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The pet funeral industry is booming with an array of pet loss products and services to farewell and honour our beloved companion animals. Caroline Zambrano explores the trends and successes of the Australian pet end-of-life industry, and how businesses can improve to meet changing grieving pet owner demands.

Death isn't a pleasant topic, but it is a fact of life for every living creature great or small, and is an inevitable process that every pet owner faces with their animal companion at some point in time.

Just as the pet industry supports the beginning and growing stages of an animal's life with an array of products and services, it also comes through for owners and their pets - with genuine care, compassion and professional advice – when it's time to say goodbye.

Sadly, the grief that follows the loss of a beloved pet can be one of life's most powerful lessons in heartbreak. But it is comforting for many people to know that their pet can be remembered and cared for in death as they were in life.

The animal end-of-life industry is booming in Australia, fuelled by the strong connection we have with our pets, and caters to all of pet owners' wishes and needs to farewell their beloved animal companion, said Mark Fraser, CEO of the Pet Industry Association of Australia (PIAA).

"From burial in a pet cemetery through to cremations, memorial products and even extravagant wakes! People also leave millions to pet charities! All this goes to show how pets play a major role in many people's lives," he said.

We owe this special human-animal bond to the trend of humanisation and acknowledgement of the positive influence that pets have on our health and wellbeing. In the past, pet cremation was virtually unheard of as most pet owners disposed of their animals' remains on their own property. Today, pets are seen more and more as part of the family unit and therefore owners are choosing to memorialise them in a meaningful way when their time on earth comes to an end.

"Thanks to the growth in the pet aftercare

[referring to how you would like your pet's remains handled] industry, people have more choice to personalise the way they memorialise their animals," explained Mr Fraser. "The ongoing trend (of memorialising pets) is here to stay and become a permanent practice in Australia."

Memorialising all types of pets

Aftercare options apply to not just dogs and cats, but all creatures great and small! Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) Director and Veterinarian Dr Robert Johnson provides veterinary care at South Penrith Veterinary Clinic (NSW) for a wide range of species, from dogs, cats, rabbits and guinea pigs to ferrets, reptiles and amphibians.

"It's not the type of pet that matters to people, it is the amount of love that has been invested, be it a mouse, rat, snake, lizard or a dog. There is no difference emotionally to people," he said.

Shane Whiley, owner of Pets at Peace Central West pet cremation service in NSW (independently owned from the Pets at Peace franchise), once cremated a Goldfish that belonged to the deceased wife of a client. Apparently, the man's wife had a deep connection to the Goldfish, and when the fish died he wanted to place the ashes next to hers.

"We live fast lives and pets are the only constant thing. That's why they mean so much to us," said Mr Whiley. Mr Whiley also cremated a 30kg diamond python which the owner kept rolled up in the freezer for some time until he could afford to get it done. "Doesn't matter what type of domestic pet you have. If you need our services, we can do it for you," he added.

Stories of success and let-down

Having a supportive, non-judgemental work ethic, investment in high quality equipment or products and successfully meeting customer expectations in an emotional environment have helped to create many success stories across the industry.

This year, a Victorian-based, family-owned pet cremation service made the industry proud when it won Australia's 2017 Australian Small Business Champion Awards for Pet Services. In business since

1984, Eden Hills Pet Cremation provides pet cremation throughout Victoria and southern NSW from two pet crematoria located in the Melbourne and Albury Wodonga regions.

Another pet bereavement industry winner - Passing Paws Pet Cremations – won the 2017 Rising Stars Award in the Start-up category. The Rising Stars Award recognises and celebrates WA-based companies that are growing and still have future potential.

Passing Paws Cremation offers a range of personalised services, including 'private' and 'same day' cremation services, tailored grievance counselling and customised funeral services, to more than 200 customers a month. The company has experienced 350 per cent growth in the past 12 months!

Last year, a WA-based pet bereavement business that makes eco-friendly, stylish pet caskets, cadaver bags and bereavement gifts won two global awards. Orchard Valley Pet Caskets received the Bronze Award for the pet category at the 2016 Worldwide Packaging Design Awards (Pentawards) in Shanghai, China – considered the 'Oscars' of the global packaging design industry!

The business also won third place in the 2016 International Creativity Awards, USA, and this year received a prestigious "Innovation Voucher" from the WA Government to travel and research potential international sales platforms whilst introducing their products to the UK market in 2018?. The Orchard Valley team will be travelling to the UK to exhibit their creations at the British Small Animal Veterinary Congress in Birmingham in April.

The successful growth of the industry is also a reflection of the trust that pet owners have in end-of-life businesses to treat their deceased animals with dignity and respect. The burning question grieving pet owners have for pet crematoriums is, 'How do I know these remains belong to my pet?'

In 2008, pet cremation business Pets at Peace in Victoria was caught dumping dead animals in bushland in the state's

