



High Tech Pets

Gadgets and other technologies for our furry friends abound.

When billionaire Leona Helmsley passed away in 2007, she shocked many by willing \$12 million to her Maltese dog, Trouble.

While it seems none have surpassed Helmsley in the amount bestowed on a pet, the average pet owner in the U.S. is not afraid to splurge on their Mr. Fluffles. According to the American Pet Products Association, total pet spending has nearly doubled in the past 10 years. In 2008, sales topped \$43 billion, up from \$41 billion in 2007; sales for 2009 are expected to reach \$45 billion.

The association says every pet sales category is growing, including gadgets and other technologies. While sales figures aren't widely available for pet tech products, Amazon.com says this category has become quite popular on its site. "Amazon customers are showing considerable interest in pet-based technology. We are seeing strong sales in 2009," says Chris Nielsen, Amazon's home and garden store vice president. "The most significant year-over-year growth is technology applied to pet training and behavior." Nielsen declined to provide Amazon's pet tech sales.

Experts say high-tech novelty items tend to be top sellers. One popular product has been the Takara Bowlingual/Meowlingual pet translation device. The company claims that the device can translate a pet's barks and purrs into intelligible sentences, such as, "I can't stand it." Other popular novelties include the Pet's Eye View Camera, a digital camera that attaches to your cat or dog's collar and takes photos at timed intervals. When you come home, you can view photos of what your pet has been up to that day.

But not all novelty items are designed with frivolous, fun intent. At first glance, the Zen Dog, a kit that provides therapy and relaxation for your pooch through calming music and massage, seems like a luxury but experts say it has practical uses. "This is great for dogs who have been through puppy mills, bad homes or traumatic experiences," Pet Enthusiast editor Dawn Piekie says. "For some dogs, it's really something to be able to reach the point of being touched again."

After novelty products, Amazon says practical gadgets that help owners care for their pets are the next best sellers. One example is the HydroSurge Rapid Bath Dog Bathing System, an "all-in-one" wet, wash and rinse device that resembles a garden hose with a spray-nozzle comb head. The product's patented InjectAir technology draws shampoo and oxygen into massaging shower jets to simultaneously create a sudsing action and eliminate long, messy baths.

GoDogGo, a fetch machine for dogs that automatically shoots out tennis balls at timed intervals, is another practical product that has been successful. Creator Ron Thompson expects sales to double this year, due to a recent factory and distribution reorganization.

"We've always sold consistently," Thompson says. "We started 10 years ago, and there are some pet gadgets that haven't stood the test of time, but ours is basic. It achieves what it is intended for: to provide exercise for your dog."