

Pet Age

A close-up, high-angle photograph of a dog's mouth, showing its teeth and tongue. The dog's fur is a mix of brown and grey. The background is dark, making the dog's features stand out.

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THE REAL TOY STORY

Toy sales maintain a solid share of the pet market, but the products endure a long journey to retailers' shelves.

BY ALEXANDRA WEPNER

Gone are the days when a fallen branch from the backyard was enough of a plaything for the family dog—and even more, pet toy sales are nothing to shake a stick at. Across all categories of pet, toys have become a staple seller for many retailers, and the variety of features has grown to a range unimaginable by many who remember the pet industry of yesteryear.

“Nowadays, you have to come up with more ideas, you’ve got to figure out a better way to value engineer it, and it’s all about removing costs, but still keeping things that are very interesting,” said John Gerstenberger, a product development and sourcing professional at Ware Manufacturing, Inc. “We find that the conception point with what you’re having to cre-

ate is much more important because pet parents today want original ideas. They’re buying new toys every two weeks, every month.”

A recent study from Packaged Facts evaluated the landscape of the pet toy segment of the industry—from “simple rubber and rope toys to high-tech items designed to help keep the pet active and entertained while the owner is away, in addition to cat scratchers and play furniture.” According to the report, dog and cat toys comprise 28 percent of the overall durable pet care products market and racked up retail sales of approximately \$1 billion in 2016. Those earnings are expected to grow by a forecasted 3 percent compound annual growth rate (CAGR), as a CAGR of 4 percent was observed



between 2011 and 2016.

But how do pet toys make their way to retailers' shelves?

Surely, industry players are aware of the weeks, months or even years that it sometimes takes for products to finally reach the market. But a bird's eye view of the process reveals emerging trends, best practices and shifts in the industry—the knowledge of which would benefit any pet professional.

Born from an Idea

Of course, not all pet toys are made the same way—that is, not all ideas are formed in the exact same manner. From in-house design departments

to independent product design firms, and even in the minds of brand owners, there are a number of ways that the idea for a pet toy can be born.

Mario Esquer is the president of Avadium Designs, a firm that works with some of the pet industry's biggest players to bring product ideas to fruition.

Dog and cat toys comprise **28 percent** of the overall durable pet care products market, racking up approximately \$1 billion in 2016.

“We’ve been in business since 2009, and we help manufacturers, inventors and companies with their ideas,” Esquer said. “We’ll take something new and unique, like dog toys, and from there we usually go through

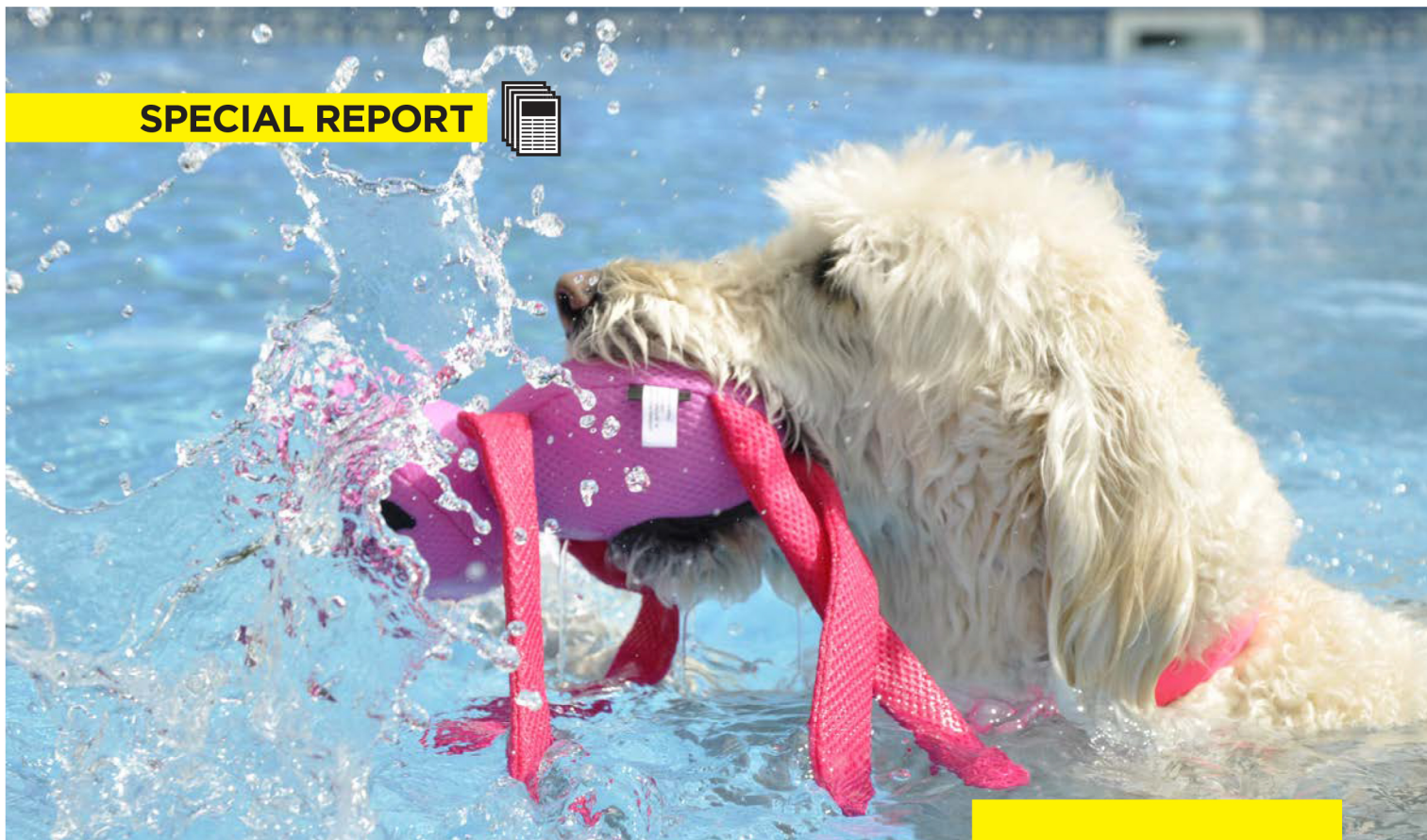


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a process of new ideas, starting with sketches and concept rendering to create different ideas and characters.

“From there, we refine the product with different variations, color studies, and we’ll go back and make mock-ups,” he continued. “For the rest of the process, if there’s any engineering to do with rubber toys and plastic, we use 3D printing to create toys very quickly and see what they look like. You get feedback, testing and market studies and then we generally go back and refine those ideas.”

On the other hand, several manufacturers have in-house departments that generate product designs. Gerstenberger described the toy design process by Ware Manufacturing, Inc, to include many of the same steps of those at Avadium Designs, though most of Ware’s design process happens within the company. Ware produces a range of toys and accessories for dogs, cats and, more uniquely, birds and small animals.

“Product development is really a multi-step process where you have the generation of an idea, you’ll do some type of mock up on the com-

puter, and then some mechanic-type drawings that you will then screen and market test that idea,” Gerstenberger said. “Then you apply a little more of the business analytics to it: is this going to make sense, can we make money off it, can we do it? And then you get into the true product development side, which is sourcing, trying to take quality assurance in, engineering it to try to make it better and better and at the same time as that doing a lot of packaging development.”

For manufacturers who make products for several pet categories, the development stages vary. Coastal Pet Products makes toys for cats, such as the Turbo Scratcher and Catnip Hurricane, as well as for dogs, like the Rascals mesh toy collection.

“Dogs and cats have unique individual characteristics, and we want to make sure we take this into consideration when we are developing a toy,” said Kirk Dixon, category director at Coastal Pet Products. “We have the same overall process, but we want to call out product features specific to the animal and type of play. For example, dogs tend to play more

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Kirk Dixon,
Coastal Pet Products

aggressively with toys so the materials and test protocols will be different than for a cat.”

Many brands even combine the two avenues into one, exchanging and molding their own ideas with the help of outside influences, both professional and consumer. Petmate, maker of toys and other products for dogs, cats and birds, has an extensive design process utilizing published research from think tanks like Packaged Facts, design firms, insight from retail partners and consumers (via social media and their website, among other venues) and even an open channel for inventors to sub-

mit their ideas, according to Chris Wilson, executive vice president of marketing and product development. Their brands include Jackson Galaxy, MuttNation and JW Pet, to name a few.

“Insights are combined with product, pricing and retailer strategies to help formulate each year’s product plan,” Wilson explained in an email. “We ideate and generate concepts internally with our in-house design team as well as utilize a network of outside design resources both domestically and with our vendor partners in Asia... We find it is best to cross-pollinate your internal views with outside influences. If we do not have the internal expertise we will utilize outside engineering support as well.”

Of course, many outsiders might be surprised by how organically



many product ideas are formed.

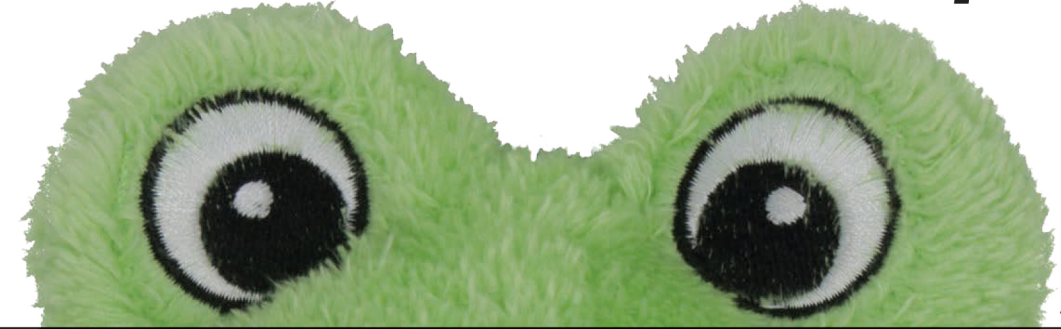
“Sometimes it’s direct communication with the customer—they may call us directly and say ‘Hey, you came out for this meeting and I just want you to know this is something we were thinking about,’” Gerstenberger said. “But the one I enjoy the most is the one I call ‘animal inspiration.’ All of us around here own pets,

and it’s amazing when you’re looking at your own pet and you’re taking care of something one day and you’re like, ‘This is a pinch point for me.’”

The Next Phase

Following the solidification of the idea for a pet toy is the manufacturing and distribution process. According to Gerstenberger, manufacturers

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