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# Solving the Mystery of Boarding Cats

WITH INNOVATIVE  
HOUSING  
OPTIONS

By Greg Taylor





It may come as a surprise to some that cats outnumber dogs as pets in the United States, as the majority of cat lovers own multiple felines. In fact, the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association (APPMA) 2013-2014 Pet Owner Survey found that there are 95.6 million cats as pets in the United States compared to 83.3 million dogs. Cat ownership has continued to increase at a significant rate, as the same survey identified 86.4 million cats were pets in 2011-2012.

For the boarding industry, cats continue to be a significantly underserved population in many markets. Many days, a pet resort's dog runs are at capacity with paying customers while cat boarding has ample empty space. This large underserved cat population offers the pet resort industry an opportunity to increase revenue by growing their feline boarding practice. In the past, however, many cat housing options were similar to those provided for boarding small dogs, or worse, a cold, loud, institutional-looking stainless steel cage bank. These housing options were not very appealing

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to customers. An even greater concern is that the needs of cats are very different from dogs. Potential feline boarders need a quieter environment as well as space to climb, perch and lounge, and preferably adequate separation of food and water from their litter boxes.

Many of the best cat housing solutions available today are specifically designed on the Association of Shelter Veterinarians guidelines for feline housing. These recommendations are focused on reducing stress in cats, and following them can provide a competitive advantage by offering boarding options that result in healthier guests. Additional research funded by the Morris Animal Foundation and conducted by the UC-Davis School

of Veterinary Medicine, for example, has provided a wealth of information about improving the health and well-being of cats in shelters, which is also applicable to boarding facilities. The research found that cats that had high stress scores tended not to eat very well in their first week staying at a shelter. However, when stress scores decreased, food intake rose. Additionally, cats with high stress scores were at significantly higher risk for upper respiratory infection (URI) than cats with lower stress scores.

One of the focuses of cat boarding options, then, is to reduce stress in what can be a new and unfamiliar surrounding—a pet resort. This can be accomplished by providing the cats with



a calm atmosphere and the ability to move and climb higher than the ground. Cat housing can also reduce stress by incorporating separate litter and hiding units as well as providing distinct sleep and exercise areas for the cats. Cats also feel more comfortable and exhibit less stress when they have ample room rather than cramped quarters.

With the above in mind, cat housing for boarding facilities should be built with an emphasis on vertical space in the form of high shelves to allow cats to spend time perched above the floor, where they feel more comfortable. Housing should also provide enough room for cats to assume their natural posture for elimination, and for the cat to raise its tail to full length. Additionally, units with shelves, scratching posts, and spaces that can be outfitted with bedding and toys can help ensure a more enriched and lower-stress stay for cats. Units should also offer options that can allow enough room for multiple cats from the same household to board together, as almost 25% of cat owners have three or more cats in their family.

### The Latest in Cat Condos

Cat condos are an increasingly popular option for pet resorts instead of stainless steel boxes, because the cat condos offer greater comfort and functional design. There are innovations with these attractive, modular units that can translate into new and repeat business for boarding facilities.

There are modules available that are even more spacious to provide cats with the room they need to exercise. Be sure to look for modules with multiple ledges instead of a single one, as they offer more opportunities for cats to explore or to simply curl up and rest. Units should provide ample room for bedding, favorite toys, food, water bowls, and a litter box.

The modules can be joined in a variety of configurations, depending on the layout of your building and the total number of cats you wish to accommodate. Select units that can be arranged in rows along the wall, around a corner, or as a central island, or where additional modules can be installed if expansion is desired. If you need the ability to connect individual units with neighboring units, look for optional pass-through doors either vertically or

horizontally to expand the accessible areas. These doors will provide a pet resort flexibility to make larger and smaller housing units as demand dictates.

Side and floor panels should be durable and constructed using laminate that is both waterproof and highly scratch and chip resistant. Look for units that can be constructed with non-organic materials if desired or required by state regulations.

For the doors, metal grid work is often standard to ensure natural air circulation, but full-length, tempered-glass panel is a newer option that can provide an updated appearance. Look for glass thickness of 1/4" to help ensure the glass will not discolor, crack, or scratch. Avoid plexi-glass or other acrylic substitutes for tempered glass, as they tend to discolor and scratch over time. Another new innovation is tempered glass that is offset 1/8" from the door surface, allowing air to circulate freely through the living space, resulting in a significant reduction in upper respiratory infections because cat sneezes cannot escape. Avoid portholes in the windows, as germs can spread if a cat sneezes or if fingers reach into the unit.

Additionally, cat condo doors can be built with the bottom one-third constructed in a solid material to allow cats to feel hidden from the line of sight as well as doors made with horizontally-oriented wire. These stress-relieving features are also recommended by the Association of Shelter Veterinarians guidelines.

### Luxury Boarding for Cats

One of the latest innovations in cat boarding solutions borrows from the best of the kennel systems for dogs yet tailors the design to offer luxury accommodations for cats. Often known as cat towers or cat runs, these solutions provide a completely customizable living space that is roomy enough for furniture and offer cats the space they need to explore.

Rather than a box or a cage, these versatile systems can be tailored to create unique living quarters, featuring larger, more open areas as well as multiple levels of play and resting space, including hiding areas. Potential buyers of cat boarding units should look for designs built around the Association of Shelter Veterinarians guidelines for living space and that provide separation of litter from food areas and places for cats to hide and de-stress. Multiple levels of climbing ladders and perching shelves allow cats to exercise comfortably, lie down, and sit. They can be made from a variety of materials, including the highest quality non-organic materials.

Cat runs should be made to your facility's specifications to ensure they are exactly the right size and meet your needs. The advantage here is that the cat housing can be designed to fill an irregular shaped room or wall in order to maximize a facility's revenue-generating capabilities. Options should also be available to configure units for a single cat or a family of cats, as 56% of all cat owners have more than one cat.

Having a better understanding of the effects of housing and the environment on cat health can help you to strategize the best boarding solution for your feline guests and increase revenue. Whatever you select, make sure the units are sturdy, durable, and easy to clean and maintain. Look to partner with a company that offers a wide selection of materials, styles, colors, and equipment options that enable

you to customize your cat enclosure system for your unique needs. Expect free design advice, price quotations, and computerized layout drawings as well as expert installation assistance from your animal enclosure solutions partner. ■

*Greg Taylor is President and CEO of the Mason Company, a leading designer and manufacturer of animal enclosures for pet care, veterinarians, humane societies, animal control, and other animal facilities. Mason was founded in 1892 and has developed the*

*widest product line in the industry, many with innovative designs and features, and has nine patents or patents-pending. Mason sells around the world, has installations in over 25 countries, and has worked with many of the most successful pet resorts to develop animal housing unique to their facility. Greg is a frequent contributor to pet care periodicals, and he or other Mason personnel can be found at all the animal care conferences. Greg earned a BA from Denison University and an MBA from the University of Chicago.*

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