

Petcube, the Skype for Fido

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Ever been stuck late at the office while your furry friend is home alone, and wished you could give Fido or Fluffy a quick ring or text to check in?

Until your [pet](#) develops opposable thumbs, Petcube may offer the next best thing.

The San Francisco-based company sells a smart [camera](#) that allows users to watch their pets in real time and talk and play with them remotely using a laser pointer. Customers use their smartphone to check in on their own pets, or they can use the Petcube app to play with adoptable shelter pets in their area.

"It's basically like Skype for you and your pet, but your pet doesn't have to pick up the phone," said co-founder Yaroslav Azhnyuk.

The \$199 device, called Petcube Camera, is a sleek silver and black cube that stands 4 inches tall, with a microphone, camera and laser on one side, and a speaker on the other. It plugs into the wall and connects to Wi-Fi. Owners use the free Petcube app to control the camera's laser pointer, dragging a red dot around on the screen with their finger.

Petcube is part of a growing market for high-tech pet gadgets. Apps like Wag let users book on-demand dog walkers in San Francisco and other cities. Other companies sell GPS-enabled collars that let users track their pet's location from a smartphone, such as San Francisco-based Whistle, which was recently acquired by pet-food company Mars Petcare.

Petcube also has direct competition in the pet camera space from products such as the Petzi Treat Cam, a camera that dispenses pet treats, made by San Jose-based Petzila.

David Clark, president and CEO of Petzila, said he's seen the pet tech industry expand significantly since he founded his company in 2012.

"We all care for our pet and wonder what they're doing when we're not there, and of course, want to be good pet parents," Clark said. "It seemed very much like a logical progression for technology to begin to incorporate our pets."

The Petzi Treat Cam jingles when its human user turns it on remotely, Clark said, which alerts the dog or cat to expect its owner's voice. After talking to their pet, users can press a button on their smartphone to launch a small treat into the room. The treat is important, Clark said, because it gives the animal an incentive to approach the camera once it turns on.

Fanny Charpiot, 29, of San Francisco, uses Petcube to check in on her cat, Tintin. She bought the camera when she was preparing for a four-day trip and couldn't find anyone to watch him. Charpiot said she has an automatic feeder, but she worried Tintin, who she calls "needy," would get lonely while she and her boyfriend were gone. Though it may be confusing for a non-tech-savy pet to hear his owner's disembodied voice coming from a box, Tintin seems to have taken to it.

"The reaction he gets when the thing turns on is really funny," Charpiot said. "He starts meowing at it like it's a bird or something, and he's really, really excited."

Chasing the laser helps get Tintin, who had been getting a bit chubby, off the couch, Charpiot said.

Petcube also taps into the public's love of cat videos, improving upon the Internet staple by adding an interactive element. By tapping the "play" feature on the app, users can access Petcubes of strangers all over the world who have made their accounts public. It would be easy to waste plenty of time at work making other people's cats and dogs chase a [laser pointer](#) back and forth. But on a recent weekday, many of the pets in the public accounts were napping or otherwise uninterested. Other cameras showed a view of an empty room, with no pets in sight.

Some of these public accounts belong to animal shelters, such as Hopalong Animal Rescue in Oakland and KitTea cat cafe in San Francisco, which receive the cameras for free.

Juliet Boyd, executive director of Hopalong, said her cats love chasing the laser.

"It's nice for the cats to break up their day, to have someone out there playing with them," she said.

The public account also helps garner interest in the shelter's adult cats, which are the hardest to place.

The idea behind Petcube was sparked by Azhnyuk's co-founder, Alex Neskin, who couldn't get his Chihuahua, Rocky, to stop barking when he wasn't home. Neskin turned to Google for a solution, but the most high-tech option he found was an anti-bark collar - and Neskin was bothered by the idea of shocking his dog. They created Petcube with the idea that Rocky would calm down and stop barking if he heard Neskin's voice, and it worked.

The founders originally launched Petcube in the Ukraine, and now have 25 employees there and 10 in San Francisco. Petcube raised \$250,000 on online crowdfunding platform Kickstarter in 2013, was backed by

Mountain View-based accelerator Y Combinator this year, and has raised \$3.8 million in venture capital funds. In March the company hit 20,000 Petcubes sold.

"Products made for pets should be made with as much care as products made for people," Yaroslav said, "because pets are such important parts of our lives."

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Petcube

The product: A [smart camera](#) that lets you watch, talk to and play with your pet remotely

Features: Camera, microphone, speaker, laser, Wi-Fi enabled

Size: 4-inch cube

Cost: \$199

Get the camera: Order online at petcube.com. It's also available at amazon.com, and in stores including Best Buy and Brookstone.

Get the app: Find links to download the free Petcube app for iOS or Android at petcube.com/mobile-app.

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Petzi Treat Cam

The product: A smart camera that dispenses treats for your pet

Features: Camera, speaker, treat launcher, Wi-Fi enabled

Size: About 13 inches tall

Cost: \$169.99

Get the camera: Order online at petzi.com. It's also available at amazon.com, and in stores including Bed Bath & Beyond and Best Buy.

Get the app: Find links to download the free Petzi app for iOS or Android at social.petzi.com.

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