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Last Word: Vets helping pets, owners . . . and the U.S. economy

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As a veterinary surgeon, I can gladly say that every day I get the opportunity to make a positive contribution not only to the health and wellness of pets (or animal companions, depending on your linguistic preference) but also to the happiness - and perhaps even the health - of pet owners.

After all, Americans are increasingly incorporating pets into their families, ranking companionship, love, company and affection as the leading benefits of a pet. Fully 62 percent of cat and dog owners state that their pets help them relax and relieve stress, and 59 percent of dog owners and 37 percent of cat owners feel their pets help them live longer, better lives. If only half of them are right, those are great numbers. But one thing that I never expected, when I committed myself to veterinary medicine, was making a positive contribution to the U.S. economy. Looking at some recent statistics it becomes very clear that the veterinary field - as well as ancillary businesses involving pet medicine, food, breeding, boarding and grooming - is a major boost to local and national economies.

For starters, there has probably never been such an increase in the sheer number of pets and the resources committed to their care in a single country as there has been in the United States in the last few years. The most recent National Pet Owners Survey conducted by the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association found that the number of cats in the U.S. rose from 77.7 to 90.5 million in three years and that the number of dogs rose from 65 to 74 million during the same period.

And judging by spending, people increasingly treat their pets as a valued member of the family: Americans annual spending on pets doubled from 1994 to 2004. It currently stands at \$38.4 billion. Those numbers are quite staggering and clearly demonstrate that Americans are acting on the conviction that the benefits of pet ownership are well worth the financial cost.

On the local level we see the contribution that pet ownership makes to the Tucson economy every day. People buy gas to drive their pets to the park. What about the construction involved in servicing the field? High end boutiques, luxury hotel resorts, and superstores are all around us in their efforts to cater to the pet owners and their furry friends. And if pets actually improve the health and well-being of our work force, what does this translate to in terms of decreased sick pay, lower health insurance rates and fewer missed work days for employees?

Looking ahead, I can only see the field continuing to grow, and I can honestly say that I am proud to be a part of it.

Because in the final analysis, "the business of pets," if you want to call it that, thrives for one reason: love. We love our pets and they love us. And if the economy benefits in the bargain, that's OK, too.

Barbara R. Gores, DVM, DACVS, established the state-of-the-art, nearly 10,000-square-foot Veterinary Specialty Center of Tucson (www.vscot.com) with James Boulay, DVM, MS, DACVS, in 2004. VSCT, 4909 N. La Cañada Drive, has about 100 employees.