, and that's music to the ears of local businesses that cater to their needs.*

To say that Heidi Zich loves her dogs is an understatement.

"Our dogs are like our children. Everything we do in our lives is planned around our dogs," she says, referring to the two golden retrievers she and her husband, Steve, own.

For starters, Brady, 2, and Oso, 4, have their own beds in their own bedroom. When their owners go camping, the dogs retreat to the privacy of their own tent.

On birthdays, they don party hats before chowing down on doggie-themed cakes courtesy of Appleton's Two Paws Up Bakery. Photos and gifts, like a snazzy new collar or toy, also help mark the occasion.

The Zichs are not above renting movies for the pair of pooches, who are also partial to Animal Planet programming or animated shows featuring Garfield, for example.

"We leave the radio on for them when we're not home," Heidi adds.

Brady's food allergies necessitate prescription kibble. "His ears flare up if he eats something he's allergic to," Heidi says. Oso has airborne allergies and acid reflux, for which he takes medication.

Pet insurance helps take the bite out of vet bills incurred during routine visits as well as the expensive surgery Oso required during a cancer scare last winter. The services of a pet therapist

helped Brady with his anxiety issues during Oso's recuperation when the two had to be separated.

The Zichs got their Pontiac Aztec because it easily accommodates their dogs and the mountains of dog-related paraphernalia.

"Everything we do caters to them," she says. "We have to consider how the dogs affect things."

That includes the purchase of a pricey Dyson vacuum to more easily manage pet hair, durable leather furniture, dark-colored tile, and carpeting with flecks "that hides dirt well."

A dog lover her whole life, Heidi, 27, says that if she even thinks about what life would be like without her goldens, she "loses it."

"Humans are great and you have that interaction, but it's different with dogs," she says. "Dogs always try to please you. It's unconditional love, all the time. Goldens are known as "Velcro" or "back-pocket" dogs because they never want to leave your side."

Although she says she knew Steve was a dog lover when they met, she says she doesn't think he knew the extent to which the dogs would eventually

affect every aspect of his life.

"But now he's just like I am," she says, adding that the couple are actively involved with Golden Retriever Rescue of Wisconsin, a statewide, all-volunteer, nonprofit organization that helps place unwanted, abandoned, or surrendered golden retrievers into loving homes.

If you think the Zichs are a bit extreme, think again. The pet industry is one of the fastest growing around, exceeding \$36 billion dollars last year, according to the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association (APPMA).

Consumer demand for pet products and services "is expanding into almost every corner of what has typically been reserved for human consumption," says Bob Vetere, APPMA managing director and COO.

One of the top six trends for the pet industry in 2006 is the proliferation of services geared toward the mental, physical, and behavioral issues of pets.



Brady Zich (owners are Heidi and Steve), all decked out for Halloween.





A quick glance at the yellow pages reveals pet owners have their pick of groomers and spas, pet suppliers, trainers, sitters, day care facilities, photographers, veterinarians, and even pet cemeteries and crematoria in our area.

Trisha Young, who owns Bark Avenue, says her customers view their dogs more like family members than pets.

Young offers daycare, boarding, and training at her Appleton business, as well as pet supplies, including supplements, toys, and high-end dog food.

"I'm a big nutrition buff," she says, adding that none of food she carries contains corn, one of the biggest allergens found in dog food and one with little nutritional value. "If the first ingredient is corn meal, and you feed a dog that, you know it's going to come out the same way it went in."

Although some might balk at the prices—think spending upwards of \$50 for a 15-lb. bag for some organic brands—Young and other dog lovers see it as an investment.

"It's like feeding your children fast food all the time. You wouldn't do that. If you're going to pay upwards of \$1,500 for your dog, you might as well feed them well."

The Web cams at Bark Avenue are a huge hit with her clientele as well. Owners who put their dogs in day care will find a structured, safe environment for their four-legged friends, which operates remarkably similarly to a human day care facility, complete with scheduled snacks and naps, playgroups organized by dog size and temperament, and access to playground equipment and an outdoor play area.

Dogs, says Young, are social animals that benefit from the interaction, stimulation, and exercise they get at doggie day care. Dogs who don't get enough exercise during the day, like most dogs who are home while their owners work, can

turn toward destructive behaviors to get attention. Putting them in doggie day care can be a win-win situation for both animal and owner, she says.

That being said, dog owners who bring their pets to Bark Avenue can check in via the Internet throughout the day, putting their minds at ease knowing Fido and Fifi are happy during their stay. The bonus: "I'd want to know I'm getting what I'm paying for, and my customers do, too," Young says.

Vicki Pingel, owner of Fox Valley K-9 Training Center in Menasha, is another local business owner benefiting from pet owners who will do, and pay, just about anything for their companions. Using a positive reinforcement technique, Pingel offers one-on-one training for every client. Suffice it to say, you can teach an old dog new tricks.

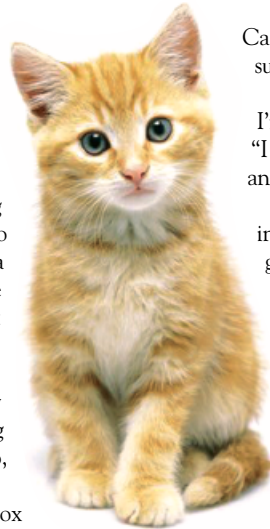
And, catering to today's busy dog owner's lifestyle, she offers individualized training programs on-site, in-home, or via boarding. Free phone and e-mail support is always available, she says.

"Five years ago, people saw this as more of a luxury, but things have changed," she says. "There are more options, it's more affordable, and now it's seen as more of a necessity. From my perspective, it's less disheartening than having the police come to your door [in response to constant barking, or worse], or losing your homeowner's insurance for repeat offenses."

Today's pet owner can truly indulge his pet. Once only found at pet stores, mass-market retailers have gotten on board with the human penchant to outfit and accessorize. Along those lines, consider "pet parties", a play on the Tupperware direct-selling concept whereby independent pet consultants host parties and demonstrate the latest and greatest in pet products under the Shure Pets brand.

Lisa Zuleger turned to Shure Pets products for her Cairn Terrier, Emma, who suffers from severe allergies. Upon learning the company offers to donate 25 percent of the profit from each sale to a non-profit organization, she was hooked. As a Shure Pets consultant, the part-time nurse enjoys meeting other animal lovers, demonstrating products, and being able to give back to

Steve and Heidi Zich, with Oso (sitting) and Brady.



Cairn Rescue USA, an organization she supports.

"I'm always looking for ways the rescues I'm involved with can make money," she says. "I thought what better way to raise money for animals and pets than by selling pet supplies?"

Dedicated dog parks are gaining popularity in the Fox Cities for pet owners who want to get their dogs some exercise and socialization. The Kaukauna Dog Park is a recent addition to a list of sites, which also include those in Oshkosh and Appleton.

If washing your dog leaves something to be desired, check out UR Washin' Stuff in Menasha. Besides doing a booming car wash and laundry biz, it offers dog washing rooms with large, stainless steel tubs, industrial blowdryers and a supply of shampoo, towels, and ear and eye wipes.

"Our customers like that we clean up after them so there's no mess at home," says owner Mark Grishaber. "And it's easier on your back than a regular tub because you do it while standing."

Alas, there's one aspect of pet ownership that can be more than a bit unpleasant: the duty of picking up doo-doo. But don't despair. There's at least one area business that will deal with that nagging chore.

The folks at Poop Patrol (whose motto is "#1 at #2") will happily remove pet waste from your environs, and also offer dogwalking and dog food delivery.

Rates are based on number of dogs and sessions per month. For example, your yard can be poop-free for as little as \$40 a week for one dog.

It may seem a bit extravagant, but for many it's a small price to pay to deal with such a nasty by-product of pet ownership. 



## So Long, Pal

When it's time to say good-bye, consider pet cremation services or a pet cemetery. Losing a pet can be extremely difficult emotionally. The services offered by these businesses can include options for burial, cremation, or interment for the dearly departed, which can help with the grieving process.

Forrest Run Pet Cemetery and Crematorium in Sherwood has been assisting grieving pet owners for more than 20 years. It also offers a line of pet urns and caskets, with the option of a pet funeral complete with a viewing room.

A little farther north, Heritage Pet Cremation Service in Hortonville is a popular choice when home burial isn't an option.