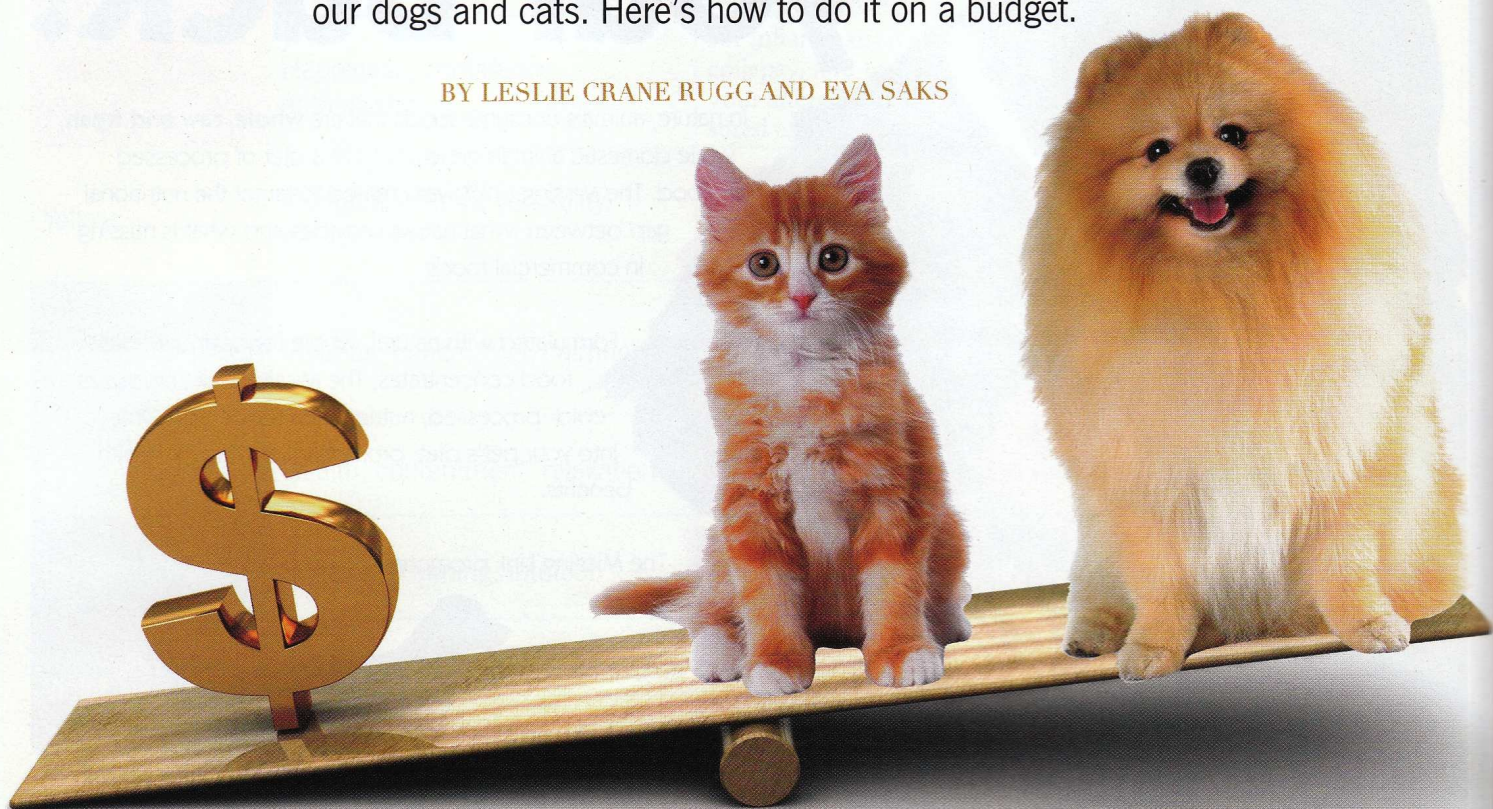


# 10 tips FOR TOUGH TIMES

These days, a lot of us are pinching pennies, yet we still want to pamper our dogs and cats. Here's how to do it on a budget.

BY LESLIE CRANE RUGG AND EVA SAKS



**M**ost animal lovers treat their dogs and cats like royalty, but these days, even royalty is being forced to watch expenses. Your companion can't do without the necessities of life, though – and let's face it – some luxuries too!

Every self-respecting companion animal needs quality food, water, health, hygiene, toys and basic supplies to stay happy and healthy. As a savvy shopper, you want good value for a good price. Read labels carefully to ensure you're getting your money's worth while avoiding ingredients and materials you don't want. Don't lower your standards; raise your consciousness. Read on for ten ways to get the best for less.

## 1 COUPONS AND FREE SAMPLES

Clip coupons. You'll find them in magazines, on websites, in stores and the mail. Keep them handy

in your wallet. Use them for routine items and to try new products, as long as you approve the ingredients.

Free samples are another boon. Manufacturers bet that if your dog or cat tries it, he'll like it. Again, choose wisely and avoid low-end products that contain unhealthy additives or unsafe parts or materials.

## 2 VOLUME

Buy in bulk to reduce unit price. Some online sites offer free shipping for large orders. If you're buying dry food (make sure it's a good quality diet), buy large bags only if they can be sealed airtight to maintain freshness.

Some groomers offer volume discounts: you might get ten sessions for the price of nine, for example. If your animal only needs a bath or a brush, do it at home, al-

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though it depends on his breed. Home grooming is a lot easier with a Chihuahua than a poodle.

### 3 COMPARISON SHOP

As the song goes, you better shop around. Don't just head to the nearest pet supply megastore. Check out a range of stores and compare prices on specific items. You might discover that the chic boutique charges less than the so-called "discount" store. Independent stores sometimes carry well-priced products you won't find anywhere else. Search online too.

### 4 LOYALTY PROGRAMS

Return to the same stores or brands, and they'll show their appreciation by giving you discounts or purchase points. Cash them in promptly and reap the benefits.

### 5 SALES

Buy what's on sale if it suits your dog or cat. Always investigate the clearance section. Raw feeders can purchase large packages as well as close-to-sell-date meat. Consider investing in a freezer to take advantage of these sales.

### 6 WATER WAYS

If you buy your animal bottled water, switch to a filtered pitcher or other water-purifying system. It saves money in the long run and reduces your "plastic pawprint" on the environment.



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## 7 POST-SEASON PLAY

Buy products on sale that are remaindered solely for human reasons. Your companion will happily eat Santa-shaped biscuits in February, or play with a stuffed Easter bunny all year round.

## 8 RE-PURPOSE AND RECYCLE

Need poop bags? Re-use the plastic bags your newspaper and grocery store produce come in. Need storage? Re-use yogurt containers. Make a few toys from “found objects.” Lost one sock? Knot its twin into a ball for tug. Or fill it with crumpled newspapers and sew up the open end. Didn’t finish your own dinner? If the leftovers are safe and healthy (lean meat, veggies, fruit, etc.) give them to your companion.

## 9 D.I.Y.

“Home made” has a special kind of value. Prepare simple treats like dried apple slices. Bake your companion customized cookies, using whole grain flours, unsweetened applesauce, and his favorite toppings (carrot, strawberries, fish). These goodies are highly perishable, so freeze after a few days.

## 10 THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

You’re not limited to pet stores. You can find healthy animal treats at the dollar store if you look in the human food section. Search for high quality foods like organic baby food, vacuum packed salmon, sardines or tuna. Eggs and vegetables are also bargains. It’s crucial to check “sell by” dates, as items arrive at dollar stores close to expiration.

Farmer’s markets are another great resource. Feeding an animal pricey organics isn’t just for movie stars. The trick is to go at closing time. Ask vendors if you can have their “damaged goods” for free. They can’t sell overripe, bruised, or fallen-on-the-ground produce anyway.

Treats don’t just come in shiny bags. If you’re out of coupons, consider “people food” like dried banana chips (with no added sugar), freeze dried blueberries (ditto) and organic peanut butter. Grow catnip in a flowerpot.

The bottom line is that you don’t need to compromise your companion’s lifestyle when things are tight. Just use your imagination and creativity, and learn how to ferret out the best for less. 🐾

