

“Chain stores have also helped take a share of business away from grocery channels which see pet products as just another profit centre and offer no advice on their products.”

Karen Justice, CEO of Just for Pets Australia, Australia's largest group of independent pet retailers, said the current pet retail sector is doing well particularly with the remarkable growth in online sales, “but it could be better”, expressing concern for the future of independent pet stores.

“There's no question that over the past few years many independent pet retailers have closed or been acquired by a corporate brand, so the numbers are dwindling which is a real tragedy,” she said. “Independent retailers (not just specifically pet) remain the biggest employers in Australia, so this is a concern for not just retailers but everyone in Australia.”

Competition in the pet retail market is fierce and whilst many independent store owners consider the corporate brands as their competitors, the biggest competitor remains the supermarkets, said Ms Justice.

Representing 65 independent retailers, Just for Pets is a buying group that has grown by more than 500% in the past few years and turned over more than \$10 million, seeing the company come in at No. 4 in last year's Smart50 Awards, named the Smart50 Top Retailer and joint winner of the Community Hero Award.

Ms Justice's vision is to educate pet owners. People are treating their pets better than ever before, but so many pet owners remain uneducated about what is best for their ‘furbaby’, she said.

“Pet owners' shopping behaviours are unfortunately often driven by convenience and they believe what they are buying is good for their pet. But more often than not, that lack of knowledge is doing a disservice to their pet. If you get the opportunity to talk to these types of

shoppers, most are horrified that what they have been buying is not what is best, and I think that is where an independent retailer has the most opportunity. An independent pet retailer has such an important part to play in the lives of Australian pets!” she said.

“Independent retailers and very specifically pet retailers have some qualities that can't be replicated by anyone else, and that is what we need to focus on and promote. Doing what we do best, to the absolute best of our ability is our key to survival.

“Promoting locally-owned, great service and advice are what a lot of retailers talk about, but if a store genuinely delivers that, then the customers love it. Customers want a relationship (with retailers) and if we nurture that relationship, they will support you. My vision is to assist stores to deliver that 100% of the time and find innovative ways to be even better at it.”

Ms Justice is also impressed by the phenomenal growth of online shopping and said it is too big to ignore.

“But if you want to play in that space, you need to do it well without damaging your bricks-and-mortars business,” she said. “It's a very delicate balancing act that needs to be done so well and we are working on that.”

Looking into the future, Ms Justice believes the Australian pet industry needs independent pet retailers to survive and thrive, “as independent retailers have a better ability to work with shoppers on assisting and potentially changing their shopping decisions, and the brands that are currently in the Australian marketplace need that support.”

Independent retailers also do not have a discounting mentality, which destroys both product brand loyalty and store loyalty when retailers are constantly driving the shopper to continually change to find the cheapest as opposed to the

best product for their pet, she added.

“Australia has a diverse range of small manufacturers and importers that are 100% reliant on independent retailers to deliver the products to the customer, and if independent pet stores shut down, those brands will disappear,” she said.

In North America, independent retailers have made a resurgence and Ms Justice believes the same will happen in Australia with time.

“Consumers are becoming more aware of the damage that duopolies do to the economy and other things, such as choice, prices and employment, and I trust that the Australian shopper will drive the change that is needed to keep independent stores going,” said Ms Justice.

IMPACT OF DECLINING PET POPULATIONS ON RETAIL

According to the AMA's study, the population of dogs and cats has increased a little since 2013 - dogs up by 3% and cats up by 6% - but a decrease in bird and fish numbers have brought the overall pet population down by 9%.

Mr Young is concerned about the overall decline in pet populations, saying every Australian family should own a pet.

“Today, there are countless bodies of research which prove that owning a pet is extremely beneficial for mankind, improving our minds, bodies and lives in so many ways,” he said. “In these uncertain times, we can't ignore what's happening around the world today, and as a result the human/animal bond and the comfort it gives us is further heightened.”

So why is the overall population of pets dwindling? According to the AMA, the biggest threats to growing pet ownership in Australia are increasing urbanisation combined with current strata and body corporate regulations. Other issues reported are the increasing cost of ownership, accessing holiday care and managing pet responsibilities amid a busy lifestyle. It all comes down to Australia needing to be more pet friendly!

Despite having one of the highest pet populations in the world, Australia is behind other countries in being ‘pet friendly’, said Dr Chris Brown, TV

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