

Aftermarket products focus on pets and safety

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updated 4:05 p.m. ET, Thurs., Feb. 26, 2009



You've likely heard about the travel industry's transformation to become pet friendly.

According to a recent survey of pet owners — conducted by the American Pet Products Association (APPA) — more than 21 percent of dog owners and about 3 percent of cat owners take their pets along on road trips.. It was only a matter of time, then, before automakers hopped aboard and started offering accessories to this growing market.

The Global Pet Expo, held recently in Orlando, Fla., showcased the latest trends in the seemingly recession-proof pet industry. Toyota announced its dealerships would start carrying a comprehensive range of pet car accessories from Kurgo, the innovative pet travel accessory manufacturer.

While many carmakers — most notably Volvo, Honda and Volkswagen — have focused on designing vehicles for creature comforts, Toyota is the first to turn its focus to the automotive aftermarket. Pet-loving drivers can customize vehicles with a variety of products that include ramps, seat covers, harness restraints, booster seats and more — not to mention air fresheners and license plate frames. The products will sell for under \$79, a relatively small price to pay for pet safety.

"We are simply expanding the definition of 'customer,'" explains Bob Zeinstra, Toyota's national product marketing manager. "We decided to take this step to coincide with the launch of the Venza, as this vehicle was specifically designed to appeal to active baby boomers by having a lower rear loading height as well as a lower step-in height. Many of these buyers look to their pets to fill the gap left by their kids and these design features target pet needs too."

According to AAA, more than 30,000 accidents each year are the result of unrestrained pets in a vehicle.

"When it comes to a pet's automotive safety and comfort, Europe leads," says Gordie Spater, president of Kurgo. "Less than 10 percent of Americans restrain their pets in vehicles, and while many states are actively trying to get laws passed, we have a long way to go. This new initiative [from Toyota] is going to have a positive impact because it makes it convenient and easy for pet owners to see to their pets' needs at the time of purchasing a vehicle or simply going for an oil change."

The products to be carried by Toyota dealerships are not exclusive to their cars, but universally fit all makes and models. They include a backseat barrier to keep pets in the rear of the vehicle, a harness on a special auto zip line that allows the dog freedom to move on the back seat, a booster seat to give smaller dogs a restrained, elevated view, and a variety of seat covers, truck restraints and travel accessories such as collapsible bowls.

"There is something for different-sized vehicles and pets both large and small," says Spater.

Despite the economic downturn, APPA President Bob Vetere announced that while most retail sectors in this country are struggling to stay afloat, the pet industry continues to grow with a projected 3.6 percent increase in spending to \$45.4 billion in 2009.

"This demonstrates that people are more willing to sacrifice on themselves before trimming on their pets.