

Pet memorial products—part of a young and growing category—are great opportunities to meet grateful customers' needs during a difficult time. **By Lisa Plummer**

Products to Memorialize Pets

It's an unavoidable fact of life: Pets don't live forever. For many people, losing an animal companion can be just as difficult as losing a human family member. So it's not surprising that many pet owners honor the passing of an animal companion with as much care and ritual as they would a human being.

Today, a wide variety of options let you offer your customers the memorial product that feels right to them. Yet many pet retailers make the mistake of ignoring this young and growing category, even though they commonly carry products for every other phase of a pet's life, said Nick Popravsky, vice president

of sales and marketing for Eternal Image (Farmington Hills, Mich.), which manufactures and markets licensed branded urns and memorial garden markers. In doing so, retailers are simply handing off business to other sources, including funeral homes, he said.

"Many funeral home operators were telling us that an increasing number of people were coming in looking for pet products, urns, and so on," said Popravsky, whose company also manufactures memorial items for the funeral industry. "That was three years ago. Now more than 10 percent of all funeral homes are selling retail pet memorial products, and it's growing.

"It's not about death and dying, but rather about giving your customers options," Popravsky added. "The large chain operators have so far pretty much missed the boat on this trend, giving a window of opportunity to independent and smaller retailers. If you don't carry [memorial products], your customers will buy them from someone else, but buy them they will."

Whether you are including memorial products in your store for the first time or carrying them already, you will want to familiarize yourself with current offerings that not only can help grieving customers, but also give you greater opportunities to meet their needs during a difficult time.

Caskets and Burial Attire

When his daughter's pet died, Edward Lamolinara, owner of Antal Products Inc. (Loyalhanna, Pa.), didn't want to merely wrap it in a blanket, place it in a plastic bag and bury it, said Roxann Wingard, sales manager for the company. Instead, Lamolinara buried the animal in an antique chest that fit the pet. "That gave Ed the incentive to make our polyurethane pet caskets," said Wingard.

The Pet Casket mimics the look of a natural wood-grain coffin. Made of rigid polyurethane, it can withstand pressures exceeding 360 pounds per square inch and is airtight and water-resistant. Available in five sizes and three finishes, the casket comes with a built-in liner. An optional Deluxe Liner—a hand-sewn, lace-trimmed blanket and pillow made out of a fine crepe fabric—also is available from the company.

For owners on a tighter budget, Antal offers a double-walled and earth-friendly corrugated casket with decorated lid as



part of its Pet Memorial Set. The set provides everything a person would need to perform their own memorial ceremony and burial ritual, including a bereavement certificate, a stainless steel grave marker and a ceremony booklet.

The company also offers a Pet Bereavement Product Center, a convenient retail product display that includes the Memorial Set with three casket sizes and additional product options.

Another eco-friendly option is the biodegradable Critter Coffin Pet Casket line from Critter Coffin (Bothell, Wash.). The easily assembled caskets are made from recycled material and are suitable for cats, dogs, birds, reptiles and small animals. The company recently redesigned its packaging for individual retail caskets to provide an even more environmentally conscious product, according to company president Lorette Alpers.

For meaningful send-offs to the Rainbow Bridge, Teckelklub (Vancouver, British Columbia) offers the new Nirvana K9 Eternity line of dog jackets and blankets/shrouds created especially for burial. For a company that has made jackets and beds for every stage of a dog's life for the past decade, launching a product line for the end of life seemed like a natural step for Teckelklub, according to marketing director Erin Kingston.

"The Eternity jackets and blankets add a formality to the inevitable process that mirrors what we are accustomed to doing in everyday life for all members of our family," Kingston said. "Eternity products provide a beautiful, peaceful way of capturing final images of your pet."

Both products are made locally from lustrous taffeta fabrics with an iridescent sheen. The padded jacket is available in nine sizes and two colors, while the blanket/shroud comes in three sizes, designs and colors, with a zippered closure at one end.

Urns

Rather than bury their pets, many owners prefer cremation. In fact, there has been a "tremendous increase" in pet cremations over the last five years, according

Designed to look like sculptures rather than urns, hand-cast Sculpturns from ShadowCasts L.L.C. are available in several breed varieties.



Helping the Bereaved Customer

LOSING A PET is a devastating experience for many pet owners, so shopping for memorial products isn't exactly fun for them. However, you can make things easier. In addition to guiding customers toward the right products for their particular tastes and requirements, be prepared to offer a little extra help during an emotionally difficult time.

Here are some tips and ideas for assisting grieving customers:

- Treat the pet's death as one that deserves the same kind of respect as for a human family member. The grief is very real and should not be trivialized.
- Speak in a gentle, kind and soft voice.
- Take time to listen. When people lose a pet, they want to be around others who "get it." Ask the customer to tell you about his or her deceased pet and listen to their stories. If you're familiar with the pet, acknowledge how wonderful it was and participate in the remembrances.

• Put together a packet or brochure that connects customers to support resources. Include a list of books on pet bereavement and information about rituals and memorials. Include community resources, such as counselors, support groups and online services. Offering these resources further validates and legitimizes a person's grief, which can be very comforting.

• Create a section in your store to honor pets that have passed on—a memory wall or remembrance board where people can share photos and cherished memories, for example—and invite your customers to participate. This respectful way of honoring your customers' losses and showing compassion in a time of need can be not only a unique way of setting your store apart from the competition, but also could result in positive word-of-mouth and increased patronage.

Source: Betty Jane Carmack, author of Grieving the Death of a Pet

to Popravsky of Eternal Image.

For departed canines, Eternal Image offers the American Kennel Club Urn, made out of burnished copper and bronze die-cast aluminum with a polished base that gives the appearance of real wood. It also comes with a photo window and a metallic nameplate for personalizing.

The Cat Fanciers' Association Urn features an Egyptian-style art deco design with two feline figurines appearing to hold the urn in an upright position. Like the AKC urn, it includes space for attaching a photo and a plaque for engraving.

The Fur-Ever-Friends Keepsake Memorial Pet Urn, introduced last year by Animal Keepsake Memorials (Agoura Hills, Calif.), is an option for owners who wish to honor

the memories of multiple pets in one container. Dan Gersten, company president, was inspired to create the lightweight, triangular-shaped urn after receiving the remains of his first dog, Frisco, "in a tin box suitable for hard candy."

Unable to find a more appropriate product to safeguard his pet's ashes, and knowing he would have the same need for other pets, he came up with his own design. "I realized I was going to have other pets who would be just as significant as Frisco, in their own unique and delightful ways,



The American Kennel Club Urn and the Cat Fanciers' Association Urn from Eternal Image include space for attaching a photo and a plaque for engraving.



Made out of a resin that resembles carved stone, Arts-n-Crafts memorials from A Special Place include a compartment to store cremains and customizable brass pet tags.

which led me to look for a product that would allow me to memorialize multiple pets in one place, as opposed to having a mantle full of pet urns," Gersten said. "There just weren't any."

Available in five finishes in durable plastic, the urn contains three separate compartments for holding a symbolic amount of ashes for up to three pets. It includes three brass memorial plates for engraving pet names and tributes, as well as space for photos. A four-sided urn is in the offing, Gersten said.

Lifelike, breed-specific statuary urns from ShadowCasts L.L.C. (San Anselmo, Calif.) double as works of art. Made of hand-cast urethane, Sculpturns come in nine dog breed varieties and a short-haired cat version. The company also offers special pet tags and purple velveteen pouches to hold cremains.

Said principal Steve Ardito, "I think what makes our breed-specific Sculpturns so special is that they memorialize a beloved pet in an emotionally comforting life form. Because they're hand-painted in the [United States], our Sculpturns can be custom-painted to match the likeness of the pets they represent, which makes them even more personal to pet owners."

Smiling angels joyously tending to beloved pets are the hallmark of urns from A Special Place (Overland Park, Kan.). Memorial urns in the Traditional

Group are available in outdoor resin that looks like stone or in white-glazed porcelain. The company also offers a contemporary Gentle Spirits line of angel urns made of an outdoor resin that mimics the look of painted wood.

Inspired by her own experiences with loss and grief, company owner and artist Gina Deutman wanted to design her memorials to reflect an uplifting and comforting image of pets living on in a peaceful place. "It was so important for me to convey the feeling that one's pet will be lovingly cared for and looked after," Deutman said. "I wanted the angels to have the same look on their faces that we have when we hold a puppy in our arms for the first time."

The company's most recent product line, Arts-n-Crafts, includes breed-specific memorials made out of a resin that looks like carved stone. A compartment at the base of each piece stores cremains. Available in several dog breed varieties and one cat design, they include brass pet tags for customizing.

Memorial Stones and Markers

For unique, personalized memorials suitable for outdoor display, Pet Steps To Heaven (Lindstrom, Minn.) mixes pet cremains with cement to create durable, individualized stepping stones and garden benches. Available in a variety of colors, sizes and shapes, the memorials can be customized with hand-laid, stained glass details and additional personalized options, including glass cases set into the cement for displaying pet photos and mementos.

This memorial, too, was born out of a personal experience with pet loss. "We became involved in this industry three years ago with the loss of our German shorthair, Zak," said company president John Laub. "My wife wanted a way to celebrate the 14 years he gave us. Her background was spent teaching the art of stained glass, so she came up with a formula to incorporate Zak's ashes into a garden stone, then hand-laying stained glass to celebrate his memory. [Since then], we have developed a passion

The iMarc Memorial Stone, made by iMarc Pet Tag Engraving Systems, is a tabletop memento designed to display either bone- or heart-shaped pet tags.

to be able to offer a work of art to help people celebrate their memories."

Large garden memorials from A Special Place are reminiscent of classic European statuary. Created in outdoor resin to weather the elements, the base can hold cremated remains. Like the company's small urns, the garden memorials are available in Traditional, Arts-n-Crafts or Gentle Sprits styles.

Also made to withstand the great outdoors, the CFA Garden Memorial Marker and the AKC Garden Memorial Marker from Eternal Image are made of durable aluminum. Like the urn, the CFA memorial features an Egyptian, art deco-inspired design, while the AKC marker sports a paw print border. Both circular markers come with brass plaques that owners can engrave with their pets' names.

Keepsakes

For owners who want to carry the memory of their beloved pet with them wherever they go, Antal offers its new Pet Memorial Keepsake. Available in paw, bone and fire hydrant designs, the small 3-inch mementos are made out of a stone-like resin and come with a clear plastic storage capsule for storing pet hair, baby teeth, a photograph or a small amount of cremains.

The iMarc Memorial Stone, made by iMarc Pet Tag Engraving Systems (Phoenix), works as a tabletop memento. Standing 5 inches high, the memorial is made of a cast stone material that resembles real rock. The stones are designed to display either bone- or heart-shaped pet tags and bear an engraved tribute on the front.

As manufacturers of the iMarc pet tag engraving machine, the company decided to offer a memorial product after noticing



the growing popularity of these kinds of items, according to marketing manager Natalie Whitehouse. "We began selling pet memorial stones in spring 2007. The stones provided a new item that could be sold by existing iMARC owners as well as an incentive for those considering purchasing the machine."

Finally, grieving pet owners can celebrate the lives of their furry loved ones with books such as *Paw Prints in the Stars: A Farewell and Journal for a Beloved Pet* from Tristan Publishing Inc. (Golden Valley, Minn.). Written by Warren Hanson in the voice of a pet that has passed, the illustrated book offers a reassuring message. The 9-inch by 9-inch keepsake book also includes space for precious photos, journal pages for favorite memories and a ribbon for securing pet tags.

"Our hope is that pet owners can draw upon the book for years to come as they reflect on the life they shared with their beloved pet," said Sheila Waldman, vice president of sales, marketing and relationships for Tristan.

A Place for Memorials

To draw your customers' attention to memorial products, create a tasteful memorial area or display that highlights a range of products. Keep a variety of catalogs at your counter for larger items that can be drop-shipped to your store, and/or allow customers to look through manufacturer Web sites while in your store.

Also, train your employees to understand the various products in your inventory and how to discuss them with customers in a thoughtful, compassionate way (see "Helping the Bereaved Customer.")

"Have your memorial products in one clean, bright location and be prepared to direct or escort your customers directly to [them]," said Popravsky. "A pet memorial area or display works best. Your customer is feeling badly, and you have a wonderful opportunity to help them feel much better by [helping them make] this purchase."

By carrying products that address the full cycle of life and let owners remember and honor the life of a cherished pet, you are providing an invaluable service that will help cement a long-term customer relationship. ■

Lisa Plummer is a freelance writer based in Las Vegas.



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