

# Passion Pets

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were a number of brands available and all seem to address the messy dilemma of a dirty cat litter tray. It appears that Australian based pet product distributors haven't yet caught on that this would be a big seller here and in New Zealand. With a price tag of between \$200 and \$400 I know many cat owners who would be happy to fork out for these clever contraptions.

On the subject of cat litter brings me to the hands-down prize for the weirdest product/innovation I saw at the Expo. I had a little moment where I was shaking my head and wondering 'what the'. It was a box that was made to look like an air conditioning unit—the ugly beige box kind that you see jammed into apartment windows. The inventor was on-hand to explain its unique charms. It had a cat flap where your cat would enter and then use its litter tray (tray and litter not included in the unit's price). After puzzling over this for a moment I enquired politely and diplomatically why someone would be drawn to this and installing it in their house. The inventor was quick to explain that its merits were based on hiding the litter. I still think it's about as smart as installing a cat flap in an unused fridge. But there you go, the US is a huge market.

Two years ago my 'what the' prize went to the mother and daughter team from Dallas who made disposable dog coats made out of the same material that disposable medical gowns are made from. The concept was so that your dog wore this under their dress or other outfit. You would then dispose of the undercoat after every wear. Why would

someone come up with such a concept? Dallas mum explained that it was from being annoyed at washing her dogs clothing and finding pet hair in her washing machine and clothes drier.

A big trend is the integration of well-designed pet furniture for consumers wanting to have stylish products that complement their interior. Sumptuous pet beds in designer high-quality upholstery fabric and cat climbing and scratching frames that look more like sculptures.

Perhaps recession-resistant is how I would describe the pet product market at this point. Smaller retailers are certainly feeling the pinch from the larger operators like retail behemoth, Wal-Mart who has expanded their pet products department and continues to expand into pet grooming throughout the country. Target also has ridden this wave and is giving big-box specialty retailers such as PetSmart a run for their customers' money.

There's a strong belief that people will continue to spend above and beyond on their pets as the population ages and pets take the place of children at home. But they possibly will be spending less in high-end retail environments and continue to put their bucks into quality necessities such as food, treats, pet-homeware accessories and bedding.

Nobody has a crystal ball to see what the next few years will hold for product development. Hopefully the great little stores we have in Sydney will survive and continue to deliver the best service and product knowledge that is, at times, harder to find in the larger chain and stores.



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