

# Small Animal Containment

**Nancy Reed, strategic planning and marketing manager for Companion Habitats, suggests that a little bit of homework can go a long way when it comes to selecting an attractive small animal habitat.**

## What are some of the key things retailers need to know about small animal habitats?

One thing is certain: Healthy, happy pets will attract customers and will sell. Therefore, when a retailer has decided on, or is considering, carrying and selling pets in their store, it is vital that they recognize the importance of maintaining the health of these animals. By understanding the best way to feature and promote small pets, retailers will quickly find good homes for them. The care and nurturing that the retailer provides these pets directly reflects positively or negatively on a store's image in the community.

When deciding how to house and care for small animals, it is important to understand the difference between a cage, which is merely an enclosure to confine, and a habitat, which more closely emulates a pet's natural environment.

## What should retailers look for when purchasing a habitat?

Retailers should seek quality constructed units that are easy to clean and maintain, will not easily show wear and deterioration over time, and will demonstrate the retailer's commitment to the health and welfare of its pets. Many products currently on the market do not provide easy access for cleaning and are primarily constructed of wood, which will deteriorate with mold and mildew over time. In the long run, retailers can actually end up spending more money by repeatedly

replacing poorly constructed products, rather than initially purchasing a well-made product.

Select attractive habitats that will capture interest and enhance, yet do not distract from the pets' natural beauty. Enclosures should be well lit for optimal viewing and the health of its inhabitants. Many pets, such as reptiles, require full-spectrum lighting and humidity, which is critical for their health.

In addition, smaller habitat units should have an effective ventilation system to circulate fresh air throughout and diminish odors. The heating system should be one that can be easily be regulated according to individual needs. Be sure to consider recommended feeding requirements, such as dishes, bottles, etc., for each pet's food and liquid intake. It is highly recommended that you research the proper care and feeding requirements for each species you decide to offer.

Don't overlook safety. Select units with proper locks and safety features to protect the pets and your business from theft. Lastly, don't forget to provide entertainment for pets, such as toys, things to climb on, etc. Customers will enjoy watching pets play and interact.

## What are some helpful tips in caring for pets?

Proper employee training is critical to ensure consistency in caring for pets. With this in mind, habitats should be monitored throughout the day for cleanliness. Some

odor is expected, but it should not be overwhelming. To control odor, habitats should be free of old feces, dead prey, food items and any other waste.

Avoid drafts and temperature fluctuations while maintaining an overall store temperature of about 75° F. Don't position animal enclosures in direct or constant sunlight—heat can build up quickly, causing dehydration and/or death. Each species has specific heat requirements, with reptiles and birds, in particular, requiring additional heat.

Metal cages should be rust free. Research the best substrate for your various pets, as some can cause skin irritation or respiratory problems.

Provide fresh water in clean bowls or bottles that are absent of algae or scum, and ensure that they are never empty.

Watch for listlessness, diarrhea, dull coats and runny eyes, which can be signs of illness. Quickly separate ill animals from others sharing the same enclosure.

## How can retailers help their customers to be responsible pet owners?

Our experience has shown that many customers purchase pets on impulse and may be quite unprepared for the responsibilities of their new pet once they get home and reality sets in. Retailers can seize this opportunity. Build a relationship with your customer and increase sales by strategically placing helpful related signage, literature, food and toy products near pet habitats.