



Photo: Amy Knebel

The Perks of Having a Boutique Pooch

See How Store Pets Can Add More Than Fur To Your Sales Floors

Hint: Customer Traffic Often Increases, Too

Amy Knebel

Has retail gone to the dogs? For many boutique and indie owners who bring their dog to work, the answer is yes. A 2011 Humane Society of the United States statistic shows over 78.2 million dogs are now living in thirty-nine percent of U.S. households. Those growing numbers are why many retailers are opting to make their pet dogs an integral part of their store landscape.

A recent survey conducted by the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association shows that roughly one in five U.S. businesses welcomes pets at work. Owners and employees agree that pets at work can be beneficial. Of those surveyed, 37 million people believe that having pets at work decreases absenteeism, 46 million believe pets can improve workplace productivity and 70 million agree that workplace pets mitigate stress. Overall, do pets make a workplace happier? 75 million Americans surveyed think so. Every retailer can probably agree that less stress plus increased attendance, productivity and happiness add to the bottom line.

Science supports the benefits of bringing your dog to work. According to a study conducted by Karen Allen, Ph.D, at the State University of New York at Buffalo, pets present during stressful situations lowered human perception and actual response to stress. Since boutique owners wear so many hats and juggle myriad responsibilities, a canine sales associate can help lift some of the pressures of the daily grind. In addition to keeping you sane, dogs can help you connect with customers. Christopher Honts and his research team at Central Michigan University discovered that a dog's presence during group situations fostered increased trust and intimacy. Not only can a dog be an instant icebreaker, he can also encourage customers to buy and come back.

Ranee Malanga, owner of Artwares Contemporary Jewelry in Taos, New Mexico, has a secret weapon to help customers feel welcome. Dominique, a tiny toy Poodle, has accompanied her owner, store manager Judy Giron, to work since she was four months old. Now thirteen and a half years old, her official title of “Inspiration and Spirit Lifter, Gallery Welcoming Executive” indicates Dominique’s skills lie in customer relations. According to store owner Ranee Malanga, “The relationship building asset that Dominique creates is what Artwares Jewelry is all about. Dominique opens up people and affects everybody’s moods, which affects more store sales.” Adds Giron, “Customers will hold her in their arms as they shop, which helps them become more relaxed about their purchases.” Malanga credits Dominique with transforming customers into friends, and repeat business.

Boutique owners often spend a lot of time by themselves in their stores, so having a canine companion can alleviate loneliness and offer a measure of security. From his perch in the bay window of The Winery in Old Town Alexandria, Virginia, six year old Rocky, a Labrador Retriever-Husky mix, alerts his owner, Jane Cahill when a customer approaches the door. Like many indie retailers, she is also the sole employee and the only human in the store between customers. “Rocky not only provides me with companionship, but he has another benefit and that is safety,” observes Cahill. “He has good sense about people and can read if they are OK or not. He’s either fine with people or there is a lot of barking.” He’s a neighborhood celebrity as well as a crime deterrent. For many years, Rocky and his now-deceased sister dog Sailor welcomed the neighborhood kids who would stop by to pet them and bring them treats. Those kids are grown now and Cahill knows her dogs helped create the next generation of loyal customers.

In Stuart, Florida, Zak, a chocolate Labrador Retriever, is hard at work at The Curtain Exchange. Franchise owner Terri Perry began bringing Zak to the store seven and a half years ago because she didn’t want to leave her puppy at home. She credits Zak with indirectly increasing sales because customers stay in the store longer because his presence creates such a comfortable atmosphere. “Zak helps people relax and gives customers something to talk about,” says Perry. She also credits Zak with comforting her. “When I’ve had a hard day, I pet him or he lies on my foot; after a difficult day, he makes it right.” Zak is working his magic outside the store, too. He has such a devoted following that many customers ask Perry to bring him along when she does an in-home consultation.

Opposite: Rocky is a welcomed face at The Winery in Old Town Alexandria

Right: Store owner Terri Perry credits her dog, Zak, for increasing sales

Even though retailers and customers report many great experiences with boutique dogs, there are some challenges that demonstrate a need for backup plans. Perry emphasizes that having a dog in a store, “can work if it is handled professionally and you are sensitive to the customer first and foremost.” She deliberately chose a dog breed known to be people friendly. When a new customer enters the store, Perry lets them know there is a leashed dog in the store. For customers who may be afraid of dogs or allergic, she happily accommodates them by moving Zak to the back room behind closed doors. A sign on The Winery’s door lets people know that there is a dog inside. When small children come into the store, Cahill places Rocky behind a baby gate between her storefront and office so parents can shop worry-free. In a boutique, cleanliness always counts, so be ready to combat shedding and dirt with regular grooming, a lint roller and some Clorox wipes. Canine potty breaks are a minor concern for the retailers interviewed. “Dog people are patient, I hang a sign on the door-walking the dog-back in 10 minutes and they wait,” remarks Cahill. She’s also had customers offer to take Rocky out for her.

But what about customers who just don’t like dogs? All three owners report never hearing complaints and maintain that their boutique dogs have bolstered customer relations and sales. Cahill figures that customers who dislike dogs self-select and shop elsewhere. When asked how this affects sales, one dog-loving retailer who asked not to be named revealed, “It sounds harsh, but if they (customers) are not dog people, then I don’t want them as customers. My dog-loving customers give



Photo: Frank Perry

me plenty of repeat business.” According to Perry, having a dog in your store communicates that, “you are more open and giving, which is inviting to most customers.”

In a competitive retail market, a shop dog can also be a tool that differentiates you from your competition, but it ultimately boils down to personal preference when deciding if you’ll have a canine companion at your store. Since the benefits of decreased stress, better customer relations and increased sales can outweigh the challenges, not only is your working dog good for you, but your working dog may be good for business.



Photo: Susan Kohl



Photo: Amy Knebel

Who Let The Dogs Out?

Let’s face it. Sadly, not everyone is a dog lover. And that includes some customers or potential customers. So what’s a store owner with a furry pet to do?

Let your customers know you are aware that your dog may not be their thing.

Identify this through a simple yet friendly store sign near the entrance, stating that you have a store pet and are happy to accommodate customers who may be affected by this. This could mean you simply leash the dog to a stationary spot during their store visit or put the dog in the back room.

Understand that dogs – even your seemingly perfect one – can get in the way.

Sometimes it may be best to have your pooch stay home, such as during special events or days that are known to be busy. A tip to decide when your pooch would be better off at home is if you are missing sales because you need to attend to your dog. Even if you are okay with some missed sales, your lost customers might not be and they might tell others who tell others. You get the point.

Offer sensitivity to people with dog allergies.

We know it’s your store and you call the shots, but simply showing respect to personal situations goes a long way. Accommodate your customers however you can when this happens, and go out of your way to help them still enjoy your store. It’s likely they will appreciate your extended customer service and in return, be a customer that spreads the word about your store.

Top Left: Dominique is a toy Poodle who excels in customer service

Left: Rocky resting up after a tough day of greeting customers

Amy Knebel is a freelance writer who specializes in writing about dogs and luxury living. Knebel calls Arlington, VA home and is mom to rescue dog Lou Lou.

