

# Businesses living high on the dog

BY CAROLYN STEEVES

**CHARLOTTE** — Sometimes letting one's business go to the dogs is not a bad thing. In fact, in a culture where pets are often seen as children instead of merely dogs or cats and given that the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association estimates people will spend \$43.4 billion on their pets in 2008, catering to a furry clientele can often be lucrative for businesses.

Some companies capitalize on Americans' love for their pets. Others build an entire business model around it. And that's no longer limited to pet dealers, groomers and supply stores.

One local hot spot for dogs and their humans alike is The Dog Bar in NoDa. It is a bar with a graveled yard, where people can come out for a drink and socialize. With their dogs.

Audra Hartness and J.P. Brewer launched the business in 2005. Hartness explained that Brewer "wanted to design a place where people could come out after work and instead of leaving their dogs at home all night when they come out, they just enjoy a beer and come out ... to relieve the guilt of leaving (their pets) yet again."

Hartness serves drinks to customers from behind the bar with her rescued Weimaraner sleeping at her feet. Dogs of all breeds and sizes, from lumbering great Danes to pint-sized terriers, run around the bar and the outdoor area, playing while their owners chat with fellow dog enthusiasts.

Hartness said there could be anywhere from 10 to 50 dogs there on a given night.

Patrons Laura Moss and Fred Netzler came to The Dog Bar on Wednesday with their five dogs in tow.

They say they come to the bar at least once a week. "When you work all the time and you spend all of your day at work," Moss said, "it's nice to be able to go out and bring your dogs, too. You feel guilty on the weekends when you're not able to bring them out with you. It's nice to be able to bring them somewhere."

Moss and Netzler said they were more likely to go to a place that allowed dogs. "We like to take our dogs wherever we can," Moss explained.

For consumers who are seeking pet-friendly lodging or dining and the business who bank on connecting with them, the Internet is a crucial tool.

There are a litter of national Web sites dedicated to travelers who have their pets in tow and seeking pet-friendly lodging or dining. One of them is BringFido.com, founded in 2004 by

Melissa Kendall after a frustrating road trip with her dog, Rocco. She found that many travel Web sites said hotels were pet-friendly, but upon calling them they were not.

"I decided that something had to be done about the lack of accurate pet policy information available online," she explained. "I got a bunch of friends together and started calling all 20,000 hotels in the U.S. that were reported to be pet-friendly."

While calling, she collected information about weight limits, pet fees and other policy specifics. She built the Web site and partnered with Travelocity to provide online reservations.

BringFido.com receives about 50,000 visitors and 400,000 page views each month.

That can be a real help to pet-toting travelers, but also a boost to businesses like The Dog Bar, or even to mainstream operations like the Westin Hotel, which welcomes pets.

## "The dogs of Charlotte have it pretty good."

Melissa Kendall, founder of BringFido.com, national pet travel Web site

Kendall noted that she visited Charlotte last year to visit both the Charlotte Westin and The Dog Bar. "The dogs of Charlotte have it pretty good," she said with a smile.

Despite the demand for pet-friendly services, the customer base may be limited.

People often complain about pet allergies, noise, waste and other pet-related issues. There are also health-code limitations. In North Carolina, businesses can't serve food if they allow pets indoors.

To eager patrons, that doesn't seem to be a problem.

"Me, personally, if I was going into McIntosh's I wouldn't want a dog sitting

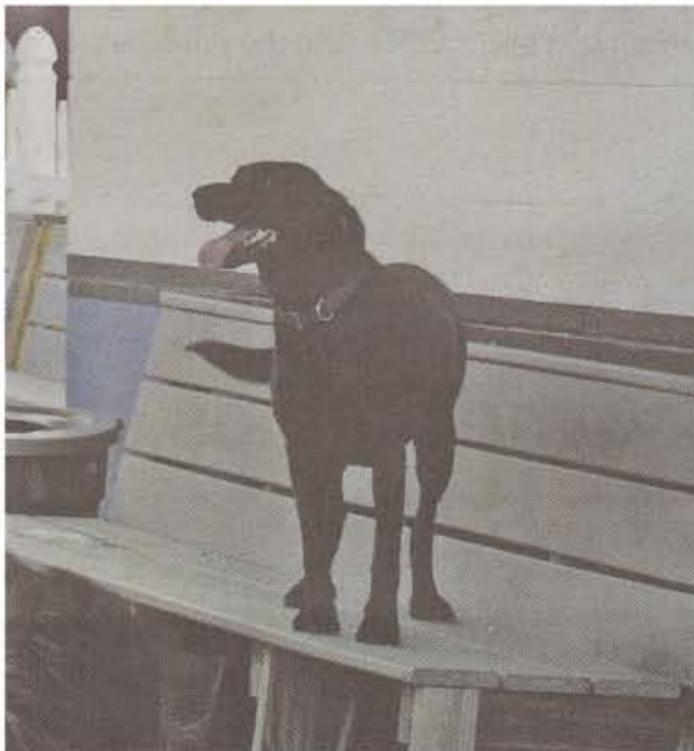
there," Moss said. "But somewhere like The Dog Bar or any place like that, when you go you anticipate that ... so you eat first or order and bring it in."

Netzler noted that a pet-friendly establishment also has to be more selective with hiring, making sure it has people who like animals and understand a bit about pet behavior.

However, customers at the Dog Bar last week generally agreed that people love their dogs and if a business that can cater to that love, people will come.

Netzler and Moss said they would like to see the owners franchise The Dog Bar to other metro-Charlotte locations. "It is such a great idea," Moss said. "There are a lot of dog people. It's a very dog-friendly community."

Carolyn Steeves is a staff writer for **The Mecklenburg Times**. E-mail her at [carolyn.steeves@mecktimes.com](mailto:carolyn.steeves@mecktimes.com)



**YOU CAN LEAD A DOG TO THE BAR:** Dogs of all kinds, from great Danes, Labradors, boxers and mutts congregate at The Dog Bar in NoDa. The Dog Bar has been open since 2005. Since that time it has hosted hundreds of dogs, birthday parties, live bands and happy owners. Charlotte is perceived as a dog-friendly city, where dogs are often allowed in hotels and on the patios of restaurants. Some businesses, like The Dog Bar, cater almost exclusively to a canine clientele.

Mecklenburg Times staff photos by Carolyn Steeves