

Pets go

DIGITAL

Animal-lovers celebrate their furry friends in online communities

by Ashley Trent

From show organizers to retailers, it seems everyone in the gift industry is exploring the world of social networking. Facebook, Twitter and blogging communities are teeming with trend outlooks, photos of new products and personal insight. And individuals in the pet industry have proved to be particularly creative with generating online content.

An Unforeseen Success

When Debi Allison, owner of Deb & Co. (866/478-6425), decided to add her company to the real-time social-messaging utility Twitter, she came across an unexpected surprise.

"I went on Twitter to set up a Deb & Co. account to expand our social networking," says Debi. "While I was looking around, I noticed there were profiles for animals that were Twittering. They had their own personalities, and there were obviously people behind them, but they were really creative. A lot of rescue organizations, people selling pet products, veterinarians and also everyday people who own pets were participating. I thought the idea was so exciting and really different."

Inspired by the humor these peppy animals expressed virtually, Debi decided to create Twitter accounts for two of her family's own pets: her cat Felix and Zeppelin, her dog. She began Twittering on behalf of her animals as a fun way to experiment with the service.



Deb & Co.'s (866/478-6425 or www.debandco.com) Bo figurine was a hit with users of Facebook and Twitter, who viewed photos through the company's online pages. Suggested retail: \$16.95.

"I gave Felix a fun picture and at first had him Twittering about his everyday life – things like his naps and love for food. And when I was referring to myself and my husband, I'd have Felix call us Mom and Dad," says Debi, who adds that her husband, Glenn, writes the Twitter updates for Zeppelin. "Then, with Felix's account, I started incorporating some posts related to the company itself and our new products."

Debi says that Felix's Twitter account, which she began in April, already has hundreds of updates. "He's become a personal spokesperson for the company. Felix has something like 350 followers now on Twitter; he became popular very quickly and is chatting with other pet Twitterers. Now he's running for Top Animal Twitterer in a little contest, so we are



Up Country's (800/541-5909 or www.upcountryinc.com) Chatham Bed has a machine-washable futon and is made of solid wood with a non-toxic painted finish. Handmade in Rhode Island, it comes in four colors: Ocean Blue, Seaglass Green, Coral (shown) and Driftwood. The sleigh-style bed measures 26" long, 22" wide and 10" tall. Suggested retail: \$130.

Twittering and encouraging his followers to vote for him," she says.

Debi adds that the Twitter accounts result in traffic to the company's main website as well. She also created a Facebook fan page for Felix, which contains photos, pet-related information and links to the Deb & Co. website. "Our Twitter and Facebook accounts really work together and support each other, and in turn that supports our website and increases our traffic, too," she says. "On the fan page, we posted pictures of Felix on a road trip in our mobile home, and people loved it. It really brings a more personal element to the company and communicates our



Scratch 'n Shapes are 100-percent recyclable corrugated scratching pads. Each is made in the USA and comes with a bag of certified-organic catnip. This cat-shaped scratcher nests inside a larger, 3' pyramid with a honeycomb texture designed by pet expert Sandy Robins. The piece comes in Natural, Paisley, Peacock (shown) and Red Victorian prints. From **Imperial Cat**; 501/354-8466 or www.imperialcat.com. Suggested retail: \$149.99.

love for our pets."

An avid animal-lover, Debi actively volunteers with rescue organizations and has always incorporated pet-themed designs into her company's line of ornaments and figurines. She is impressed with the way Twitter and other social-networking services are increasing animal-rescue efforts worldwide. "Many animals are actually being saved through Twitter. People are using it to raise money and arrange adoption for animals that might have otherwise been forgotten about. There are just so many ways to use it for good causes, and people are acting quickly," says Debi.

Overall, Debi believes retailers should experiment with Twitter and other services to see how they can help to expand business online and build community among customers and other retailers. "Our Twitter and Facebook adventures have been fun

and helpful to the company – especially because of that personal factor," says Debi. "People don't want to just be sold something. You have to make it fun, and so far this has been a really great way to sell ourselves in a new way."

Debi says the company will continue to build its list of Facebook fans and Twitter followers by writing about new products, posting new pictures and offering incentives through contests for both retailers and consumers. To view Deb & Co.'s Twitter pages, visit www.twitter.com/DebandCo, www.twitter.com/Zeppelin1 and www.twitter.com/Crazy_Felix.

Celebrity Status

Following his election to office last fall, President Obama vowed to fulfill a multitude of promises; among these was a sincere agreement to adopt a hypoallergenic puppy for his young daughters, Sasha and Malia.



Pet First Aid Kits from **me4kidz** (480/444-2332 or www.me4kidz.com) are made in the USA and assembled by the disabled. Each kit includes a variety of first-aid tools, including antiseptic wipes, gauze pads, ointment, scissors, gloves, tweezers, a Pet First Aid Guide and more. Suggested retail: \$19.95.

In the spring, Senator Edward Kennedy helped complete this important undertaking by presenting the first family with a Portuguese Water Dog they affectionately named Bo. The first dog was an instant hit with the media and animal-lovers worldwide, and he



Donna Potter, founder of **Freedom Gates** (866/478-2206 or www.freedom-gates.com), poses during the announcement of the winner of Dallas Market Center's The Next Big Thing product search contest. Her translucent, resin pet gates took top prize at this summer's show. The gates are an alternative to traditional plastic pet barriers that are eyesores within the home.



Lady Rosedale (800/263-3551 or www.candym.com) has a variety of new pet products for fall — including coats, throws and carriers — that come in fashionable patterns, such as this one called Square Pegs Sable with Brown Faux Fur. Suggested retail: \$29.99-\$44.99 coats, \$41.99 throw, \$59.99 carrier.

has established a large presence on the web, too. Jesse Lee, the White House online programs director, updates the White House blog (www.whitehouse.gov/blog), and every now and then, she will post photos and information about Bo.

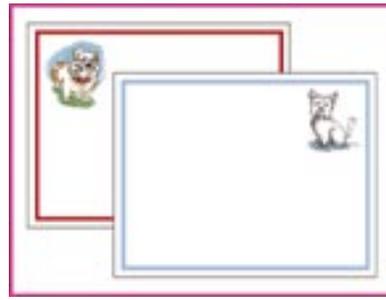
From adoption to death, presidential pets have traditionally held the attention of the public. Most recently,

the passing of Socks, the Clintons' cat, and India, the cat that belonged to George W. Bush's family, garnered national news coverage. Throughout their lifespan, these pets inspire toy manufacturers and giftware companies to create products that appeal to the needs of both pets and their owners.

Other famous pets have an equal share of the spotlight. Martha Stewart's pet dogs, which are often featured within her magazine as well as on her television show, have their own blog called The Daily Wag: Adventures



Historic Mason Cash pet bowls are available through **Pacific Merchants Trading Company** (888/207-8999 or www.pacificmerchants.com). Made of heavy stoneware, the bowls are durable, bite resistant and labeled with words such as Water, Dog and Cat. Sizes range from 5" to 10". Suggested retail: \$12.95-\$25.95.



Doggie Dittie notepads from **donovan-designs** (614/337-0944 or www.donovandesignsinc.com) come in 36 breed designs. Each notepad includes 50 pages. Suggested retail: \$6 each.

with Francesca and Sharkey (<http://dailywag.marthastewart.com>). Written from the pets' point of view, it follows special outings (such as trips to local pet stores) and day-to-day activities. Visitors to the site can view photos of dog breeds and follow links to pet-related websites, such as the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (www.aspc.org), the American Kennel Club (www.akc.org) and Adopt-a-Pet (www.adoptapet.com).

The Daily Wag also links back to the main Martha Stewart site (www.marthastewart.com), which fea-

tures a variety of pet crafts, advice from animal experts and information on grooming, feeding, behavior and health. Visitors to the site can also participate in photo contests, such as the recent Patriotic Pets photo contest, in which the winner received a year's supply of pet food.

Consider adding similar features to your own website. Lead customers to the information they seek by providing links to trusted animal-care websites, and partner with local animal hospitals and vets who can contribute expert



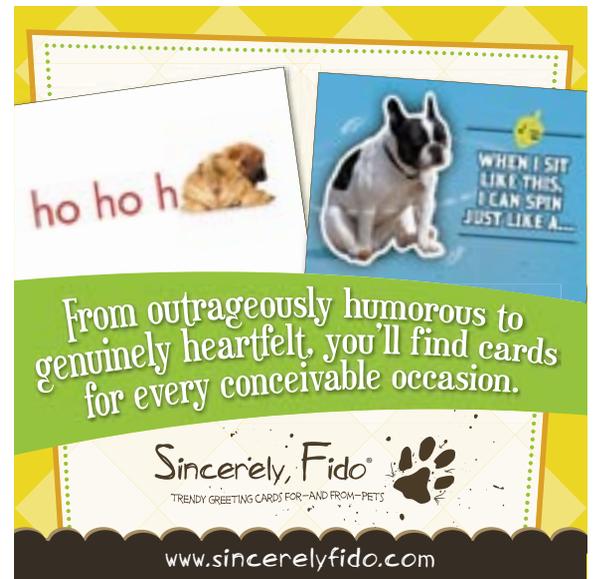
To provide children across the country with their own Bo-like puppies, **Douglas Company** (800/992-9002 or www.douglastoys.com) has introduced a pair of Portuguese Water Dog plush toys. Complete with fluffy tails, 9" Bento and 16" Jose are sure to please. Suggested retail: \$9.50 and \$21.



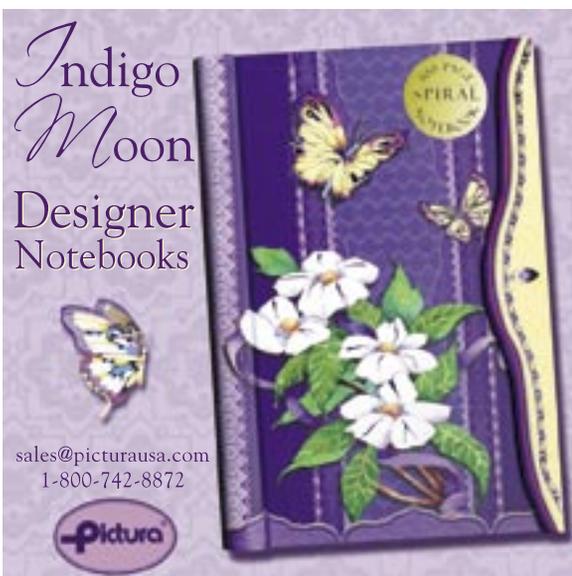
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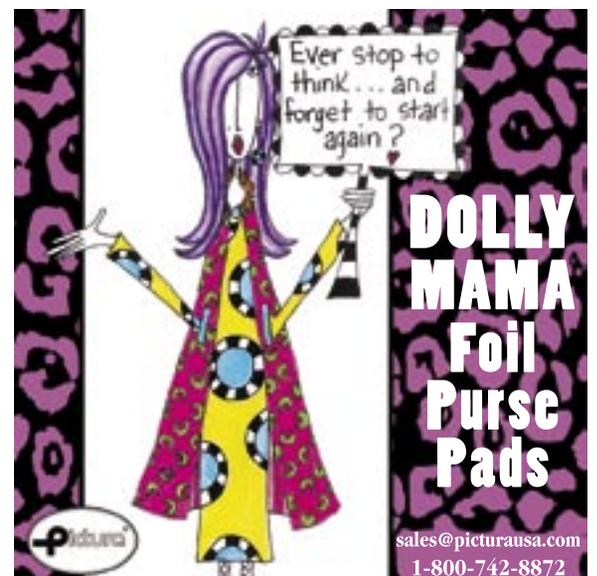
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Show Schedule:

New York International Gift Fair

Aug. 16 - Aug. 20, 2009
Jacob K. Javits
Convention Center
General Gift Level 3
Booth No.: 2150 . 2152

Las Vegas Market

Sep. 14 - Sep. 17, 2009
WORLD MARKET
CENTER BUILDING C
Booth No.: C-677

Hong Kong 2009 Mega Show Part 1

Oct. 20 - Oct. 23, 2009
Booth No.:
Hall 1B, A26,28
B25,27



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advice. Add a "product of the week" feature to your site that highlights a new addition to your store's lineup. Expand your digital presence through social media and connect with your customers online – you'll find it a valuable way to market your store.



The Avant Garde line of retractable leashes from **26 Bars & a Band** (213/219-4182 or www.26barsandaband.com) come in fashionable patterns. Shown is the Sherlock style. Other modern pet accessories are also available. Suggested retail: \$34-\$40.



This pet sympathy card is simple and touching. The inside reads, "Heartfelt condolences on your loss." From **Calypso Cards**; 888/203-7327 or www.calypso-cards.com. Suggested retail: \$2.95.



Greet Me – Eat Me's (713/899-0582 or www.greetme-eatmecards-us.com) edible greeting cards and novelties are new to the U.S. Licensed through the American Kennel Club, these handcrafted gifts are made with all-natural rawhide and USDA-approved vegetable food coloring. Shown is the Advent Calendar, which features 24 rawhide bone treats. Other holiday items are also available. Suggested retail: \$17.95.



For the dog that has everything, **FouFou Dog's** (416/628-1916 or www.foufou-dog.com) cheeky FouBerrys are also a hit with tech-savvy pet owners. Made to look like BlackBerry phones, these plush pet toys, designed for small- to medium-size breeds, have embroidered details and loud squeakers inside; iPup toys are also available. Suggested retail: \$9.99.



This Meowing Cat Clock from **Mark Feldstein & Associates** (800/755-6504 or www.markfeldstein.com) comes in two sizes (8" and 13") and features illustrations of popular breeds. A Barking Dog design is also available. Suggested retail: \$14.95 and \$19.95.



Kool Tees (800/933-5431 or www.kooltees.com) has a variety of T-shirts for pets and their owners, including this rescue-themed design. Suggested retail: \$14.99.