

How Much Is That Doggie in the Window?

(Answer: Not enough to justify appropriate vet care if the doggie should get sick before being sold.)



► By Francis Battista

The problem with pet stores and supposed pet supply stores that sell animals (Petland, Petco, PETsMART, etc.), is that until an animal goes home to a caring family, he or she isn't a pet at all. He or she is merchandise and usually treated as such. He or she is an "It." A toaster that has to be fed, watered, and cleaned up after.

This all came to a head recently in San Francisco, where the city has sued Petco for abuse of the animals in its stores.

Petco and PETsMART have made a name for themselves in the world of animal welfare by not selling dogs and cats, and by hosting dog and cat adoptions. And local dog and cat groups have come to depend on these locations to place pets in good homes. Both companies also have a charitable wing that dispenses funds for good stuff like spay/neuter and special events. Best Friends has received grants from both companies and also organizes adoptions at both stores.

All this makes it difficult for most local organizations to protest the sale of these other animals.

Off the Shelf

Modern merchandising, especially in chain stores, is all about shelf space. The more shelf space, the more products you can display. Conversely, the smaller the packaging, the more products that can be displayed on a given shelf.

Now you probably never thought of it this way, but in the weird world of animal sales, a cage is the equivalent of a product package. So, if the product is a parrot, then the parrot's cage is the packaging. And the smaller the package, the more birds can be displayed on a given shelf.

In fact, pet retailers have a trade and lobbying group whose main job is to protect the interests of pet retailers by making sure that laws aren't passed that would require pet retailers to do things like keep animals in larger cages, because that would impact the old shelf-space equation.

Henry Ford Meets Dr. Dolittle

The economics of mass-market retail is simple: assembly-line mass production of a product at the lowest possible cost; distribution to low-overhead, self-service stores that stock a huge inventory with relatively few employees; and high-volume sales of low-priced quality goods.

This is great when it comes to jeans, running shoes, and computers. And it is a tribute (leaving aside for a moment the matter of sweatshops and child labor in third world countries) to American ingenuity and egalitarian principles.

But when it comes to animals, the economics of mass marketing is a disaster because every element of the chain, from mass production to low overhead sales, plows a trench right across the interests and well-being of the animals.

In the wild, parrots, for example, are nurtured and taught survival skills and language by their parents for periods of up to two years. But normal animal development has no place in mass production.

Mass production means one version or another of a puppy mill. Bird mills crank out thousands of parrots at a time. Eggs are removed from parents for incubation, and when hatched, baby parrots are placed in a bowl (to prevent splay-footedness) in climate-controlled isolates, out of contact with parents or other chicks, and fed by syringe in assembly-line fashion until they are old enough to survive a cross-country trip to market.

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Point of sale is typically a low-overhead, lightly staffed, self-service pet or pet supply store. You name the chain. Young birds are usually placed in glass display cages and deprived of all contact with the flock that millions of years of evolution have hard-wired into their highly intelligent brains. Syringe feeding, which continues until they're old enough to eat on their own, is usually done by a rotating staff of well-meaning, low-wage, under-trained, high-school-age “associates.” The birds are then sold as “hand-reared” or “hand-raised,” evoking the image of a kindhearted surrogate parent lovingly feeding them. In reality, the unsuspecting buyer is purchasing an emotionally deprived creature whose most intimate contact has been with a plastic syringe.

This is not hand-rearing – it's poultry farming. But the geniuses behind factory farming pets would have you believe that this is really the efficiency of Henry Ford mated to the loving, animal-friendly care of Dr. Dolittle. Hah!

Monty Python Saw It Coming

And God forbid a \$50 bird should need to visit a vet! The economics of retail go right out the window if you have to spend \$100 on a vet visit and medication for a bird that you can only sell for 50 bucks. Finances dictate (remember, you are in this for the money) that you put the bird in the back of the store, give it vitamins and maybe some off-the-shelf antibiotics, and hope for the best. Distraught employees have accused managers of placing sick and dying animals in backroom freezers to “put them to sleep,” rather than spend money on veterinary care.

Some animal retailers (including some of the major chains) get their babies from backyard and basement breeders. Hundreds of birds, sugar gliders, guinea pigs, African hedgehogs, and other “pocket pets” can be force-bred in a relatively small basement. The darkness and silence of these unlicensed operations are ideal for disease, mental and emotional deprivation, and the all-too-common cruelty of neglect and over-breeding.

The number and variety of behavioral and health problems associated with both of these types of breeding could fill a veterinary textbook, but the buyer is sent home with a one page “care sheet” and a frightened animal. The survival /success rate of these animals as household pets is depressing at best.

Suddenly the “Dead Parrot” sketch of Monty Python fame becomes distressingly relevant.

Why Bother?

Given the hassles and flack associated with selling animals, you've got to wonder why they do it. How much money can there be in selling animals when you factor in the cost of staff necessary to look after them? How can they bear being, in reality, versions of the “Dead Parrot” sketch?

Well, you know, in addition to the animal, there's the cage, and then if all goes well, there's the special food, toys, perches, and treats that special pets need – and thus a market is created.

What to Do?

First off, adopt your next pet. Never buy or breed animals – any animal. Given that millions of animals of every conceivable type and breed (including virtually every kind of purebred dog) are dying for lack of a home, it is unconscionable to buy or breed.

Second, when you visit your favorite pet or pet-supply store, look around to see if they sell animals. If they do, write a letter to the head office and let them know how you feel about that. Ask them to replace their sale of birds, reptiles, and small mammals with adoption programs that specialize in these animals.

Petco and PETsMART's stand against selling dogs and cats is laudable. It's too bad that they don't hold parrots, rabbits, reptiles, and other animals in the same regard. They can still do the right thing, but they might need a little encouragement.

The Avian Welfare Coalition maintains a Pet Store Watch at www.avianwelfare.org. Or call Brian Devine, President of PetCo, at 888-583-6044 x3046; Nick St. Erne, DVM, Quality Assurance Manager of PETsMART, at 623-580-6100; or Ed Kunzelman, President of Petland, at 740-775-2464. (Petland sells dogs and cats as well as small animals.)

Best Friends Animal Society

Best Friends Animal Society is working with shelters and rescue groups nationwide to bring about a time when there will be no more homeless pets. Best Friends operates the nation's largest sanctuary for homeless animals, provides adoption, spay/neuter, and educational programs, and publishes *Best Friends*, the nation's largest general-interest animal magazine.

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