

Think your pooch is pampered? Think again!
Consider feathered day beds, mink coats

By WARREN JOHNSTON
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At The Ranch in Lebanon, dogs staying the night won't get a basket of fruit, champagne or chocolate on their pillows, but they will have a private room with a view, raised pillowed beds, soft music and abundant toys.

There are no kennels at the 13,000-square-foot, \$2.2 million dog-care facility, only deluxe suites, and from the outside it looks more like an office building than a pet inn. From the inside, the lobby is reminiscent of one found in a posh hotel, and from Princess's point of view, the rooms also may appear luxurious.

"We want the dogs staying here to feel like they're staying at home," said Amy Gamache, who owns and operates the new facility, which opened last month.

Gamache is tapping into a rapidly growing market. Pet owners in this country are expected to spend more than \$35.9 billion on their furry companions this year, according to statistics recently released by the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association, a not-for-profit trade association based in New Haven, Conn.

The Ranch will offer dog boarding, cat boarding, training and behavior consultation services, a large retail sales area, grooming and do-it-yourself grooming, Gamache said.

"Our 60 boarding suites will be like tiny bedrooms. They have baskets of toys, fresh water piped in, little beds, decorated walls and radiant heat. It's like being in a house," she said.

Dogs will be able to stay at The Ranch for \$25 a night. Special rates also will be available for frequent guests.

Gamache also is expanding into the fastest-growing trend in the market - day care - an area where she has five years of experience and a customer base waiting.

Pampered pets

The Ranch is being marketed to pet owners who don't want to leave their pets at home during the day while they are at work and to people who want a higher level of service than is available at boarding kennels, Gamache said.

"Doggie day care" is not just for owners who are worried about their pets being lonely or bored at home during the day, said Jim Krack, executive director of the American

Boarding Kennel Association, a nonprofit trade association. It also is appealing to owners who can't leave their pets at home because they might be destructive or too noisy.

"Pet day care is appealing to owners who view pets as members of the family and who want the same level of amenities for them as they want for their children in day care," Krack said.

Some boarding facilities even offer Web cameras so that owners can keep up with the activities of their pets, he said. "It really doesn't make the dogs feel any better, but it gives some owners a level of comfort."

The Ranch is wired for web cameras, but they won't be installed until later, Gamache said.

Although pet boarding in this country had revenue of almost \$4 billion last year, there are no exact figures for pet day care because the segment is too new and growing too fast, said Krack, whose association is based in Colorado Springs, Colo.

"We can't even keep up with it right now. It's very difficult to project the numbers."

The trend started in California and grew out of the dog park movement, where owners found it was a good experience for their dogs to socialize with other dogs, Krack said.

Gamache said she believes The Ranch is in the right place for the market - the facility is located just off Route 120 and Interstate 89 on Etna Road near Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center, Dartmouth College and Centerra Business Park, the Upper Valley's largest employment centers - and has arrived at the right time.

Spending on pets in this country has doubled in the last decade, and every year more people are spending more on pet services, which is the fastest growing segment of the industry, the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association survey showed.

"This has helped fuel a new breed of service providers including pet behaviorists who treat unruly pet behavior and training programs for pet hotel operators, pet butlers, pet sitters, pet massage therapists, pet communicators and pet travel agents," the association found.

In addition, some national companies, better known for providing people products, are starting to tap into the pet world, where \$8.8 billion will be spent this year on pet supplies and medicine.

Companies such as Paul Mitchell, Omaha Steaks, Origins, Harley-Davidson and Old Navy are now offering lines of pet products ranging from dog shampoo, pet attire and name-brand toys to gourmet treats, the survey found.

Hotels across the country are now adopting pet-friendly policies, some of which include

everything from oversized pet pillows, plush doggie robes and check-in gift packages that include treats and toys. "Some even have a licensed dog masseuse on staff," the survey noted.

And for the Upper Valley's cold winter weather, pet owners can purchase faux mink coats and feathered French day beds for afternoon naps. There also are monogrammed dinner jackets and holiday outfits to keep pets in fashion all year, the survey found.

Although Gamache plans to carry some top-tier items in The Ranch's 1,200-square-foot retail shop, she also will sell food and other products that are more conventional.

"We're looking into selling higher-end things - the more expensive collars and leashes," she said. "There are scarf and coat sets that can be matched with what the owner is wearing. We may think about something like that, too."

Gamache offers day care for dogs, at \$17 a day, in outdoor and indoor recreation areas with swimming pools and walking trails. There will be games and activities with other dogs and the companionship of staff members.

In fact, day care at The Ranch, which Gamache expects eventually to bring in 24 percent of her revenue, seems like a camp. The day care has organized "fun and constructive play for dogs in a structured setting with scheduled playtime indoors and outdoors, nap time and basic obedience refreshers throughout the day," the company's business plan says.

Cats also have a day care and boarding area on the facility's third floor and are housed in specially designed "kitty condos." They, too, have a recreation space with toys, climbing poles and spots to sit in the sun and watch birds or the dogs that are playing outside.

The Ranch has boarding space for 30 cats at a cost of \$17 per night.

For clients who want to bathe and groom their animals, Gamache provides professional equipment for \$12 for the first half hour and \$10 for each additional half hour.

Or owners can leave their pets for the day, and professionals will bathe and groom them for an average cost of \$35.

The market

After graduating from Keene State College with a bachelor's degree in communication, Gamache worked in advertising and marketing in Boston and New York.

She moved to the Upper Valley with her husband, Dylan, and worked at Tally Systems. In 2000, she started Always Better Care as a part-time pet-sitting service. The business grew, sales increased dramatically, and it became a full-time boarding and day-care business. Because of the success of the pet-sitting business and a growing need for space, Gamache decided to open The Ranch. She took the entrepreneurial course at the Tuck

School of Business at Dartmouth College, and she put together a business plan.

On the strength of her plan, experience and the money she was putting into the project, Gamache was able to borrow \$1.4 million from Mascoma Savings Bank and \$185,000 from the Grafton County Economic Development Council.

In addition to having a customer base, Gamache found that there are 10,000 dogs registered in the Upper Valley.

She looked at the competition and found that there are 27 kennels within a 40-mile radius of Lebanon. Only one offered luxury suites, and it is more than 38 miles away, just north of Concord.

The primary target market for The Ranch is the area surrounding Lebanon and Hanover. The secondary market is customers in towns within a 30- to 40-mile loop, where residents travel to Lebanon for work, shopping or pleasure.

The services also will be marketed to residents of larger cities who travel through Lebanon for vacations or skiing.

None of the kennel facilities within a 40-mile loop of Lebanon provides the variety of services at The Ranch, Gamache said.

"I think kennels work well for some dogs and some owners. What we're offering is another solution. We're not trying to take business away from the other businesses here."

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