



Good for What Ails Them

FOODS AND OTHER PRODUCTS THAT ADDRESS PETS' EVOLVING HEALTH CONCERNS CAN ATTRACT LOYAL SHOPPERS. **By Princess Jones Curtis**

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Whenever I start talking about Choppa's diet, people laugh at me," admits 30-year-old Bree Thompson, owner of a 5-year-old pug mix, "but I don't care. He had so many skin issues before we went grain- and gluten-free. I'll never buy another bag of dog food with grain in it."

Thompson represents a growing number of consumers who use ailment-focused pet products to manage their pets' health. Ailment-focused products are ones that have formulas, packaging and advertising geared toward a specific problem or condition,

such as anti-itch shampoo or a food for older cats. And while pet owners should always follow a veterinarian's medical advice, many conditions can be

alleviated by supplies and over-the-counter medicines, on which pet owners spent an estimated \$14.93 billion in 2017, according to figures compiled by the Stamford, Conn.-based American Pet Products Association.

Humanization

The biggest contributor to the rise of ailment-focused pet products is the increased humanization of pets.

"Millennials are now the largest pet-owning population in the U.S. and the driving force in the pet industry. As pet owners, Millennials treat their pets as members of the family, and that bond is very important to them," says Lindsey Rabaut, VP of marketing for I and Love and You, a Boulder, Colo.-based premium pet food and treat company that translates the latest natural health trends for humans into pet products.

The humanization trend has grown to the point that many pet owners also think of their animals as their children.

"Just like feeding your own babies, health awareness is very important," explains Jennifer Lord, manager of Martin's Paw Marts, an

independent pet store chain associated with South Bend, Ind.-based grocery chain Martin's Super Markets. "We all want our pets to live the longest lives possible. Consumers are involving pets more in their everyday activities. Pets are no longer just pets; they are family."

That being the case, owners feel a responsibility to provide the best for their pets, notes Rabaut. "We care for our family," she says. "When they aren't feeling well, we seek out healing solutions. We all want our pets to be in optimal health, and to keep them free from pain and irritations. It's no surprise that the pet industry is providing natural solutions for these consumer concerns."

She continues: "We know that healthy foods support our longevity, so it's a natural extension that quality pet food equals a higher-quality life for our pets. Who wouldn't want that for their pets?"

Personalized Development

Ailment-focused products are also a direct

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result of personalization trends in consumer goods overall. Shoppers want to feel like a product has been developed especially for their needs.

Savvy manufacturers are listening to consumers during the product development stage. Nicky Walsh, director of business development for Stamford, Conn.-based Daymon, says that this is crucial. As the eyes and ears in the pet business industry for Williamsville, N.Y.-based Tops Markets LLC, Walsh is involved in everything from analysis of the market to product development. “If analysis shows the need to develop an item or category for a specific audience, we pursue it,” she asserts.

“We strive to bring unique and differentiated ideas to fellow pet enthusiasts,” notes Rabaut. “By understanding and relating to our core audience, we are able to design products that are made specifically for them. ... Our loyal tribe of social followers is often where we start when coming up with new products. The information they see is often very telling of larger trends/themes. This was the specific impetus of our recent launch of Lovingly Simple,” a pet food line addressing food sensitivities, such as food allergies and digestive issues, with a limited-ingredient formula.

Joe Toscano, VP and director of business development and industry relations at St. Louis-based Purina, says that product development requires extensive data and market analysis. “At Purina we have a dedicated category team that’s sole purpose is to build the pet category,” observes Toscano. “The Cat Chow Indoor formula, for instance, was born out of the insight that indoor cats can be less active than their outdoor counterparts. Therefore, the product was formulated to help with weight management and nutritional needs that weren’t being met by conventional cat food.”

He adds: “We utilize a vast assortment of data to lead and identify current pet trends in real time. We can work together with retailers to create a customized solution to meet [their] goals and targets.”

Senioritis

While ailment-focused pet products can span a number of categories, food dominates in the numbers. Within that subsegment, foods for senior animals are highly popular.

“Of course, as the average lifespan of a pet increases, so does the market for senior pet formulas,” notes Toscano. “Purina has made nutritional advancements with formulas like Purina ONE Smartblend Vibrant Maturity 7+, which includes enhanced botanical oils to support brain health and a dual-defense antioxidant blend to support an aging dog’s immune system and healthy skin and coat.”

Another contributing factor to the numerous products for senior dogs is the current popularity of smaller, older dogs, he observes. “Changes in lifestyle, urbanization and shifting demographics are driving a recent boom in small-dog households, with the pint-sized pooches making up 70 percent of the dog population growth, and 49 percent of dog-owning households now including a small dog.”

Smaller dogs also tend to live longer than their larger counterparts, leading to a greater number of senior dogs affecting market needs.

Toscano adds that addressing the specific needs of those pets drives product development. “These dogs have unique nutritional needs, which led us to introduce Purina Bella, a full line of dry and wet dog food inspired by the little ones we know and love so well,” he points out. “The formulas are nutrient-dense with higher caloric content, since small dogs tend to eat less; [have] a proprietary blend of antioxidants to support their immune system; and are formulated to support overall health throughout their life to address their longer life expectancy.”

The bottom line is that catering to the health needs of pets makes good sense for grocers. “People love their pets like family, and just as our pets differ in age, lifestyle and health condition, their nutrition should be tailored to meet their unique needs,” asserts Toscano. “Such tailored nutritional offerings are an underused retail strategy, representing a larger opportunity for personalized offerings that span breeds and pets’ needs.” **PG**

