

FIRST
FOR PET
RETAILERS
IN PRINT
AND ONLINE

#1

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Pet Product News

International

MARCH/APRIL 2021 \$5 PETPRODUCTNEWS.COM

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are diversifying
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DOUBLE DOWN ON DINING



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► CLICK AND CONNECT

Right around now, PPN's team of editors should be meeting to go over the final details of our Global Pet Expo show floor schedule: Who's going to visit which booth and at what time; what products do we hope to finally see in person; what restaurant do we want to be sure to visit before the trip is over?

Alas, we're discussing none of these things, and if you're in the pet industry and not living under a rock, you already know why. The annual Global Pet Expo held at the Orange County Convention Center in Orlando, Fla., is not happening this year—at least, not in its traditional format.

However, thanks to the magic of the internet, PPN's editors will be attending Global Pet Expo in a digital form.

Still grappling with the effects that the coronavirus pandemic has had on travel and trade shows and other professional in-person events, the expo's organizers, the American Pet Products Association (APPA) and the Pet Industry Distributors Association (PIDA), announced in December 2020 that there would be no live event in 2021 and opted instead to offer the industry a digital trade show experience. And it's one we at PPN wouldn't think of missing.

The official moniker of the event is Global Pet Expo Digital Access. Like usual, it is open to independent retailers, distributors, mass-market buyers and other qualified buyers, who, for three days, will get to visit the virtual showrooms of pet product manufacturers in all categories. And thanks to the digital platform, attendees and exhibitors will be afforded a host of ways to connect and do business.

This is among the latest in a string of events that have chosen a similar path. Most recently, the Pet Sustainability Coalition (PSC)'s Impact Unleashed and the annual Pet Industry Leadership Summit, hosted by APPA, PIDA and the World Pet Association (WPA), debuted digital formats en lieu of live events. And late last year, the Pet Connections Expo moved its New Jersey-bound 2020 trade show to an exclusively online space as well. All three reported enthusiastic and robust attendance, in part, I'm sure, owing to the growing appetite many of us have for any forum that allows us to get out of our own offices (or home offices) and headspace, even if only virtually.

So we look forward to Digital Access, and we are keeping a close eye on the live events still planned for this year—namely, WPA's Atlanta Pet Fair & Conference scheduled in June and, of course, SuperZoo scheduled in August in Las Vegas. As the official media partner for both, we are hopeful and highly optimistic that we will be able to convene in person at these events and make up for some lost time.

In the meantime, be sure to check out PPN's Product Parade, which is inserted into this issue (page 11). It features page after page of on-trend products pet retailers might want to consider stocking this spring.

Also, in anticipation of Global Pet Expo Digital Access, PPN's editors share the trends that we will be keeping our eye out for. See page 10 to check it out.

Hope to see you in person and online soon!

—*Jennifer Boncy*
Publishing Director
and Editor-in-Chief



Pet Product News International

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Support for Your Online Store

Retailers making the leap to e-commerce don't have to go it alone.

BY PAIGE BROCKWAY

With customers fully acclimated to the convenience and speed of online shopping, pet retailers might be missing out on a chunk of their local markets if they haven't branched out into e-commerce. Luckily, there are several companies and tools poised to help retailers establish an online store or improve one they may already have.

"The biggest frustration these retailers have is they don't have the time, they're busy, there [are] so many platforms," said Brandon Swenson, co-founder of NextPaw in Salt Lake City.

NextPaw combines a multitude of tools, so retailers can manage their online presence from a single dashboard, Swenson said. The company serves about 400 retailers across all 50 states. It was launched in January 2019, but its e-commerce software was a new addition in November 2020.

"When we went into this, we didn't go into e-commerce first," Swenson said. "We wanted to first build a product that would help an independent pet retailer gain more market share locally and compete with their big-box competition, as well as online big-box like Chewy and Amazon."

Among the tools NextPaw offers are website creation and management, an online store platform and product catalog that, as of press time, contained around 30,000 SKUs (but is still growing), event marketing and more. One key feature is point-of-sale integration with the Clover, Square or Vend systems that syncs up price and inventory between a retailer's store and their website in real time.

NextPaw's biggest seller, however, is its search engine optimization that helps retailers get in front of local customers and drive website traffic and other conversions like phone calls, messages and views on Google Maps.

A lot of these independent retailers are mom-and-pop shops. ... It scares them to allocate the right amount of time to really grow this part of the business.

—Matthew Roach of Animal Supply Co.

"Because we are so focused here on search engine optimization and digital marketing, everything we do blows up these retailers online," Swenson said. "We have case study after case study where we drive 100 percent, 200 percent, 300 percent increases in the amount of time those products are viewed locally, how many messages they get, phone calls to the store, directions to the stores, people buying online."

NextPaw also offers a universal messaging inbox that aggregates messages from a store's social media, Google Business profile, email and website, so retailers can stay in touch with customers from one home base. Messages can be sent straight to the retailer's mobile phone, so retailers can go back and forth with customers via text message.

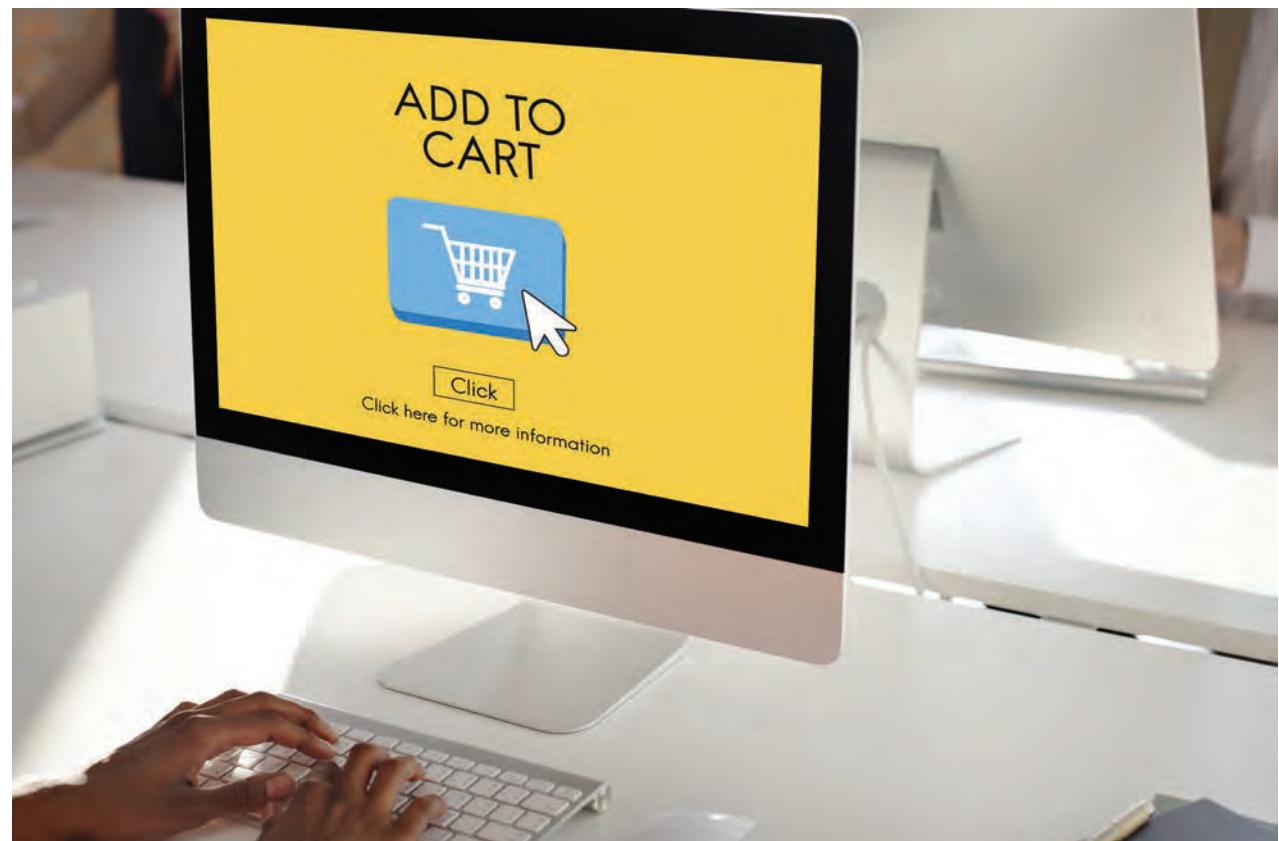
"We do have the ability for people to request payments from customers via text message," Swenson added. "Retailers can turn that conversation into an order right from the dashboard."

eTailPet has been in the pet e-commerce game longer than NextPaw, having been launched out of Santa Monica, Calif., in April 2018. As of March 2020, eTailPet was serving about 400 independent retailers, but that number has grown to about 1,200 since the coronavirus pandemic began.

"All of a sudden, everyone is speaking our language," said founder Bere Giannini. "The conversation has gone from trying to convince someone to trying to do e-commerce to, 'What's the best way to do it?'"

eTailPet offers clients access to a robust 80,000-SKU catalog—including product images, ingredients and guaranteed analysis for retailers' online stores—with which retailers can build their own customizable online store.

Retailers looking for support in adding an online store have many options to choose from.



SHUTTERSTOCK

eTailPet also offers integration with customer loyalty software Astro Loyalty, an analytics dashboard to help retailers strategize and social media post management through eTailSocial.

"Our hope is that we level the playing field for [retailers] versus the big-box versus online," Giannini said. "We flat out want them to be able to compete against Chewy on a local level."

The company recently introduced eTailPlus, a higher tier of services that manages in-store transactions and inventory, a smart order algorithm, appointment booking software for groomers and other service providers, a recipe builder for bakeries and more.

Giannini said eTailPet can build a retailer's website overnight and have its online store up and running in as little as three days, while Swenson said NextPaw takes about one to two weeks to build a retailer's website and about one to three weeks to get an online store ready to go live.

The two can also be used together. Flying M Pet Grocery in Houston uses NextPaw for its website and eTailPet for its online store.

"Prior to the pandemic, we were laser-focused on our in-store service," said owner Trace Menchaca. "We were a little rattled when we had to initially pivot, but we made it work. ... We used a combination of NextPaw and eTailPet, [and] we really did very little to get set up."

Retailers had rave reviews for NextPaw's customer service.

"We're not the most savvy tech-wise, but NextPaw was like working with a friend that works from home," said Cassie Rose, assistant manager of Cohutta Country Store in Blue Ridge, Ga. "We can send them a comment on our website, and within minutes to a couple hours, whatever our issue was is fixed."

Leslie Stewart, owner of Southern Barker, which has two stores in Kentucky, said she has seen increased traffic to both her online and brick-and-mortar stores since joining NextPaw, but she wishes her staff had more time to devote to the website.

"My goal for 2021 is to hire an employee to run the website," she said. "Your website could easily be a 9-to-5 job Monday through Friday."

BEYOND CURBSIDE PICKUP

Since the coronavirus pandemic began, curbside pickup has become an industry standard, but customers are also drawn to the convenience of the fast home delivery that Amazon and Chewy can provide. Offering shipping or delivery can put a strain on smaller retailers.

Cohutta Country Store ships smaller items here and there, but sticks mostly to pick-up orders.

"Trying to figure out shipping cost is what hinders our shipping ability," Rose said.

"SUPPORT" CONTINUED ON PAGE 10

"SUPPORT" CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6

Other retailers simply may not have the time or staff necessary to offer deliveries.

Fetching Dog in Scottsdale, Ariz., accepts online orders through NextPaw and delivers to its three closest zip codes. Co-owner Becci Scott said her husband does most of the deliveries himself and that they haven't had to hire any additional staff.

"It hasn't picked up to that volume," she said. "If it does, that's something we'll have to consider, and then all the [employee] insurance and everything comes into play as well."

However, there are ways to get purchases to customers' doorsteps without headaches.

NextPaw has integrations for UPS and FedEx, as well as a local delivery tool that allows retailers to draw an area on a map to designate where they want to offer delivery to.

Gianinni said most of eTailPet's retail partners make their own deliveries, but the platform also works with Postmates couriers who pick up orders from the stores and deliver them to customers.

Retailers looking for an even simpler approach can use third-party logistics shipping through Animal Supply Co. While the Irving, Texas-based company's core business is wholesale distribution, its Animal Supply Connect ship-to-home service has boomed since its soft launch in 2019, said senior director of digital commerce Matthew Roach.

Animal Supply Connect offers a catalog of more than 4,000 items and fulfills orders right from its 10 distribution centers. Orders go straight from the retailer's

website to Animal Supply Connect, so the retailer doesn't have to worry about ordering, item selection or packaging. Most packages can be delivered within two business days, offering customers the same speed they can get from Amazon or Chewy.

Animal Supply Connect integrates directly with both eTailPet and Shopify and doesn't charge retailers fees outside of the product cost and the shipping cost through FedEx. Retailers aren't locked into a subscription or contract—the service is simply "pay as you go."

"One of the things that we continue to work on is helping [retailers] dip their toe in the water and jump in [to e-commerce], because it is scary," Roach said. "It can be a new language, new jargon they're not used to. A lot of these independent retailers are mom-and-pop shops. ... It scares them to allocate the right amount of time to really grow this part of the business."

E-commerce isn't going anywhere, even after the coronavirus pandemic, said Ken Fish, Animal Supply Co.'s executive vice president of corporate development. Fish anticipates that pet product e-commerce will fall back to an annual projected growth rate in the mid-teen percentages, like the industry saw prior to 2020.

"While e-commerce will continue to grow and consumers enjoy those services, by no means are we thinking that it will diminish the need for the small independent pet stores throughout the communities," he said. "We really view [e-commerce] as a supplement as far as a broad relationship with the consumer versus a replacement." •

Pet Trends to Watch in 2021

PPN's editors reveal the trends they will be eyeing at Global Pet Expo Digital Access.

While the absence of in-person pet trade shows has put a damper on new product discovery in the past year, industry professionals have not been left high and dry. From the World Pet Association's WPA 365 virtual platform to the 2021 Pet Industry Leadership Summit, held by WPA, the Pet Industry Distributors Association (PIDA) and the American Pet Products Association (APPA), industry organizations have been committed to finding alternative ways to foster the business-building environments offered by live events.

Coming this month is APPA's Global Pet Expo Digital Access, a digital show floor and educational experience that will be taking the place of the live show normally held in Orlando, Fla. Running from March 24-26, it will feature exhibitor showrooms highlighting manufacturers' latest offerings and links to their catalogs. It also promises to feature products in some of the typical show floor sections including Natural Pet, Everything Aquatic and The Boutique. And just as the show does every year, it will include the New Product Showcase and allow attendees to cast their votes for the Best in Show winners in various categories.

While the editors of Pet Product News will miss the unique excitement of the live event—and discovering new products in person—we absolutely look forward to the digital version. With that in mind, these are some of the trends we'll be keeping an eye out for.

Alternative proteins in pet food:

We're not talking about kangaroo or alligator meat here—although those would indeed be alternatives to the norm. What we're finding interesting is the slow but steady rise of pet food and treats—mostly for dogs—that are made using non-meat ingredients, or, more specifically, plant- or insect-based ingredients.

It's not unusual for a pet owner to go on the hunt for new protein sources for their dog when their go-to choice becomes problematic, for example, as in the case of a newly developed food intolerance. But these days, customers in growing numbers are starting to question the sustainability of feeding our nation's pets with only animal proteins.

Pet foods comprising plant- or insect-based proteins rather than animal proteins are still a novelty; however, the options in this category are growing. Pioneers in this space include companies such as Wild Earth, a pet food company manufacturing plant-based diets; Jiminy's, which produces treats and foods made from crickets; and Pet Naturals, which recently expanded its product portfolio to include a plant-based option.

Again, this is a drop in the bucket now, but as younger generations of pet owners overtake the buying power of baby boomers and gen Xers in the marketplace, we're expecting that brands that are actively working toward greater sustainability and earth-friendly options will take off.

Stress relief for pets:

The past year has been a stressful one for humans, but it's been hard on our pets,

too. Market research firm Packaged Facts reported that there's been a "heightened demand for natural remedies offering relief from stress and anxiety," with cannabidiol (CBD) soaring in popularity. According to the Packaged Facts survey *Pet Supplements in the U.S., 8th Edition*, 21 percent of dog owners and 10 percent of cat owners purchased CBD supplements in 2020.

Manufacturers are still releasing CBD-free calming supplements, too, with L-theanine, passionflower, valerian root and melatonin all appearing in recently introduced formulations intended to relax pets.

We'll be interested to see if the call for anxiety-reducing solutions influences releases at this year's show and, aside from supplement introductions, if there will also be cuddly calmers—perhaps toys and pillows—and even gadgets designed to help pets keep calm and carry on.

Personality pleasers:

It's no secret that the COVID-19 pandemic has changed how people live, and pets are benefiting from the new perspective many pet owners gained in 2020. A majority of pet owners (90 percent) said that they have built a stronger bond with their pet through 2020, and 86 percent of pet owners feel closer with their pet(s) than ever before, according to the *Modern Pet Parent Report*, which was conducted by Kinship Partners, a division of Mars Petcare, in partnership with Ipsos.

Pet owners who feel closer to their furry companions will no doubt look for pet products that bring them comfort and joy, and those that reflect pet owners' personalities and lifestyles are sure to resonate. Think novelty dog toys that mimic happy hour-loving customers' favorite libation (care for a White Paw, anyone?), or collars and leashes sporting patterns that support a pet owner's personal interests or hobbies.

Pet product manufacturers, like ZippyPaws, which recently released a collection of toys designed to look like popular adult beverages, and SodaPup, which recently introduced a grenade-shaped treat dispenser, are continuously watching trends to innovate and create eye-catching products that spark pet owners' interests.

We'll be on the lookout for personality-pleasing and provocative products that make us think, "My pet needs this!" We anticipate that products like these will not only work to promote an even stronger bond with our pets during a time when many pet owners might need it most, but it will also create a loyal customer base for pet stores looking to differentiate their product assortments in an ever-expanding competitive market. •

Younger generations of pet owners are influencing product trends in the pet industry.



SHUTTERSTOCK

► NEWS

8 Pet Supply and Service Franchises Make Entrepreneur Magazine's Annual Franchise 500 Ranking



Camp Bow Wow moved up the list from No. 248 last year to No. 172 this year.

The franchise industry has definitely felt the effects from the COVID-19 pandemic, but not all is lost, according to officials from Entrepreneur Magazine, which recently released its 42nd Franchise 500 Ranking. Eight pet supply and service franchises made the coveted list, with Pet Supplies Plus at the top, ranking No. 21.

"Nobody expected 2020 to be a year of growth," Entrepreneur Magazine officials said. "With a pandemic raging, the future seemed too uncertain. Who could accelerate their business, let alone open a new one? What potential new franchisee would plunk down their up-front costs in this environment—and maybe even open a storefront?"

With the numbers now calculated, there are two ways to look at them, according to the magazine editors. Starting with the "bad news," as the writers put it, the rate of new unit openings shrank. Within the United States, just 7,141 new units were opened between 2019 and 2020, compared with 9,110 between 2018 and 2019. However, when you look at the "good news," growth did happen.

"It may have been slower than in years past, but units were added, sales grew, new franchisees chased their dreams and businesses met new and sometimes increased demand," the editors said. "Consider it: Overall, the companies that ranked in the Franchise 500 had a combined total of 510,051 units open as of July, with 472,200 (a little more than 92 percent) being franchise units. (The rest are company-owned.) Net growth for these 500 companies over the year was 14,354 units—a 2.9 percent increase."

The key factors that go into the evaluation, according to the magazine, include costs and fees, size and growth, support, brand strength, and financial strength and stability. Each franchise is given a cumulative score based on an analysis of more than 150 data points, and the 500 franchises with the highest cumulative scores become the Franchise 500 in ranking order.

Pet Supplies Plus, a pet food and supply store, ranked No. 21 in the Franchise 500, jumping 29 spots

Dogtopia took the No. 54 spot, up from last year's ranking of No. 71.

from No. 50 in last year's ranking. Jack Berry and Harry Shallop opened their first store in Redford, Mich., in the late 1980s, and by 1990, they were franchising. The stores also offer services such as grooming, self-serve pet washes and adoption events. At press time, Pet Supplies Plus had 504 units in 35 states and was seeking new franchise units throughout the United States.

"The growth of Pet Supplies Plus only supports the brand's reputation as a recession-resilient franchise opportunity," Pet Supplies Plus officials said in a statement. "In fact, the franchise is expected to open 100 new stores this year, which includes rebranding nearly 40 previously-operated Pet Valu stores across seven states. The real estate transaction alone increased the brand's paw print by 10 percent."

Dogtopia, a Phoenix-based dog day care, boarding and spa services brand, also climbed the ladder, clocking in at No. 54, up from last year's ranking of No. 71. The company was founded in 2002 and has been franchising since 2005. Each facility averages between 2,500 and 7,500 square feet and is designed to reduce odors, noise level, illness and accidents, according to officials. At press time, Dogtopia had 140 units and was seeking new franchise units worldwide.

Petland, which sells pets and pet-related merchandise to consumers throughout the United States, Canada, Japan, France, Chile and Israel, came in at No. 171. Last year, the Chillicothe, Ohio-based franchise ranked No. 118. Petland was founded in 1967 and has been franchising since 1971. At press time, Petland had 235 units and was seeking new franchise units worldwide.

Just following is **Camp Bow Wow**, which leapt from No. 248 last year to No. 172 this year. The Westminster, Colo.-based dog day care, boarding, training and grooming franchise opened its first location in 2000 and began franchising in 2003. At press time, Camp Bow Wow had 182 units and was seeking new franchise units throughout the United States and in the following regions: Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Mexico and Western Europe.

Wild Birds Unlimited came in at No. 186, down

Pet Supplies Plus came in at No. 21 on Entrepreneur Magazine's 42nd Franchise 500 Ranking list.

from No. 137 last year. The company was first opened in 1981 by Jim Carpenter, and by 1983, it was offering franchising opportunities. Wild Birds Unlimited, which has headquarters in Carmel, Ind., sells bird-feeding and bird-watching supplies, including birdhouses, feeders, food and binoculars. At press time, Wild Birds Unlimited had 347 units and was seeking new franchise units throughout the United States and in Canada.

Sit Means Sit Dog Training, which offers obedience and behavior training for dogs, ranked No. 266 on this year's list, up from No. 374 in the year-ago period. The Las Vegas-based company was founded in 2006 and began franchising in 2009. Sit Means Sit also offers boarding and sales of collars and other pet products. At press time, Sit Means Sit had 139 units and was seeking new franchise units throughout the United States and Canada.

Jumping up in ranks was **Aussie Pet Mobile**, from No. 455 last year to No. 303 this year. The mobile pet grooming company was founded in Australia in 1996 but then moved its global headquarters to the United States—Aliso Viejo, Calif.—in 1999. At press time, the franchise had 308 units throughout North America as well as Australia, Canada, Ireland, Greece and Cyprus. The franchisor is seeking new franchise units throughout the United States.

Pet Wants, a natural pet food franchise based in Cincinnati, dropped to No. 490. Last year, the company ranked No. 376. Pet Wants offers two franchise models: a mobile model and a retail store model, both offering delivery services. At press time, the franchise had 106 units and was seeking new franchise units worldwide.

"2020 was a challenging year for everyone, but it was also a year of unusual opportunity," said Jason Feifer, Entrepreneur's editor-in-chief. "Franchises were able to be nimble and innovative, serving the needs of franchisees and customers in ways that will resonate for many years to come. We believe that, when we eventually look back on this time, we'll see it as a moment when many brands defined themselves for the future." •

► EVENT RECAP

Digital Pet Industry Leadership Summit Sparks Success

Registration was better than expected, according to event organizers.

BY MARISSA HEFLIN

The Pet Industry Leadership Summit was the latest trade event to transition from an in-person to a digital format due to safety concerns spurring from the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the shift, the live virtual event, which was held Jan. 25-26, proved to deliver what it set out to accomplish: an opportunity for leaders and experts in the pet care community to come together to discuss everything from the state of the economy to industry trends.

"All the co-hosts agree that the event was a huge success," said Celeste Powers, president of the Pet Industry Distributors Association (PIDA), which hosted the event along with the Pet Industry Joint Advisory Council (PIJAC), the World Pet Association (WPA) and the American Pet Products Association (APPA). "Registration was better than expected, speakers all provided beneficial insights for attendees and the sessions all ran smoothly. The advantages to being digital are many companies could register employees that would not have attended the in-person summit; plus, the travel cost savings for attendees (although many people would have much rather paid the travel costs and be together in person again!)."

Overall, there were 220 attendees, broken down evenly in thirds between manufacturers, distributors and industry guests (retailers, staff, press and others), according to Powers.

"This was on par with 2019, and 10 percent less than 2020," Powers said. "Distributors took advantage of the digital platform, with more than 80 percent of the companies registering at least three attendees, and of them, two companies registered eight attendees, one registered nine and another firm had 13 attendees."

Mike Bober, president and CEO of PIJAC, also noted the advantages of the online version of the event.

"Like many organizations that participated, we were able to take advantage of the digital format to have more of our team participate than ever before," Bober said. "We could hear from great speakers like Brian Beaulieu [from ITR Economics] and Patrick McGinnis [venture capitalist and writer] without taking too much time away from our primary role as the pet care community's legislative and regulatory watchdog."

"Although I missed the opportunities for face-to-face conversations and the innovative ideas that often come from them at an in-person event, the digital event was a great way to deliver the value of The Summit and hopefully to introduce it to future attendees, as well," Bober added.

SESSIONS THAT SPARKED INTEREST

The Summit's success stems largely from the provided content, according to Steve King, president and CEO of APPA.

"This year's summit was successful because the

content was compelling, timely and relevant," King said. "At a time of tremendous disruption in our industry and society at large, being able to step out of our daily routine, listen to the insights of experts and thought leaders, and analyze the impact on our businesses and personal lives has great value."

While all of the sessions were well attended, Brian Beaulieu's welcome and keynote address, "Moving Forward and Out of 2020," was the biggest hit, with more than 200 attendees watching it live, according to Powers. Beaulieu, who is CEO and chief economist of ITR Economics, has spoken before at The Summit.

"Brian was selected to be the cornerstone of the event because more than ever, Brian's insights on the economy and the pet industry in 2021 and beyond was important," Powers said. "The co-hosts were pleased that all sessions were viewed at their scheduled times by more than 100 people. According to data in the event industry, this is very successful."

A whole session was dedicated to the recently formed IndiePet organization. Short for Independent & Neighborhood Pet Retail Association, IndiePet's mission is to empower independent and neighborhood pet retailers to work together as peers for the well-being of North American pets and pet owners as they maintain a strong, sustainable and growing place at the heart of the pet industry.

"The pet industry is a unified one, and the four co-host associations of The Summit agreed it would be great to give the new IndiePet association the opportunity to use this event to continue to educate the industry on its purpose and goals," Powers said. "Speaking on behalf of PIDA, the independent retailers are very critical to distributors, so PIDA supports this new group that helps strengthen that important segment of the industry."

IndiePet has WPA's support, too.

"WPA has always been a champion for the independent pet retailer," said Vic Mason, president of WPA. "We are excited to support the efforts of IndiePet and encourage them as the voice for independent retailers and hope they build stronger partnerships between pet retailers, manufacturers and distributors."

And IndiePet's efforts are already paying off, according to Bober.

"IndiePet signed on to our open letter about the essential nature of pet care businesses as lawmakers implemented closure and quarantine orders last year and helped to recruit their member retailers to do so, as well," Bober said. "Their participation—and that of the hundreds of other pet care professionals nationwide who signed the letter—really helped us to deliver the message to lawmakers and to ensure that pet businesses were protected."

King added, "Independent pet stores have been the lifeblood of the pet care community throughout the modern history of our industry. Their contribution to new product adoption and their connection with pet owners in their communities is unmatched."



Brian Beaulieu, CEO and chief economist with ITR Economics, was just as popular at this year's virtual Pet Industry Leadership Summit as he was last year at The Summit 2020 (pictured) in San Diego.

At a time when competition from e-commerce, big-box and mass-market outlets is more challenging than ever, the IndiePet organization has the potential to help independents meet the competition head-on and maintain their essential role in serving the needs of pet owners."

WHAT LIES AHEAD

In-person events may still be preferred, but the push into digital formats has opened the door to new possibilities, according to the show organizers.

"While I think we're all eager to get back to in-person events where we can better connect with our fellow pet care professionals, the digital events our community has put on this [past] year like The Summit, Pet Week on Capitol Hill and the annual DC Fly-In have had the positive effect of welcoming new participants from across the country," Bober said. "That's a definite positive, and I think you'll see organizers of these events looking for ways to engage these wider audiences in the future through hybrid scenarios and additional digital programming."

King agreed.

"This year's digital Summit served an important purpose during a challenging time," King said. "It was a bridge to next year's live event, when we will once again have the chance to gather as a community. I envision that we will incorporate some of the best digital elements into the live event to make it even more valuable and accessible."

The next Pet Industry Leadership Summit is scheduled for Jan. 24-26, 2022, in Phoenix. •

"SUMMIT" CONTINUED ON PAGE 14

"SUMMIT" CONTINUED FROM PAGE 12

BEHIND THE SCENES:

HOW AN IN-PERSON EVENT GOES VIRTUAL

Citing the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, Pet Industry Leadership Summit organizers in early December decided to make its Summit 2021 digital. Interested in knowing what goes on behind the scenes when trade show plans swiftly change, Pet Product News (PPN) reached out to Celeste Powers, president of the Pet Industry Distributors Association (PIDA), which hosted the event along with the Pet Industry Joint Advisory Council (PIJAC), the World Pet Association (WPA) and the American Pet Products Association (APPA). So, what goes into

converting a normally in-person event to an online one? A lot of work, according to Powers.

"Prior to the decision being made, a great deal of research was conducted by Marci Hickey, PIDA's director of meetings and membership, to select the right platform for the event, as well as to select a digital producer," Powers said. "Both of which turned out to be perfect for the event."

Officials from the organizing groups also decided that it would be impossible to beneficially incorporate the networking events and one-on-one distributor meetings into a digital event, Powers said. Therefore, the focus was placed on what programming would be most important to the attendees, she added.

"It was also agreed to limit the event to two 2.5-hour days over the actual Summit dates," Powers said. "The timing was limited because with attendees still in their offices (home or actual one), everyone understood they have competing priorities."

As to specific sessions, only the keynote had been selected for the in-person event, according to Powers.

"The first speaker confirmed was Brian Beaulieu of ITR Economics," Powers said. "To be honest, [it] was a 'no-brainer' that he was needed for 2021. Brian is always a top-rated speaker at past Summits. With the challenging economy in 2020 and the future still unknown, the planning committee knew having Brian's highly accurate insights into key economic indicators to help business prepare for the future was critical."

Patrick McGinnis, a venture capitalist and writer, was selected to speak at The Summit because of the term he coined, FOMO (fear of missing out), according to Powers.

"[FOMO] is how so many of us have been feeling personally during [the pandemic]," Powers said. "It was our hope that this session would give attendees some personal tips for managing through challenging times."

Two of the industry sessions—"Pets, Presidents and Policy" and "Pet Ownership During the Pandemic"—were also added because they offered timely insights needed for many companies across all segments in the pet industry, according to Powers.



► INDUSTRY NEWS



PURINA NAMES PET CARE INNOVATION PRIZE WINNERS

Five pet care startups from across the United States have been selected as the 2021 winners of the 5th annual Pet Care Innovation Prize powered by Purina. The winners were among more than 100 companies from 43 cities globally that applied for the prize. Each of the winners will receive \$10,000 and mentorship from the Pet Care Innovation team, and will participate in a virtual accelerator boot camp featuring pet experts from across Purina and the industry that is tailored to meet their business needs.

"Purina is committed to supporting early-stage pet care startups," said Blair Morgan, co-lead of Purina's 9 Square Ventures group, and vice president, strategy and innovation for St. Louis-based Purina. "Our culture thrives on collaboration and mentorship, and by extending that outside of our walls to startups who share our passion for enriching the lives of pets, we are able to both help and be inspired by a new generation of entrepreneurs."

Independent Pet Retailers Unite to Form New Trade Organization

IndiePet, which recently became a formal entity, is now actively enrolling members.

BY MARISSA HEFLIN

Independent pet retailers seeking support and education have a new resource to turn to: IndiePet, short for Independent & Neighborhood Pet Retail Association. The nonprofit trade organization, which recently became a formal entity, is now actively enrolling members.

IndiePet may have started as a small informal group of independent pet retailers, but it has since expanded to 50 retailers representing more than 2,000 stores. With its



newly launched online membership enrollment portal—open to pet retailers, manufacturers, distributors and industry organizations—that number is expected to climb.

The portal's launch follows a significant milestone for IndiePet: formal recognition.

"In November 2020, we officially incorporated, and have started our work to build professional partnerships, fundraise and enroll members," said Al Puntillo, chief merchandising officer at Mud Bay, a pet specialty chain based in Olympia, Wash., and president of IndiePet's board of directors.

The idea of IndiePet, according to the association's mission statement, is to empower independent and neighborhood pet retailers to work together as peers for the well-being of North American pets and pet owners as they maintain a strong, sustainable and growing place at the heart of the pet industry.

"We are a nonprofit trade organization run by independent and neighborhood retailers for independent and neighborhood retailers," Puntillo said. "We believe that independent retail is the heart of the pet industry. Independent retail is where education, innovation and true customer relationships are built. The more we can work together to enhance those core values, the more successful we will all be."

The journey began back in 2015 at Global Pet Expo when a few independent retailers had an informal meeting to share industry information, Puntillo said. After that, they began meeting once a year at SuperZoo. Interest grew, and the meetings became larger.

"It was at SuperZoo in 2019 that this informal group made the decision to form a steering committee to explore how best to start a trade organization that could help us strengthen the independent channel and speak with one voice," Puntillo said. "The steering committee comprised of seven retailers, All the Best Pet Care, Healthy Spot, Mud Bay, Pet Food Express, Tomlinson's Feed, Pet People and IPP [Independent Pet Partners]. [We] began meeting monthly, researching and interviewing other trade organizations to develop the base structure of [IndiePet]."

As to moving forward, job No. 1 is to establish two-way communication between members and partners, Puntillo said.

"After a year like 2020, all retailers are taking stock of where they are at, and adjusting what they are doing to provide solutions to customers," Puntillo said. "IndiePet's communication and content will focus on giving retailers information and support in making important decisions about their business. We have already gotten some great suggestions from retailers on how we can best support them and are working on launching consistent content by April."

Specific topics IndiePet hopes to address include:

- Digital market support. "We need to give independent retailers great low-cost or free options for increasing their digital presence online," Puntillo said.
- Standards. "[We need] standards that differentiate independent retailers from all the other business out there trying to sell pet products: education, experience, nutrition, formulation, sustainability," Puntillo said.
- Accurate and timely data and information.

"Independent retailers need better and more consistent information to inform their day-to-day decisions," Puntillo said. "There is a lot of information out there, but none of it is specifically tailored to the needs of independent retailers." Questions to consider, according to Puntillo: "What categories and brands are growing? What are consumers looking for? Which brands are doing a good job of supporting the independent channel, and which are not? What is working for other independent and neighborhood retailers?" •

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INDUSTRY NEWS CONTINUED FROM PAGE 14

The winners are:

- **ClueJay** in Denver, an online diagnostic platform that allows pet owners to access lab tests on demand from home. ClueJay lets dog and cat owners collect and mail stool samples for parasite screening without the “hassle and stress” of vet visits.
- **Kitty Sift** in Eden Prairie, Minn., which offers a convenient, healthful and sustainable alternative to the plastic litterbox, according to officials. Made from 100 percent post-consumer recycled cardboard, Kitty Sift’s disposable sifting litterboxes and liners enable pet owners to ditch plastic alternatives for a more sanitary, eco-friendly solution that protects their kitty and the planet.
- **A Pup Above** in Austin, Texas, which makes fresh dog food that’s cooked sous-vide, a unique cooking method that makes meat extra tender and moist while also preserving nutrients, according to officials. Made with 100 percent human-grade ingredients that are fully traceable back to the source, A Pup Above delivers, on average, 72 percent more protein than other leading gently cooked dog foods, officials further noted.
- **Mella Pet Care** in Chicago, which builds accessible technology and diagnostic products for veterinarians and pet owners to better understand and track pet health to help their pets live longer, healthier lives, according to officials. Co-created with veterinarians, Mella Pet Care is launching the first smart axillary thermometer, which measures temperature under the foreleg rather than rectally.
- **VetGuardian** in Gainesville, Fla., which offers a zero-touch remote telemonitor for veterinarians. The device continuously gathers a patient’s vitals such as pulse, tem-

perature and respiration rate from up to five feet away without the need for wires or physical contact—eliminating unnecessary stress to animals, officials said.

At press time, a virtual pitch competition was planned for March during which the five winners will get the chance to present their business to an audience of industry influencers and investors, and a grand prize winner will be chosen to receive an additional \$10,000 in cash and an opportunity to partner with Purina on a project.

The Pet Care Innovation Prize is a collaborative effort of Purina’s 9 Square Ventures group and investing leaders Active Capital to support and connect with early-stage pet care startups that are currently in market with an innovative business addressing pet and pet owner needs in the areas of pet health and wellness, services, technology, and food, treats or litter.

THANK YOU Troy Firth



Your leadership and efforts to nurture a stronger, more collaborative pet industry are highly valued in our community. WPA thanks you for your dedication while serving on our Board of Directors.

PET OWNERSHIP REMAINS RESILIENT IN FACE OF PANDEMIC, APPA SAYS

Even as the COVID-19 pandemic continues on, pet ownership remains resilient, according to the American Pet Products Association (APPA)’s fourth volume of the *APPA COVID-19 Pulse Study of Pet Ownership During the Pandemic*. The first three volumes reflect research conducted in May, June and September 2020, respectively. Volume four reveals research conducted in December.

“As we continue to navigate life during a pandemic, pet owners recognize the emotional benefits of pet

ownership such as helping to mitigate stress and providing joy, comfort and companionship during these challenging times," said Steve King, president and CEO of APPA.

Consistent with results from the September study, 82 percent of those surveyed said their pet ownership has not changed or been affected due to COVID-19. That percentage increases to 92 percent among baby boomers.

Sixty-four percent of pet owners said their pet spending has remained the same during the past month, with pet owners continuing to purchase pet food and sup-

plies regularly. More than half of pet owners consider themselves very brand loyal when it comes to pet supplies, and less than 20 percent plan to switch brands of pet food / supplies in order to save money, according to the study.

Volume four did show an increase in the percentage of respondents who are concerned about their finances (61 percent, up from 55 percent in September), as well as those who said the pandemic has significantly impacted their household financially, officials said. However, at this point, that does not appear to translate to any notable changes in pet product purchasing behavior, officials added.

WEST PAW SETS UP RECYCLING COLLECTION BINS IN U.S. RETAIL STORES

West Paw, a dog toy manufacturer in Bozeman, Mont., is now offering free in-store recycling collection bins to its retail partners.

"[West Paw] will proactively aim to increase the amount of dog-tired Zogoflex toys returned to the company for recycling via branded recycling bins," officials said in a statement. "Once full, retailers simply adhere the pre-paid shipping label and send back to West Paw for inspection, cleaning, sanitizing and recycling. By offering customers an easy and free way (no postage!) to recycle their dog-tired toys, the company aims to increase the amount of recycled plastic content in their Zogoflex toys while reducing the amount headed to the landfill."

West Paw will also be supporting retailers by offering window stickers calling out the program as well as social media posts to help them share the news with the followers in their communities, officials added.

The recycling collection bins are an extension of the company's Join the Loop program, which was introduced in 2004 as a way for "loyal and eco-conscious retailers and consumers to send back their well-loved and worn out Zogoflex toys."

"As the durable, nontoxic material used to make Zogoflex is a No. 7 plastic, they cannot easily be recycled in most parts of the country," officials said. "Join the Loop was West Paw's way of collecting, cleaning and recycling damaged toys. Additionally, West Paw assesses the damage of all returned toys to learn how they can continually improve the toy's durability."

As of December 2020, officials said that the company had recycled more than 266,589 pounds of toys. That's equivalent to more than 700,000 toys.

"West Paw is confident [that] by offering customers a free and easy drop-off location at their favorite pet product store, retailers will notice an increase in consumer traffic, and Zogoflex returns for recycling will as well," said Spencer Williams, owner and CEO of West Paw. "This is a win-win for participating retail partners as well as the planet."



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HEALTHY SPOT LAUNCHES LOYALTY PROGRAM

Healthy Spot, a Los Angeles-based pet retailer, has launched a loyalty program called Mind Body Bowl Benefits. The program is free to join, and members earn points on purchases made in stores or online at healthyspot.com that can be redeemed for a variety of rewards, including dollar rewards, dog grooming services, days of small dog day care and treats, to name a few.

"At Healthy Spot, we believe it's all about the experience, and Mind Body Bowl Benefits takes the customer experience to a whole new level," said Andrew Kim, co-founder of Healthy Spot. "[Co-founder] Mark and I are proud to offer this program to our community as a way to share our appreciation for their continued support for our mission of inspiring healthy pet lifestyles."

8 PET CARE STARTUPS JOIN LEAP VENTURE STUDIO'S NEWEST COHORT

Leap Venture Studio has selected eight pet care startups for its latest cohort. The startups were chosen for their unique products and services, and represent various segments within the pet industry, such as vegan pet food and treats, artificial intelligence technology and pet-friendly travel, according to officials.

The startups joining Leap Venture Studio's fourth cohort are:

- **Oliver Pets** in Mexico City and Buenos Aires, Argentina, an all-in-one service platform that makes "pet parenting simpler and more fun," according to officials.
- **Pebble Naturals** in Moss Beach, Calif., which helps shelters save money on medications by connecting them directly to manufacturers, according to officials.
- **Petaluma** in Oakland, Calif., a public benefit corporation that formulates sustainable dog nutrition with environmentally friendly and animal-free ingredients.
- **petNmind Naturals** in Coconut Creek, Fla., which aims to enhance the bond between pets and their humans by focusing on quality products, insightful education, simple pet-washing services and local product delivery, which creates peace of mind for pet owners and a healthy lifestyle for pets, according to officials.

• **The Bark Shoppe** in New York City, a premier pet care company specializing in pet grooming. It aims to standardize and certify pet groomers with its flagship grooming school and online training platform.

• **The Pack** in London, which is on a mission to cook up plant-based meals for every dog bowl in the world, officials said. A kind that's better for dogs, and the planet, too, officials added.

• **Toletta Cats** in Fujisawa, Japan, described as a "smart" cat litterbox capable of detecting early symptoms of common feline diseases, without the stress of a veterinarian visit.

• **Woof Together** in Athens, Greece, a startup that assesses, certifies and trains pet-friendly hospitality businesses.

Leap Venture Studio is the first pet care-specific startup accelerator and represents Kinship, a division of Mars Petcare, and Michelson Found Animals' commitment to improving the lives of pets and their owners, according to officials.

"This year's program takes place virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic," officials said. "In a positive and ironic twist, the pandemic caused the implementation of travel restrictions, thereby allowing Leap to attract an even more diverse and international set of startup founders."

The startups will grow their companies with the support of R/GA Ventures, according to officials. Each company will work with a curated team of R/GA strategists, technologists, designers and consultants, and receive mentorship from executives at Kinship and Michelson Found Animals. The goal

of the program is for each company to enhance its business plans, prepare for fundraising milestones and establish minimum viable brands, officials said. Additionally, each company received an investment of up to \$200,000 for being accepted into Leap Venture Studio, officials further noted.

Leap Venture Studio will culminate in an online pitch event where the companies will present to investors, industry leaders and the startup community in May.



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K9 BALLISTICS RECEIVES B CORP CERTIFICATION

K9 Ballistics has become the first and only certified B Corp in the niche of durable, longer-lasting dog beds, officials said in a statement in early January. Certification, which is administered by the nonprofit B Labs, means that businesses meet the highest standards of verified social and environmental performance, public transparency and legal accountability to balance profit and purpose.

"Like us, our customers care about the social and environmental impact of our products life cycles," officials said. "With thousands of companies manufacturing products, it's not always easy for customers to determine a good company from a bad one. At its very core, that is the essence of what B Corp certification provides. It gives us a way to validate the environmental and social value we bring to our community. For us, it is the perfect way to formalize our dedication to thinking beyond profits and measuring what matters, social responsibility."

Some of K9 Ballistics' efforts, as cited by officials, include donating 100 percent of lightly used returns to shelters in need of beds; working continually to incorporate sustainability; encouraging employees to give back to local nonprofits in need of volunteers through paid days for their community service; and helping employees develop and grow through better pay, wellness programs and continued education.



B Corp certification means that businesses meet the highest standards of verified social and environmental performance, public transparency and legal accountability to balance profit and purpose.

To retain permission to display the seal on its products, Canopy Animal Health must pass an independent facility audit every two years, and demonstrate continued compliance to strict standards and regulations, according to officials, including:

CANOPY ANIMAL HEALTH PET CBD PRODUCTS RECEIVE NASC QUALITY SEAL

Canopy Animal Health, a wholly owned subsidiary of Canopy Growth, has been awarded the National Animal Supplement Council (NASC) Quality Seal for its cannabidiol (CBD) products for dogs.

To earn the NASC approval, companies must pass "rigorous" standards in proving the quality and safety of their products, according to the organization.

"Canopy Animal Health has conducted a great deal of critical research over the last four years in the development of science-based CBD products that improve the lives of pets," said Robert Menardi, DVM, director of veterinary educational and technical services at Canopy Animal Health, which is based in Duluth, Ga. "The NASC Quality Seal affirms our dedication to providing safe and high-quality CBD products for companion animals."

To retain permission to display the seal on its products, Canopy Animal Health must pass an independent facility audit every two years, and demonstrate continued compliance to strict standards and regulations, according to officials, including:

- Stringent labeling guidelines, such as specific warnings and caution statements for particular ingredients recommended by the U.S. Food & Drug Administration (FDA)'s Center for Veterinary Medicine
- Random product testing by an independent lab to ensure ingredients meet label claims
- Documented quality control and production procedures ensuring a consistent and quality product
- Ingredients reviewed by the NASC Scientific Advisory Committee
- Real-time product monitoring and mandatory adverse event reporting

PET RELEAF EARNS ANOTHER INDUSTRY QUALITY SEAL

Pet Releaf, a cannabidiol (CBD) pet product company, has earned the quality seal from the National Animal Supplement Council (NASC). Pet Releaf, according to company officials, is the first and only pet brand to receive program certifications from the three "most trusted organizations" in their respective industries: NASC, the U.S. Hemp Authority and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Organic.

The Littleton, Colo.-based company controls its entire manufacturing process from seed to sale, from plant to pet, officials said.

"Pet Releaf is involved in every step when it comes to the organic farming process to the CO2 extraction and production facilities," officials added. "Its hemp is sourced from USDA certified organic hemp farms in the United States."

Pet Releaf also undergoes third-party laboratory testing monthly to ensure product quality and potency, officials noted. As part of its transparency efforts, Pet Releaf shares all of its product testings and certifications.

"As we've pursued our mission to change what healthy means for pets, we're proud of the recognition, awards and certifications our products have earned throughout the industry," said Stephen Smith, co-founder and president at Pet Releaf. "These credentials further validate the Pet Releaf difference and enable consumers to make safe and empowered purchasing decisions for their beloved pets."

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Erica Skene owns the new Woof Gang Bakery & Grooming Tanglewood, which is located in the greater Houston area.



WOOF GANG BAKERY & GROOMING

WOOF GANG BAKERY & GROOMING OPENS HOUSTON LOCATION

Woof Gang Bakery & Grooming has added its tenth store in the greater Houston area.

Woof Gang Bakery & Grooming Tanglewood is a locally owned franchise offering professional pet grooming and a wide selection of healthful pet foods, gourmet baked treats, toys, accessories and pet supplies.

"I'm an animal lover, and I've always dreamed of owning and managing my own shop, so opening the doors to my Woof Gang Bakery & Grooming is a perfect fit," said Erica Skene, the new franchise owner. "It's my goal to treat each one of my clients and their pets as family. And as we can all agree, pets are members of our family. My customers are my neighbors. I'm excited to get to know them and learn their pets' likes and needs so that I may provide the best service possible."

► TRADE SHOW NEWS

INTERZOO AND ZOOMARK MODIFY TRADE SHOW EVENT CALENDAR

Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, WZF, organizer of Interzoo, and BolognaFiere, organizer of Zoomark International, have decided to modify their event calendar for 2021 and 2022. The changes are the best ways to support the pet industry during the pandemic, officials said in a joint statement.

Interzoo, which was scheduled to take place June 1-4, 2021, in Nuremberg, Germany, will now take place as a purely online event, according to officials. They expect Interzoo to return as an in-person event May 24-27, 2022.

Zoomark International officials are planning their event for Nov. 10-12, 2021, in Bologna, Italy. It had previously been rescheduled for 2022.

The new trade show schedule re-establishes the original calendar, which marks Zoomark International in the odd years and Interzoo in the even years. In May, the show organizers had postponed their respective biennial events by one year.

"Trade shows are key marketing and communication tools for the global pet industry," the trade show organizers said. "Many companies were hoping to showcase their products and services at the forthcoming international pet industry trade shows with the aim of boosting their business as the ability to talk to customers face to face is especially important in times of crisis. However, due to the persistent travel restrictions and conditions that remain unsafe for hosting international trade fairs, [WZF and BolognaFiere] have jointly decided to reschedule the fairs in order to optimize business opportunities."

INTERGROOM POSTPONED UNTIL OCTOBER

In response to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, officials from Barkleigh Productions have decided to postpone Intergroom, which will be held at the Meadowlands Expo Center in Secaucus, N.J., to Oct. 21-24. Officials from the expo center and the New Jersey Governor's office were also part of the decision-making process.

Booth reservations, sponsorships, contest entries and educational packages will be honored on the new dates and remain unchanged, according to Barkleigh officials.

"Barkleigh is committed to continuing to provide education virtually for pet professionals," officials said in a statement. "While our in-person educational events are postponed, World Groom VI: Presented by Intergroom will be held live during the original Intergroom 2021 dates, April 15-18, via Zoom. This online webinar series will feature over 40 hours of education for groomers. In addition, show specials from all Intergroom vendors are available to registered attendees via a virtual trade show. After the live presentations have concluded, all content will be available for replay until May 16, 2021."



MATRIX PARTNERS ADDS VIRTUAL SHOW BOOTHS TO PORTFOLIO OF SERVICES

Matrix Partners, a Chicago-based pet product branding firm, is now developing virtual trade show booths for its clients. The announcement came in January, but the company already has various projects under its belt, such as developing booths for clients for industry shows like SuperZoo and the PIJAC (Pet Industry Joint Advisory Council) National Pet Industry Show as well as the virtual pet community WPA365.

"These interactive booths help clients deliver exceptional brand messaging to maintain both their competitive edge and sales growth during these challenging times," officials said in a statement.

The Matrix team has also produced a number of embedded promotional videos and has designed several virtual New Product Showcase displays, according to officials.

"Having successfully tackled these projects, our talented designers understand the challenges of virtual booth development," said Don Tomala, managing partner at Matrix Partners. "So, we're exceptionally well prepared to efficiently proceed with our next web-enabled assignment. Given the recent announcement that Global will be virtual this year, many of our clients are interested in making sure they are well represented at this very important international show."

In addition, Matrix Partners recently added virtual focus groups to its portfolio of services.

"Helping meet the marketing needs of our clients is priority No. 1 at Matrix Partners, and these new services will definitely generate more sales and profits for our partners," Tomala said.

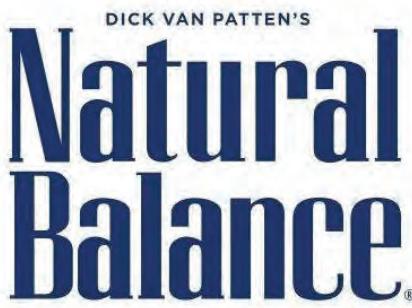


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► ACQUISITION NEWS



J.M. SMUCKER COMPLETES SALE OF NATURAL BALANCE

J.M. Smucker Co. has closed the transaction to sell its Natural Balance premium pet food business to Nexus Capital Management LP, a Los Angeles-based private equity firm, for \$50 million. J.M. Smucker had previously announced the signing of a definitive agreement to divest its Natural Balance business in early December. The transaction includes pet food products sold under the Natural Balance brand, certain trademarks and licensing agreements, and a group of employees who support the Natural Balance business.

"The closing of this transaction supports our priority to focus on the core brands within our pet food and pet snacks portfolio, including Rachael Ray Nutrish, Milk-Bone and Meow Mix, among others, which create a unique portfolio with significant long-term growth potential that meets consumer needs across value, mainstream and premium offerings," said Mark Smucker, president and CEO of J.M. Smucker Co., which is based in Orrville, Ohio.

The Natural Balance business generated net sales of about \$220 million for J.M. Smucker's fiscal year ended April 30, 2020, according to officials.

PET SUPPLIES PLUS ACQUIRED FOR \$700 MILLION

New York-based Sentinel Capital Partners is selling Pet Supplies Plus (PSP) to the Franchise Group in an all-cash transaction valued at about \$700 million. Officials reported the definitive agreement on Jan. 25. At press time, the transaction was expected to close in March.

Pet Supplies Plus has experienced significant growth over the years, officials said, and now includes 537 stores covering 36 states, up from 448 stores serving 33 states at the time of Sentinel's acquisition in late 2018.

Pet Supplies Plus was recently recognized on Entrepreneur's 2021 Franchise 500 List. The company came in No. 21—topping all other pet franchises—jumping 29 spots from No. 50 in last year's ranking. The Franchise 500 ranking was calculated with a proprietary formula built to evaluate franchises using five key factors: growth and size, brand strength, costs and fees, franchise support, and financial strength and stability.

"It was a pleasure to partner with Sentinel as we significantly grew the franchisee base through geographic in-fill and expansion into white space," said Chris Rowland, CEO of Pet Supplies Plus. "Sentinel's deep experience investing in franchise-related businesses was a great asset to us throughout this entire period."



Franchise Group is an operator of franchised and franchisable businesses that continually looks to grow its portfolio of brands while utilizing its operating and capital allocation philosophy to generate strong cash flow for its shareholders. The group's business lines include Liberty Tax Service, Buddy's Home Furnishings, American Freight and The Vitamin Shoppe.

For fiscal year 2020, Pet Supplies Plus officials are estimating total systemwide revenue of about \$1.2 billion, company revenue of more than \$825 million and Adjusted EBITDA (earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation and amortization) of nearly \$80 million.

BRIGHTPET NUTRITION GROUP ACQUIRES MIRACLECORP

BrightPet Nutrition Group, a provider of premium and super-premium pet food and treats, has expanded its portfolio by acquiring MiracleCorp. The combined company will include BrightPet's Blackwood, Adirondack and By Nature brands, as well as MiracleCorp's freeze-dried products and other pet treats sold under the Stewart brand.

"Over the past 40 years, MiracleCorp has built a complete line of innovative, solutions-driven products and accessories for pets and prized animals—including our storied Stewart brand of high-quality, nutritious and flavorful treats," said William Sherk, Jr., CEO of MiracleCorp. "The

complementary nature of both companies' offerings will create significant synergies, especially in the freeze-dried segment of pet food, toppers and treats."

The acquisition will also enable BrightPet to add additional manufacturing capabilities in Dayton, Ohio, to its existing operations in Lisbon, Ohio; Sherburne, N.Y.; and Kiel, Wis.

"BrightPet has long admired MiracleCorp's business, and this acquisition is a recognition of its proven track record of success and commitment to excellence," said Matthew Golladay, CEO of BrightPet Nutrition Group. "Over the past few years, we have been working hard to evolve the business that my family founded in 1978. Following our recent purchase of pet treat manufacturer Phoebe Pet Products in Kiel, Wis., BrightPet has seen tremendous growth—and we are excited to continue building on our momentum with the MiracleCorp team. Importantly, we believe that the addition of MiracleCorp will create a leader in kibble and freeze-dried pet food and treats, allowing us to [provide] our customers with a robust product offering of kibble, kibble with inclusions, freeze-dried treats, baked treats and toppers as well as other pet wellness products."

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The acquisition also expands BrightPet's footprint in the pet industry with the addition of MiracleCorp's other brands, including Miracle Care, Hamilton, ARC Veterinary Products and Group Summit flooring products.

UNITED RAW PET FOODS ACQUIRES GROWLIES

United Raw Pet Foods, a majority-owned subsidiary of Dane Creek Capital Corp. in Mississauga, Ontario, Canada, has acquired Growlies Pet Foods in an all-cash transaction. Growlies, founded by Jo-Anne and Neal Cropper in 2007, is a pet specialty retailer based in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada.

Under the terms of the acquisition, United Raw will also enter into lease agreements with N.J. Cropper Holdings Ltd., a company owned by the Coppers, for ongoing use of not only the Growlies retail location, but also a warehouse/freezer located not far from the store. No other terms were disclosed.

The transaction represents the first acquisition of a pet specialty retailer by United Raw. To date, United Raw has acquired five Canadian manufacturers of frozen raw pet food including Naturawls



Pet Products, Spring Meadows Natural Pet Food, Mountain Dog Enterprises, Pets4Life and Tollden Farms, which, in aggregate, produce 10 brands of frozen raw pet food, officials said in a statement. United Raw also maintains a minority interest in Pet Plate, a U.S.-based company offering lightly cooked pet food. Dane Creek also owns several pet supplements and pet treat manufacturers in Canada.

DISTRIBUTION NEWS

PET PALETTE INKS DISTRIBUTION PARTNERSHIP WITH THE NEW ZEALAND NATURAL PET FOOD CO.

Through an exclusive U.S. distribution deal, Sykesville, Md.-based Pet Palette is now carrying The New Zealand Natural Pet Food Co.'s raw freeze-dried Meow and Woof food and treats and manuka honey.

All recipes are made in New Zealand using ethically sourced ingredients grown and raised by fair trade farms, officials said in a statement. The recipes are produced in small batches, combining both the nutrition and the taste of fresh, raw food, officials added. A gentle freeze-drying process is used, which protects the natural enzymes; nothing is cooked out, officials further noted.



Business partners Amber Cordero and Jacqueline Taylor said that they started The New Zealand Natural Pet Food Co. in 2016 out of a desire to give pet owners a convenient, natural and complete raw diet to feed their pets.

CHOICE PET PRODUCTS ADDS BENEBOONE TO ITS DISTRIBUTION PORTFOLIO

Choice Pet Products has added Benebone, a manufacturer of chew toys for dogs, to its distribution portfolio.

"We're thrilled to be adding the Benebone brand to the Choice Pet Products lineup," said Doug Horiski, vice president of sales and operations at Choice Pet Products, which is based in Palmetto, Fla. "Many of our retailers are familiar with the Benebone brand, and we believe they will be happy to now have the option to purchase Benebone products from their local distributor."

Benebones are created in the USA, contain no chemicals or artificial flavors, and are made with

USA-sourced super-strong nylon infused with real bacon, white-meat chicken, real peanuts or maple wood, according to officials. There are five basic designs, including Wishbone, the company's flagship product.

"Choice Pet Products and Benebone are a great fit," said Peter Toolan, CEO of Benebone in Edison, N.J. "We are both privately owned and operate businesses committed to the growth of pet specialty retailers. We both foster a culture of delighting customers, excelling in our markets and having fun doing it. Above all, while not the biggest, we both consider ourselves to be the best in our respective markets. We're looking forward to a fun and rewarding journey together."

TEEF! NOW AVAILABLE TO VETERINARY HOSPITALS ASSOCIATION MEMBERS

Primal Health, a Minneapolis-based biotechnology company and the developer of Teef for Life, has formed a new partnership with the Veterinary Hospitals Association (VHA). As such, VHA members will be able to purchase Teef! products directly from the association's warehouse. VHA serves more than 440 member-veterinary practices in Minnesota, Wisconsin and North Dakota.

"We are incredibly excited to partner with the VHA," said Emily Stein, Ph.D., inventor and CEO of Teef!. "It is an honor to introduce our new product and technology to veterinary professionals through

this very well-established, member (and mission)-driven organization."

Teef's Protektin42 is a clinically proven water supplement designed to improve the canine oral microbiome to create a naturally balanced, healthier mouth, according to officials. Protektin42 is a patented combination of four 100 percent safe, prebiotic and bioactive ingredients: soluble fiber, amino acid, vitamin B6 and sodium bicarbonate, officials further noted.



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The Service Advantage

Pet Store Pro's new course teaches owners and managers how to use an effective employee performance management process to lead their team to success.

Pet store employees should be able to help customers have an enjoyable shopping experience.


SHUTTERSTOCK

BY CELESTE POWERS

March means that spring is in the air and that, unlike this time last year, people are eager to get out and about. Brick-and-mortar retailers can anticipate a surge of pandemic-age pet owners to soon start frequenting their friendly neighborhood pet stores in person. Independents have an opportunity to grow their businesses by capturing this new market of pet owners, which extends beyond just dogs and cats.

Unlike online and mass merchandisers, small independents differentiate themselves with customer service, which has a direct impact on sales. Selling is nothing more than helping customers get what they want by making smart buying decisions. To gain a service advantage, everyone who works for you must commit to helping your customers have an easy and enjoyable shopping experience so they give you regular repeat business and positive word-of-mouth.

Pet Store Pro's new Managing Customer Service & Sales course shows owners and managers how to use an effective employee management process to lead your team to succeed. Offered free to qualified retailers, Pet Store Pro was developed by the Pet Industry Distributors Association (PIDA) to help small independents compete with e-commerce and big-box stores by providing access to the same kind of specialized training resources that larger organizations receive.

THE P.E.T. PRINCIPLE

Using the National Retail Foundation's Customer Service and Sales (NRF CSS) skill standards as a guide, the new course explains how to set goals and evaluate performance to build a service culture that increases sales. The NRF CSS skill standards identify seven critical skill functions that any retail worker needs and the key performance activities related to each. The Managing Customer Service & Sales course presents each skill function and activity as they relate to one of the three P.E.T. principles:

- Prepare associates with the knowledge they need to sell.
- Engage with customers to provide personal service.
- Transform frequent shoppers into loyal customers.

PREPARE: Pet owners expect your staff to be able to answer their questions and offer

recommendations. Give associates the time and opportunity to complete key performance activities to help them learn about your store's products and services and encourage them to think about what they're going to say to customers. Examples of these activities include:

- Attending in-store training about products and services
- Studying store ads, promotions and web pages
- Reviewing sales goals and seeing how they are established
- Becoming familiar with pricing strategies and policies

ENGAGE: Discovering a customer's expectations lets associates know if they need to educate the customer to make an informed decision. Effective service relies on the ability to assess customer needs, gain their commitment and provide ongoing support. Key activities that contribute to productive customer conversations include:

- Greeting customers
- Explaining or demonstrating products and services
- Observing verbal and visual buying cues
- Following up on a delivery or service

TRANSFORM: To build long-term customer relationships, teach associates to think ahead to future store visits and to consider sales as an ongoing conversation with a customer. Associates should look back at each sales conversation and ask themselves what worked and what didn't. Key activities that contribute to future sales include:

- Converting returns to exchanges
- Remembering and asking customers about their last purchase
- Notifying customers of a sale or special-order arrival
- Using prospecting methods such as postcards or texts

THE PROCESS

To improve overall performance, you should target NRF CSS skill standards during hiring and training, and then apply them to everyone on your team consistently. First, define the desired behaviors for any good sales associate. Make it clear what you expect your employees to do to perform a task. For example, using a standard greeting, associates should greet customers within two minutes of entering the store.

Next, determine CSS performance measures so you can track whether performance is improving, getting worse or staying the same over time. Use evaluation methods like customer feedback, tests, and observation to identify gaps between desired and actual performance. For instance, listen to determine whether an associate greets a customer as instructed. This is how you make corrections that drive continuous improvements and allow you to have constructive talks with employees about how they're doing.

Finally, create support systems and processes to fix or improve performance gaps. Several factors may contribute to performance gaps, including the individual's knowledge, motivation and habits, as well as situational influences, such as tools, training and time. For example, associates may need a list of standard greetings. Empowered employees with the right resources are better able to provide exceptional customer service.

THE COURSE

Customer service and sales has been Pet Store Pro's flagship topic since the program's start in 2008 because providing great service is what sets independent pet stores apart. The new Managing Customer Service & Sales course explains the NRF CSS skill

standards and employee performance management process in more detail. The course includes scenario-based knowledge checks to demonstrate key points and a downloadable workbook with practice activities, quick references and examples.

Pet Store Pro's associate-level customer service and sales courses include:

- Pet Retail Basics
- Basic Customer Service & Sales
- Engaging Customers
- Customer Satisfaction
- Suggestive Selling



Celeste Powers, CAE, is the president of the Pet Industry Distributors Association (PIDA). PIDA's mission is to enhance the well-being of the wholesaler-distributor, to promote partnerships with their suppliers and customers, and to work cooperatively with other organizations in fostering the human-companion animal bond.

About Pet Store Pro

Since its launch in 2008, more than 35,591 pet store owners, managers and sales associates from more than 7,392 stores have used Pet Store Pro to train for success. The program has expanded to offer more than 30 associate- and management-level courses and remains 100 percent free, thanks to continued full funding by the distributor members of PIDA. Visit petstorepro.com to learn more.

PETS IN THE NEWS

BIEWER TERRIER RECEIVES FULL AKC RECOGNITION

The American Kennel Club (AKC) recently welcomed the Biewer terrier to its pack, bringing the number of AKC-recognized breeds to 197. The breed is now eligible to compete in the Toy Group.

"We're thrilled to have the Biewer terrier join the registry," said Gina DiNardo, AKC executive secretary. "This wonderful little dog makes a great companion for a variety of people, and we're excited to introduce dog lovers to another fantastic breed that may be a perfect match for their family. As always, we encourage people to do their research to find the right breed for their lifestyle."

AKC officials describe the Biewer terrier as a happy-go-lucky dog with a childlike, whimsical attitude.

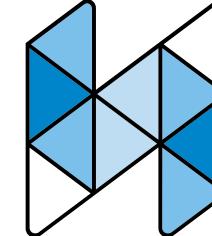
"Their purpose is to love and be loved, making them excellent companions," officials said. "These dogs are loyal and a friend to all they meet. Their long coat requires daily brushing to keep it free of mats. Biewer terriers are easygoing and don't need a great deal of exercise. Daily walks and playtime will give them the activity they need."

AKC recognition offers the breed the opportunity to compete at all levels of AKC-sanctioned events, according to officials.



The Biewer terrier has received full AKC recognition.

PETS IN THE NEWS CONTINUED ON PAGE 28



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► MARKET OUTLOOK

Growing Like a Weed

Non-pet stores like Walgreens and CVS and pet specialty stores like Petco and PetSmart are all banking on the continued boom of pet CBD products spurred by the pandemic.

Conditions like anxiety and immune support are top concerns for most CBD users.



BY DAVID LUMMIS

Glucosamine, omega fatty acids, probiotics. Like the pet market at large, the pet supplements business is accustomed to transformative cross-overs from the human side, with the above-noted ingredients and others driving key product segments. Looking back, however, it's hard to recall anything making more of a splash in human and pet supplements simultaneously than cannabidiol (CBD), the explosion of which has birthed an extraordinary cottage industry targeting people and pets. Even before COVID-19, CBD was going gangbusters. But with the year-long boost of pandemic-related stressors over health, livelihood, kids, the elderly—and the list goes on—sales have skyrocketed, with no sign of slowing down.

Due in part to the freewheeling nature of the pet supplements business in general and the CBD niche in particular, and in part to the not uncommon conflation of CBD products with hemp and other non-CBD-containing products, estimates of market size vary enormously. But all sources agree that the business is growing like, well, a weed, tripling during each of the past two years to nearly \$100 million in 2020.

Already, a preponderance of U.S. pet owners are onboard. As of November/December 2020, more than half (54 percent) of U.S. pet owners liked the idea of CBD supplements for their pets, up from 38 percent in February/March 2019. An even half of dog and cat owners in 2020 agreed they would be interested in purchasing CBD supplements for their pets if they were legal, compared with 29 percent in 2019, and almost as many (48 percent) said they would be interested in purchasing these supplements even if they remained in a regulatory gray area. Top of mind for most CBD users, for themselves and their pets alike, are conditions including anxiety and immune support, both of which were already high interest before the pandemic struck. One of the factors attracting pet owners to CBD products is strong interest in natural remedies thought to be safer and more affordable than prescription medications.

Moreover, this may be only the beginning of the boom as CBD appears to be helpful for a wide range of conditions, from anxiety to pain management to digestive issues and immune support, with research and trial in the early stages. One promising recent finding comes from the Baylor College of Medicine, where researchers working with Medterra CBD found that CBD can reduce the production of inflammatory molecules and immune cells associated with arthritis, with nine of the 10 dogs on CBD demonstrating benefits that lasted two weeks after cessation of the treatment.

Naturally a big selling point during the pandemic, CBD may also bolster immunity by working through

"Even before COVID-19, CBD was going gangbusters. But with the year-long boost of pandemic-related stressors over health, livelihood, kids, the elderly—and the list goes on—sales have skyrocketed, with no sign of slowing down."

U.S. Retail Sales of Pet CBD Products 2016-2020

Year	Sales (in millions)	Percent Change
2020	\$95	217%
2019	\$30	200%
2018	\$10	100%
2017	\$5	400%
2016	\$1	N/A

Note: Market sizing factors in publicly available data, proprietary consumer survey results and estimated sales of leading pet CBD marketers.

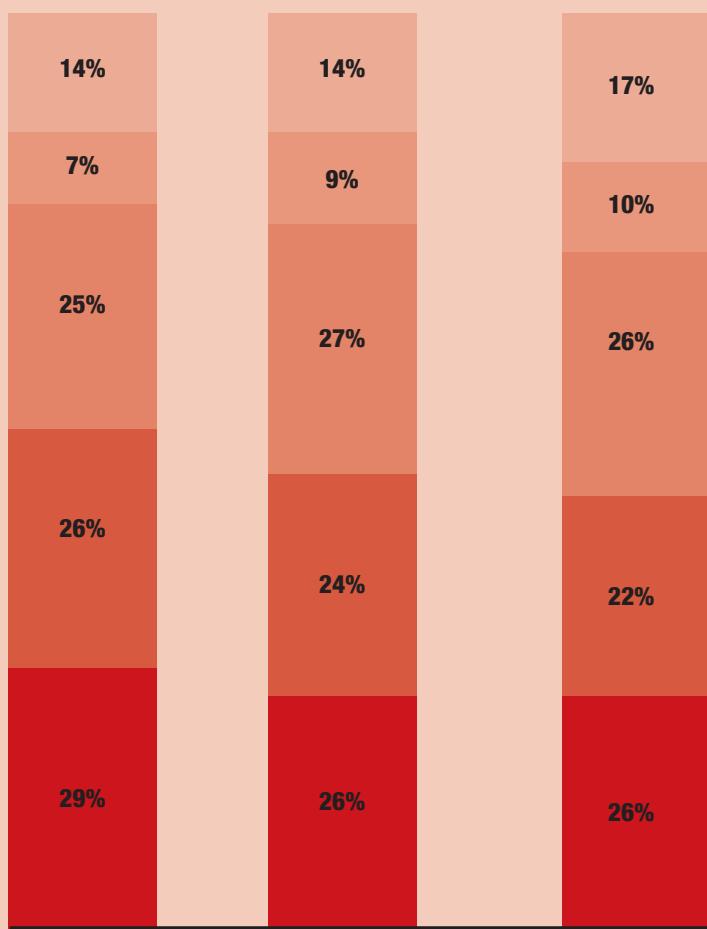
Source: Packaged Facts

the endocannabinoid system, described by Julianna Carella, founder and CEO of CBD maker Treatables, as "a biochemical communication system that regulates the peripheral and central nervous system (including the brain), immunological system, organs, and vital physiological functions" in a Nov. 4, 2020 article on petproductnews.com.

In theory, a huge sticking point for CBD is that its use in human and pet edibles is technically illegal; on the pet side, the U.S. Food & Drug Administration (FDA) has sent warning letters to approximately a half dozen marketers, and veterinarians are unable to officially recommend CBD and are divided on the issue of its efficacy. In reality, major retailers have made a full court press into CBD products in the past few months, including CVS, Walgreens, GNC, The Vitamin Shoppe, and Martha Stewart, and on the pet side, Petco with Charlotte's Web, PetSmart with Mary's Tails, and Pet Supplies Plus with Medterra and Kradle. Given this level of enthusiasm and investment, the coming years will likely see a flood of data detailing the areas in which CBD can be effective, and once CBD's legal and regulatory status is resolved, the product and marketing floodgates will open even wider.



David Lummis is the lead pet market analyst for Packaged Facts, a division of MarketResearch.com, and author of Packaged Facts' U.S. Pet Market Outlook, 2020-2021: The COVID-19 Impact (packagedfacts.com). Data cited are from Packaged Facts' quarterly Surveys of Pet Owners and market report Pet Supplements in the U.S., 8th Edition.



Pet Owner
Interest in CBD/
Cannabis
Supplements
2020 (percent
of dog and cat
owners)

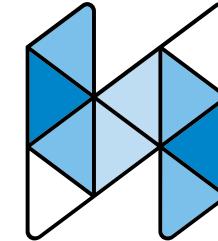
- Strongly disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat agree
- Strongly agree

I like the idea of therapeutic CBD/cannabis pet supplements for my pets.

If CBD/cannabis pet supplements were legally available for sale where I live, I'd be interested in purchasing them for my pets.

If CBD/cannabis pet supplements were available for sale where I live, but remain in a legal gray area, I'd be interested in purchasing them for my pets.

Source: Packaged Facts
November/December 2020
Survey of Pet Owners



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PETS IN THE NEWS CONTINUED FROM PAGE 25

WHIPPET WINS BEST IN SHOW AT AKC NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP

GCHP CH Pinnacle Kentucky Bourbon, a whippet known as "Bourbon," beat out more than 4,000 competitors to earn a \$50,000 cash prize and the title of Best in Show at the 20th AKC National Championship Presented by Royal Canin. The competition was held mid-December in Orlando, Fla., and aired on ABC Jan. 17.

Bourbon is owned by Justin and Cheslie Smithey, K. Latimer, J. Descutner and N. Shaw of Sugar Valley, Ga., and was bred by Justin Smithey and Yvonne Sovereign.

The overall show totals, which include the AKC Agility Invitational, the AKC National Obedience Championship, the AKC Rally National Championship, the AKC Royal Canin National All-Breed Puppy and Junior Stakes, the AKC National Owner-Handled Series Finals, the AKC Fast CAT Invitational and the Junior-handler events, topped 8,000 entries, according to officials from the American Kennel Club (AKC).

After winning Best of Breed competitions, the following top dogs went on to win in their respective groups and compete for Best in Show:

- **Sporting:** CH Kan Trace Very Cheeky Chic, a lagotto romagnolo known as "Orca," owned by Sabina Zdunica Sinkovic and Ante Lucin of Mims, Fla., and bred by Sabina Zdunica Sinkovic and Kalecak Zdunica Sinkovic
- **Hound:** GCHP CH Pinnacle Kentucky Bourbon
- **Working:** GCHP2 CH Cinnibon's Bedrock Bombshell, a boxer known as "Wilma," owned by Keith and Cheryl Robbins, B. Wagaman and D. Caywood of Aubrey, Texas, and bred by Bonnie Wagaman and Nicole Manna
- **Terrier:** GCHG CH Brightluck Money Talks, a Welsh terrier known as "Dazzle," owned by Keith Bailey and Janet McBrien of Knoxville, Tenn., and bred by Janet McBrien
- **Toy:** GCHS CH Pequest Wasabi, a Pekingese known as "Wasabi," owned by D. Fitzpatrick, S. Middlebrooks, I. Love and P. Steinman of East Berlin, Pa., and bred by David Fitzpatrick
- **Non-Sporting:** GCHB CH Hightide Tarquin Venus, a standard poodle known as "Venus," owned by Missy Ann Galloway, R. Corbin and C. Manelopoulos of Ponte Vedra Beach, Fla., and bred by Christian Manel-



A whippet known as "Bourbon" won the title of Best in Show at the AKC National Championship Presented by Royal Canin.

opoulos, Rachel Corbin and Ann Galloway

• **Herding:** GCHS CH Stonehaven Bayshore Secret Sauce, an Australian shepherd known as "Sketti," owned by K. Mallory, Margeson, Baylis, Rhoads, Margeson and Bialozor of Lovettsville, Va., and bred by Jeffrey M. Margeson, John Dale-Margeson, J. Frank Baylis Alexandra Bialozor

Reserve Best in Show: GCHS CH Pequest Wasabi

► PRODUCT NEWS

CANOPY GROWTH LAUNCHES MARTHA STEWART LINE OF CBD PRODUCTS FOR PETS

Canopy Growth Corp., the Duluth, Ga.-based parent company of Canopy Animal Health, recently launched Martha Stewart CBD for Pet, a new line of cannabidiol (CBD) pet products developed by lifestyle guru Martha Stewart. The portfolio includes oil drops and soft-baked chews in three gourmet flavor combinations and formulas—Wellness, Calm and Mobility.

All Martha Stewart CBD for Pet products carry the National Animal Supplement Council (NASC) quality seal, denoting strict adherence to manufacturing, labeling, testing and marketing guidelines, according

to officials. Products are corn, soy and wheat free, and do not contain artificial flavors, colors or preservatives, officials further noted.

Specific products include: Martha Stewart CBD for Pet Soft-Baked Chews for Calm (Chicken + Cranberry flavor), Martha Stewart CBD for Pet Soft-Baked Chews for Mobility (Chicken + Blueberry flavor), Martha Stewart CBD for Pet Soft-Baked Chews for Wellness (Chicken, Blueberry + Anise flavor) and Martha Stewart CBD for Pet Wellness Drops (Chicken flavor).

The Martha Stewart brand is owned by Marquee Brands, a global brand owner and marketer headed by investor funds managed by Neuberger Berman.



CNW GROUP/CANOPY GROWTH CORP.

BEN & JERRY'S UNLEASHES FROZEN DOGGIE DESSERTS

Ben & Jerry's has entered the pet space with the recent launch of Doggie Desserts, frozen treats that are specifically formulated for dogs. Doggie Desserts are available in two flavors: Pontch's Mix, a peanut butter and pretzel swirl blend, and Rosie's Batch, which includes pumpkin and mini cookies.

"We know our fans love their dogs and treat them like family," said Lindsay Bumps, a Ben & Jerry's global marketing specialist and a certified veterinary technician. "We created this product

line so pups can enjoy something even better than belly rubs."

The desserts were named after two dogs in Ben & Jerry's office. As a dog-friendly workplace, the Ben & Jerry's headquarters in Burlington, Vt., often has up to 40 pups curled up under desks, keeping employees company, officials said in a statement.

Doggie Desserts, which will be sold individually in 4-ounce mini cups or in four-count multipacks, will be found in pet stores, supermarkets and mass retailers nationwide, according to officials.

Doggie Desserts are available in 4-ounce mini cups in two flavors: Pontch's Mix and Rosie's Batch.



BEN & JERRY'S

VERDE COLLECTION TO HOUSE GRASS PAWS BRAND

Grass Paws, a new cannabidiol (CBD) pet product line, will sit under the recently formed Verde Collection, officials recently reported. The Verde Collection was created by merging Grass Paws and two other CBD product lines for human use: PrazaMania and FoCo Organics.

"We have always focused on the highest quality, USDA [United States Department of Agriculture] certified organic CBD tinctures with FoCo Organics, and we wanted to bring the same quality to a wider range of products with Verde Collection," said Jessica Dory, co-founder and CEO of Verde Collection, which is based in Fort

Collins, Colo. "Our commitment to organic farming and full transparency in every step has earned us the trust of many people who now understand the life-changing possibilities of high-quality CBD products. Verde Collection will expand our reach and provide even more people with a vibrant glow inside and out."

► WPA TALKING POINTS

Wondering What Realistic Margins Look Like in 2021?

Understanding overall pet industry metrics can be key to developing realistic pet store goals in 2021.

BY THE WORLD PET ASSOCIATION

As we close out on the first quarter of 2021, March is a great time to take stock of your retail shop's performance and set realistic goals for the rest of the year. This is true both when your objective is to increase overall revenue as well as when you're focusing on becoming more efficient with your operations.

"The key word in setting goals for the rest of 2021 is 'realistic,'" said Vic Mason, World Pet Association (WPA) president. "It's important to first take a look at how the pet community is doing, and then determine how your business is performing against industry benchmarks."

In 2020, WPA released the *World Pet Association Retail Operating Performance Report* based on 2019 data. The report contains industrywide operating norms and performance metrics retailers can use to compare against their own results, including financial, operating and sales figures. If you want to stay on top of profits and losses on a quarterly basis, the following three metrics will provide an overview of performance, net worth and operating margins:

Overall Return on Assets (ROA)

While there is a variety of ways to assess profitability, a tried and true way is by calculating the return on assets, which will determine pre-tax net profits as a percentage of total assets. In other words, an ROA of 20 percent means that you are generating \$1 of profit for every \$5 invested.

Based on the participants who submitted data to the *World Pet Association Retail Operating Performance Report*, the average ROA for 2019 was 20.6 percent. On the upper level, some more profitable shops reported a 56.2 percent return. While ROA can't pinpoint exactly why profitability is low or high, sales volume and product margins are usually the cause, explaining why big-box retailers can support a lower price point (and lower margins) on products if they have a significant customer base.

Return on Net Worth (RoNW)

Another good yardstick for measuring profitability is return on net worth, which provides a snapshot of the amount of profit generated from the dollars invested in the company by ownership. According to WPA's report, a typical pet store (with animals) reported a net return on worth of about 44 percent. The study also found that pet shops with less than \$1 million in sales annually had an average RoNW of 44.9 percent compared to 40.2 percent for those reporting \$1 million or more each year.

Operating Margins

Operating margins are often calculated by dividing a company's operating income by its net sales. As expected, larger pet retailers reported margins of 48.2 percent due to their ability to leverage volume discounts compared to smaller sales groups (making less than \$1 million annually), who reported average margins of 46.2 percent.

Margins also vary by type of product sold, with pet food delivering lower margins, while hard-to-find trends, human-grade food and high-end accessories generate higher margins if customers perceive them to be of greater value. However, product margins are based on many variables and tend to stabilize at a certain price point when customers are more careful about their purchases and comparison shop.

"One of the worst mistakes a pet retailer can make is undisciplined purchasing," Mason said. "That's why the best plan is to attend a pet industry trade event once a year and make it a tradition. Not only will you see the latest products and learn about buying trends into the future, you can also personally meet with premium distributors and manufacturers possessing a reputation for excellent pricing and customer service."

SuperZoo, the most popular pet product marketplace, will be returning to Las Vegas this Aug. 17-19 as the only live event in North America for the professional pet community. At SuperZoo, pet professionals can find the latest trends at great prices, explore an extensive show floor, learn from experts about financial strategies, and meet with top manufacturers and suppliers.



SHUTTERSTOCK

"We are thrilled to be connecting with the pet community again at SuperZoo this year," Mason added. "Particularly for independent retailers, it can be difficult to estimate the volume and type of products and supplies you'll want for your store and secure them at a price point that will boost profits. SuperZoo is where you can make that happen, with expert guidance you can trust."

To register for SuperZoo 2021, go to superzoo.org.

The World Pet Association (WPA) brings the pet world together so quality interaction and education between and among product suppliers and pet owners can create healthier, happier pets and a healthier, more productive pet industry. Founded in 1950, WPA brings thought leadership, innovative thinking and best practices to the pet industry, working to inform and educate the general public in order to ensure safe and healthy lifestyles for our animal friends.

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Southern Comfort

The genteel charm of Southern hospitality forms the core philosophy of Southern Barker, which has two locations in Kentucky.

SOUTHERN BARKER AT A GLANCE

Co-owners: Sarah and Leslie Stewart

Locations: 11890 Star Shoot Pkwy, Suite 175, Lexington, Ky.; 2005 Frankfort Ave., Louisville, Ky.

Number of employees: 1 full time, 3 part time

Years in business: 3

Square footage: 1,450

Products and services: Boutique, dog and cat foods and supplies, Barker treat bar, bakery section, cakes, Barker Club, adoption days, delivery, educational seminars



4



1. In an effort to offer a welcoming environment, Southern Barker uses furniture from Wayfair and Pottery Barn for its fixtures and shelving units.
2. Co-owners Leslie and Sarah Stewart
3. The Barker Bar offers a variety of chews and bones as well as scoopable treats.
4. Southern Barker carries hard-to-find boutique items.



BY LIZETT BOND

"Heaven must be a Kentucky kind of place." According to legend, Daniel Boone is said to have uttered these words upon traveling through the Cumberland Gap and gazing upon the Kentucky landscape. Today, the state is steeped in tradition and renowned for its horses, bourbon and bluegrass—both the grazing and musical variety—and southern hospitality.

Embracing that downhome allure was the foremost consideration when interior decorator and design blogger Leslie Stewart combined forces with her daughter, Sarah, a recent college graduate with a marketing degree, to open Southern Barker. However, it was the family's Portuguese water dog, Lily, who inspired the venture.

"We've always loved dogs," Sarah Stewart says. "I was finishing up college when our family got Lily."

"At the time, we also had Charlie, a little poodle," Leslie says. "Lily was our first larger dog. She's 45 pounds and also our first girl, so we were really excited about dressing her up and



buying all these cute little outfits for her."

Dismayed at the lack of stylish attire at local stores for a dog of Lily's size, the pair began a quest for chic larger apparel. A plan began to form.

"Essentially, we wanted to open a store that we would want to shop at," Leslie says.

The concept languished in the planning stages for two years until Leslie came up with the perfect name.

"I just kept throwing words around," she says. "I wanted something to do with the hospitality aspect of the south, and something to do with dogs because I wanted people to know immediately what the store was by the name. I just kept sharing ideas with Sarah, and with Southern Barker, she said 'That's it!' and we ran with it."

In November 2017, Southern Barker began welcoming shoppers in Lexington, Ky. Sited in 1,000 square feet of space, the concern features hard-to-find boutique items.

"We try to carry products that are not found in the big-box stores," Leslie says. "That's a really big focus."

The creations of local artisans are spotlighted, as well as those found on Etsy and other community marketplace sites. The product mix caters to pups of every shape and size.

"One of our goals is to try to stock clothing that will accommodate every dog," she adds.

Beyond the unique product mix, genteel "sit-a-spell" friendliness is a key ingredient to the Southern Barker experience.

"We want to offer a welcoming, homelike ambiance," Leslie says.

For this reason, pieces obtained from Pottery Barn or Wayfair make up many of the fixtures and shelving units. Treats are displayed on two kitchen tables with benches. Chandeliers illuminate the store.

"Our store is decorated almost like a home; we even have a table that came from the foyer of my home," Leslie says. "One of our signature decorative items is our tan-

and-cream-colored plaid wallpaper on our back wall with our logo."

Charlie the poodle passed away in 2019, but Cooper, Wilson, Archie, Nancy, Louie, Sophie and Dexter have joined the Stewart pack. All take turns as store dogs, with the exception of Lily.

"Unfortunately, the treat bar was too much of a temptation for Lily," Sarah says. "We had to cut her off, and she no longer comes into the store."

However, Lily still takes center stage.

"Lily is our logo dog," Sarah adds.

In 2018, two existing pet stores in Louisville were acquired, along with inventory, to become Southern Barker locations. When the lease expired on one location, the Stewarts made the decision to consolidate into a single store.

Locals and visitors alike are charmed by the homey allure and eclectic array of products presented at Southern Barker.

As Southern Barker is in an equine-oriented area, dog-loving equestrians in town for horse shows or racing love to stop in.

"Horse lovers say that in all of their travels with their horses they visit dog boutiques, and we always carry things not found anywhere else," Leslie says. "That's exactly what we want to hear."

WARMTH, HONESTY, EXPERTISE

While comfort and warmth are the focus in décor, these attributes are also part of the Southern Barker customer service experience.

"We relate to our customers on a very personal level," Leslie says. "We start conversations, we give out our cellphone numbers so they can text or call, and tell them we will get whatever they need. We ask about their dog and tell them about ours and welcome them as if they are guests in our home."

IT'S A RETAIL LIFE

What is Southern Barker best known for?

Leslie Stewart: Our unique products and our customer service.

What is the biggest challenge for the independent retailer today?

Leslie: The online retailers—they are killing us.

What about for the pet industry overall?

Leslie: The big corporations that are trying to squash all of us little guys.

Sarah Stewart: Misinformation. Certain dog food manufacturers are teaching veterinarians that raw food is bad. It's all about the bottom line, and as a dog owner, you want to believe everything your vet says.

Are you watching any interesting trends?

Leslie: Demand for raw food continues to escalate, in addition to supplemental foods, like probiotics or goat milk. Calming and relaxing products are popular, like CBD [cannabidiol], or one of our top products—the LickiMat.

What do you see for the future of Southern Barker?

Sarah: The Southern Barker Boutique, Salon and Spa Enrichment Center is happening. We are excited and nervous at the same time.

A favorite example shared by Leslie is of a woman calling to inquire about a clay paw-print kit for her dog.

"She was going to have to put her dog down that afternoon and talked with Sarah, asking to have a kit put aside for her husband to pick up," Leslie says.

Sarah spoke at length with the woman, ending the conversation with "I wish I could give you a hug."

Later that day, the woman walked into the store to pick



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STEPPING OUT IN STYLE

As Jennifer Sellers made her way through a local pet store, her mission was to pick up supplies for her iguana, Rolex. A dog lover at heart, the Frankfort, Ky., resident had vowed never to purchase a dog from a pet store, but as she passed the puppy section, a fluffy cockapoo caught her eye.

"I saw him and wondered what he felt like—but I knew if I touched him, I would probably buy him," Sellers says.

Touch she did, and three-month-old Roeper was soon settling into his forever home.

Shortly after Roeper joined the family, Sellers discovered Southern Barker during an online search.

"They were advertising a Santa Pictures event on Facebook. So, I went for a visit," she says.

She was also intrigued by the product mix, which lived up to her expectations.

"I enjoy going into boutiques because their rollouts are usually really nice, and whether expensive or inexpensive, the quality is good," she says. "Southern Barker is not your generic pet store; it's a pet boutique. Even the food is high quality."

When Roeper visits Southern Barker, his first stop is the Barker Bar to browse the extensive array of doggie delights.

"He'll stand up and sniff, and I usually let him pick out what he wants," she says. "He loves the duck heads."

As a member of the Barker Club, Sellers appreciates the value found in each month's Barker Box.

"I'd signed up for another subscription box not long after I got Roeper, and it was like getting a Happy Meal toy. When I began following Southern Barker on Facebook, I loved the Mystery Bags, and when the Barker Club started up, I signed on," she says.

While Sellers appreciates the high-quality toys, treats, food samples, or various new or unique products inside each box, it's the personal touch that makes this subscription service unique.

"Once there was a camouflage hair scrunchy in the box that matched Roeper's camouflage collar and leash, and I thought, 'Oh, how neat, they know me—it matches his leash,'" she says.

But it's the homelike atmosphere and the friendliness of the staff that keeps the pair coming back.

"Every time I walk in I am greeted, and Roeper loves to go there," Sellers says. "We've even run into Leslie and Sarah outside of the store, and he is so excited and has to give them a hug."

Whether out on the town or shopping at Southern Barker, Roeper enjoys stepping out in his cozy fleece winter coat or red-and-black buffalo-check collar and harness—all Southern Barker purchases.

"I try to accessorize Roeper," she says. "I want to set him apart from everyone else."

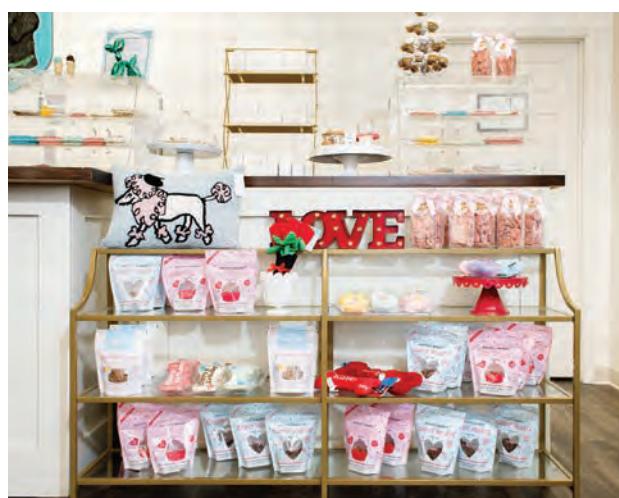


Jennifer Sellers and Roeper



TOP: Southern Barker has two locations in Kentucky.

BOTTOM: In addition to treats, Southern Barker offers bakery goodies and custom cakes.



up the package personally, saying, "I came for my hug."

"We connect with our customers," Leslie says.

Personal testimonials not only assist in customer education, but develop relationships.

"I think one of the biggest selling points is being able to say, 'This is what helped with my dog,'" Sarah says. "My dogs are tasters and toy testers."

Along with these endorsements, honesty is a value that permeates throughout the organization.

"For instance, Sarah likes our buffalo horns and I like the shin bones," Leslie says. "If a customer comes in asking for the best long-lasting chew, I'll tell them why I prefer one over the other. I feel that this is something our customers appreciate."

The ability to candidly connect with pet owners is a sought-after trait in an employee.

"It is so important that our people be able to handle a situation in an appropriate manner," Leslie says. "Along with the ability to make personal recommendations."

Knowledge is at the forefront, and staff members spend time shadowing owners and senior staffers. Nutritional study is extensive, including certification through Steve's Real Food's Raw.U online training program. Product information regarding each brand is also on hand for further study.

In addition, Sarah received nutritional certification from DNM (Dogs Naturally Magazine) University, and their full-time Louisville staff member Emily Redding took the online classes as well. Redding also provides training to new hires and ongoing education.

"We call Emily our 'food girl' because she is a whiz," Leslie says. "She lives and breathes the pet world, and it's really inspiring to see someone with that drive."

ADDING TO THE VISION

While food offerings were not in the initial Southern Barker business plan, Lily was again the impetus to growth—or a change—in the original vision.

"Lily ended up being our 'problem dog' in that she had allergy issues," Sarah says. "So, in the process of helping her, we learned about pet nutrition."

Because another independent retailer in town offered food as its main focus, the pair initially decided not to sell food in their new venture; however, Lily and customer

demand drove the shift.

"We had customers asking us to order food in for them as a convenience," Leslie says. "And with Lily's allergy issues, which we were able to trace back to food, we started selling more foods, including raw."

With limited space in the Lexington store, foods are ordered weekly, and many customer orders are set up on a regular schedule.

"We know what they need and how often," Leslie says. "When the food comes in, we just make a call, and they come in to pick it up."

At the more spacious Louisville store, the food inventory is more extensive.

"In the Lexington store, we are still mainly boutique with some food," Leslie says. "In Louisville, we offer a broader range of foods."

The entrepreneurs take pride in their nutritional offerings. For instance, the entire line of Answers Pet Food raw dog food is in the mix.

"We are the only dog store that I know of in Lexington or Louisville that carries the entire line," Leslie says.

Cat food is available at the Louisville location; however, due to lack of demand, it is not stocked at the Lexington store.

"Because the Louisville store was an existing pet store, cat food was carried so we continued on from there," Leslie says. "After that, we did bring a cat section to the Lexington store, but it just did not take off. I guess people were used to the fact that it is a dog boutique, so we took it out."

Even the most discerning pup is tantalized by the extensive Barker Bar, where a wide variety of chews and bones join an array of scoopable treats, sold by weight and housed in penny jars.

"We started with six flavors of treats and now have more than 24," Leslie says. "We stock different shapes and colors, like orange pumpkin bones and little peanut butter starbursts, carob-chip cookies, oatmeal cookies or granola bars."

In addition, Southern Barker's own line of Barker Baked Goods showcase four flavors: Chicken Pot Pie, Peanut Butter Pie, Cheese and Bacon, and Pumpkin Delight.

Bakery goodies are displayed in a separate section, and elegant custom cakes are available by special order.

The delectable creations are baked and designed by Alex Stewart, Leslie's daughter-in-law and Sarah's sister-in-law.

"The cakes are absolutely amazing," Leslie says. "We've had some really fun ones."

For example, a gender-reveal cake uncovered the sex of a couple's soon-to-be-born child as their furry family member dove into the confection.

Pet-loving members of the Barker Club eagerly look forward to monthly product packages. The subscription boxes are chock-full of surprises, including a toy, treats and chews, a mystery item and plenty of samples. Also included is Tips and Tricks, which might be a treat recipe or training pointer. Each month's parcel is centered around a theme. For example, January's Lift Off for 2021 involved space travel with alien- and planet-shaped toys.

"Not only do members get a box, but we have a private Barker Club Facebook Group where we send weekly deals just for members, such as discounts on treats," Sarah says. "Our members are also the first to hear about new products, sales or events."

The club has proven a popular offering during the coronavirus pandemic with home-bound pet owners searching for ways to keep pets entertained. However, as Southern Barker is an essential business, pet owners continue to visit the stores as well.

"We have been fortunate to remain open, and a lot of customers come in for chews and bones to keep their pets occupied," Leslie says.

Further, as a convenience during COVID, delivery services have joined the offerings.

"We offer free delivery with any order above \$50, and under that amount we charge a \$5 delivery fee," she says. "But, I'd say the majority of our people are still coming in to the store."

Curbside service is also available, and online ordering capabilities have been expanded through eTailPet, a platform that helps independent pet retailers facilitate online sales.

A SHIFT IN FOCUS

Prior to COVID-19, workshops and educational seminars took place on a regular basis. Many of these get-togethers have shifted to Facebook.

"We started doing more on Facebook; for instance, we hold special sales, almost like an auction event, or a game night," Leslie says. "We kind of had to take the events to our customers."

During this time, Mystery Bag sales became a popular Facebook Live event, eventually morphing into the more refined Barker Club boxes.

"The boxes are better; I'll just put it that way," Leslie says.

The pair looks forward to once again holding much-loved in-store parties, such as the annual Halloween Sidewalk Parade, where costumed pups and their owners parade

around the shopping center sidewalk.

"It's so much fun," Sarah says. "People drive by and honk their horns. It's really been popular."

Lexington is home to the Kentucky Derby, so what could be more fitting than a Kentucky Derby Hat competition? Participants enter to win in several categories: Best Overall Derby Hat, Most Creative Hat and Best Derby Hat Duo, where pets and owners don matching chapeaus. A percentage of the profits is designated to benefit the Lexington Humane Society.

"We go all out with refreshments, backdrops and a photo booth," Sarah says.

"We do photo booths for everything," Leslie adds.

Along those lines, the Barker of the Month finds owners submitting their dog's photo, which is then posted to a Facebook album. A random drawing determines the furry winner, who then stars in a photo shoot.

"We put little bow ties, and different clothing on them, and throughout the next month these photos are used on social media to show off different products," Leslie says. "We also display their photo up on the wall in each store."

The lucky model also receives a free bag of food from Fromm Family Pet Food.

While the stores are unable to hold adoption days during the pandemic, pets in need of a forever home are not forgotten by Southern Barker.

For instance, during the holiday season, new and gently used toys are gathered for donation to multiple shelters and rescue organizations.

"Our first year we had around 800 toys donated, too many for one shelter, so we have been able to donate to multiple shelters," Sarah says.

Toys are also collected off-site. For example, at a local car dealership and hospital.

Participation in shelter events also supports adoption efforts. For example, Southern Barker is a presence at the Lexington Humane Society's annual Doggy Paddle event, where a community swimming pool is overtaken for a day of canine paddling.

"The pool is rented at the end of the season, and people pay a donation to have their dogs come in and swim in the pool," Sarah says. "It's a really fun event."

In the near future, the entrepreneurs are looking forward to expanding the Southern Barker horizon.

"We are excited to be adding some new things to our forte with the opening of a second location in Lexington," Leslie says. "It will be nine times larger than what we have now, and we will be adding new services."

Southern Barker's Boutique, Salon and Spa Enrichment Center will offer doggie day care and a salon and spa with massage, facials and grooming. The enrichment center will also feature an indoor swimming pool and a rooftop dog park.

"The retail space is going to be larger too, a little over 2,000 square feet," Sarah says. •

PPN's Retailer of the Year Awards Offers New Rewards

Apply—or nominate a business—to be considered one of PPN's standout stores of 2021-2022.

Courtesy of the World Pet Association (WPA), the organization that hosts the SuperZoo trade show annually in Las Vegas, the winner of Pet Product News' 2021-2022 Retailer of the Year will be awarded three free nights at the Mandalay Bay Resort during the show, which will be held Aug. 17-19. In addition, all Retailer of the Year honorees will enjoy a host of new prizes including VIP treatment at the show and free admission to SuperZoo's highly popular grooming and retail educational sessions.

Also, for the first time this year, Pet Product News (PPN) is inviting manufacturers and distributors to nominate their top choice for pet business award winners.

"We always love having pet retailers and service providers share with us their successes and the achievements of which they are most proud," said Jennifer Boncy, PPN publishing director and edi-

tor-in-chief, "but we are extremely excited to open up this contest for nominations from the many companies who partner with these businesses in their success."

As it has done every year in the past, PPN is also inviting pet retailers, grooming businesses and pet service providers to apply to be named either the Retailer of the Year or an honoree in one of many categories.

PPN's annual Retailer of the Year Awards aim to showcase the best of the best in the industry, honoring independent businesses that thrive in an increasingly competitive marketplace. The awards recognize outstanding pet stores—single stores, multiple stores, specialty stores, boutiques, grooming salons and pet service establishments—in numerous categories.

While the categories sometimes change from year to year, past winning categories have included Lifestyle & Boutique, Multi-service Operator, Multi-store Retailer, Long-term Retail Success, Rescue Partner and



Community Involvement, and One to Watch.

A wide range of winning qualities can put a business in the running to be honored as a Retailer of the Year winner. These qualities can include, but are not limited to: phenomenal sales, amazing store design, fantastic marketing and promotion acumen, top-notch customer service or being a staunch pet advocate and promoter of pet welfare.

PPN will announce the winners at the SuperZoo trade show in Las Vegas in August, where honorees will be brought to the stage in a special awards ceremony.

Submission and nomination forms can be filled out online, or they can be downloaded and emailed to PPN along with supplemental material of your choice—photos, media mentions, community commendations and business awards.

The deadline for submission is April 23, 2021.

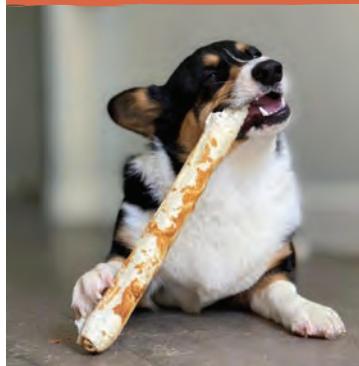


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Homemade Meals

U.S. dog food and treat manufacturers focus on quality and sustainability, while retailers hope to clear up the distinction between 'made in the USA' and 'sourced in the USA.'

BY PAIGE BROCKWAY

With the United States still reeling from the coronavirus pandemic and customers looking to support local and domestic businesses, the made in the USA dog food and treat category is poised for success.

Simply put, pet owners feel good when they support made in the USA brands, said Aaron Merrell, CEO of Plato Pet Treats, a manufacturer in Fresno, Calif.

"Not only are pet food and treats that are made in the USA more trusted by American consumers, but [shoppers] also feel good that they are supporting businesses within our economy," Merrell said.

All of Plato's treats, with the exception of its Single Ingredient Fish line, are made at its factory in California.

"When we built our Plato operation in 2006, we chose to locate in the heart of California's San Joaquin Valley in order to be close to the farms we source from," Merrell said. "We can, and often do, hop in the car to visit the chicken farm where we source the majority of our chickens from. We believe that knowing our suppliers and their operations is very important to ensure that we are offering a high-quality product."

Perhaps even more important than where ingredients are grown is their quality, said Bob and Susan Goldstein, co-presidents of Earth Animal, a manufacturer in Southport, Conn.

"We believe that it is important to use raw ingredients that are sourced in the United States as it supports local farmers and the USA economy," Susan Goldstein said. "That said, the more important factor for the health of our animals is the quality of the ingredients. There is a vast nutritional difference between fresh locally grown meat, fruits and vegetables as compared to byproducts of the human food chain, such as meat and poultry meals, and byproducts of the processing of wheat, rice and corn, regardless if they come from the USA or not."

Earth Animal's treats and No-Hide Chews are made in Lancaster County, Pa., and its new Dr. Bob Goldstein's Wisdom Dog Food is made at the manufacturer's Riverstone Plant in Westminster, Md.

All of Earth Animal's meats are sourced from Global Animal Partnership-certified farmers, which Susan Goldstein said ensures "the animals are raised, fed, housed and slaughtered using practices that are gentle and kind for the animals, the farmers and the land."

Sustainability is a big focus for Earth Animal. It operates with a zero-waste food policy, diverting food waste into compost instead of landfills, and collects grease waste from its dehydrator to be used



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in other industries. Its broccoli, carrots and beets are sourced from crops that would otherwise go to waste because they are not "pretty" enough for grocery store shelves.

"Upcycling the 'uglies' creates additional revenue streams for farmers, reduces landfill waste and decreases greenhouse gases," Susan Goldstein explained. "Continually evolving our sustainability program will always be at the forefront of our decision-making process."

Toni Shelaske, owner of Healthy Pet Products, a retailer with three locations in Pennsylvania, said pet owners are increasingly aware of the benefits of purchasing U.S.-made products, and independent pet specialty retailers play a key role in spreading the word.

"I feel that we as independents are making headway in educating the general public," she said. "Word is spreading that made in the USA and supporting local matters. I hope to see it continue to grow, which in turn supports the independent pet retailer nationwide."

Moving forward, the Goldsteins hope to see increased consumer focus on and awareness of supply chains, ingredient sourcing and quality, use of whole foods as ingredients, digestibility and bioavailability of foods. Citing the examples of the Impossible Burger and Beyond Burger, they hope that pet food companies can move toward plant-based options that reduce the need for meat.

"The plight of factory-farmed animals will hopefully be at the forefront of everyone's objectives, which will be of benefit to the health of billions of animals and the planet," Bob Goldstein said.

single-serve On the Go Energy Bars for dogs. They come in Salmon & Carrot, Lamb & Apple and Chicken & Mango.

"They are our most substantial treats made with real meat as the first ingredient, [and] real fruits and veggies," said CEO Aaron Merrell. "They have a rich, meaty texture and are perfect for active dogs who are on the go."

In late 2020, Evanger's Food for Dogs & Cats in Markham, Ill., updated its Against the Grain Nothing Else line by adding Turkey. Nothing Else is the only canned single-ingredient pet food line, said owner and president Holly Sher. Turkey joins Beef, Chicken, Duck, Pork and Salmon in the collection.

Evanger's also relaunched Hi Bio Superfood for Dogs and Cats, an air-dried, raw diet alternative for both dogs and cats. Hi Bio Superfood is available in Chicken and Beef and can be used as a treat, meal enhancer or complete meal.

NEW PRODUCTS DOMESTIC DIETS

Manufacturers of dog food and treats made in the USA are focused on bringing new innovations to the category as well as updating existing product lines.

In November 2020, Earth Animal in Southport, Conn., released Dr. Bob Goldstein's Wisdom Dog Food, which is made from three gently dehydrated and air-dried components: meat, with each diet being 70 percent chicken or turkey; Dr. Bob's Vitality Cubes, which are made with oats, flax, vitamins and minerals for the food to be complete and balanced for all life stages; and organic fruits and vegetables.

"All raw ingredients used in making Wisdom are sourced from the United States," said company co-president Bob Goldstein.

In December, Plato Pet Treats in Fresno, Calif., introduced a line of

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PRICING

MANUFACTURER LOCATION DOESN'T DICTATE PRICE

While manufacturing overseas can be cheaper, pet food manufacturers and pet specialty retailers say dog diets made in the USA don't necessarily have higher price tags than those made elsewhere.

"Price is more determined by ingredients, quality and format," said Heidi Neal, owner of Loyal Biscuit Co., which has seven stores in Maine and carries mostly U.S.-made foods with a few Canadian and European exceptions. "Some of my best priced, and some of my most expensive, are both USA-sourced and -manufactured foods."

Consumers aren't necessarily after the fanciest or most exotic diets on the shelves.

Evanger's Food for Dogs & Cats in Markham, Ill., offers a multitude of canned and dry dog diets, with grain-free, super-premium, organic and single-ingredient options—but its best-seller is its canned Heritage Classic Chicken & Rice Dinner, according to president Holly Sher. While Evanger's pricier grain-free diets run up to \$46.91 for a 12-pack of 12-ounce cans, a 12-pack of 12.8-ounce cans of Chicken & Rice Dinner is listed at \$22.68.

"[It] is surprising [that Chicken & Rice Dinner is our best-seller] because, while it is a staple, it is not generally that unique," Sher said. "It is a good value, feeds well, clean ingredient panel, and I think because there's nothing fancy going on there, it connects with the customer."

Earth Animal's new Wisdom Dog Food is priced competitively with other premium diets, said

company co-president Bob Goldstein. The dry Chicken and Turkey Recipes range from \$11.99 for a 1-pound bag to \$89.99 for a 10-pound bag on the company's website.

"Premium diets today range from high-end specialty kibble to frozen raw, freeze-dried and dehydrated foods," Goldstein said. "Earth Animal's Wisdom falls squarely in between that spectrum of higher-end specialty foods—more expensive than highly processed kibbles, but more affordable than freeze-dried and frozen raw meat diets."

The higher price tag for premium foods comes from nutrient quality, he said. Wisdom diets are air-dried and gently processed to preserve nutrients, and pet owners can visibly identify the dehydrated meats, fruits and vegetables in their dogs' bowls.

"The more nutrient inclusion, the better the diet, and consumers are beginning to understand that, and that is why more expensive, higher-quality foods are becoming more in demand," Goldstein explained.

Made in the USA treats do come with a higher price tag, said Aaron Merrell, CEO of Plato Pet Treats, a manufacturer in Fresno, Calif. Plato's best-selling line of Thinkers air-dried meat sticks are sold on its website for \$2.49 apiece, or \$14.59-\$14.99 for a 6.5-ounce bag, depending on the protein.

"We have found that, since consumers of high-quality treats have more trust in a treat that was made in the USA, they are more than willing to pay the slight premium that accompanies it," Merrell said.

MADE IN THE USA VERSUS SOURCED IN THE USA

Pet specialty retailers agree that one area where many customers are misinformed when it comes to dog food and treats is the distinction between "made in the USA" and "sourced in the USA."

"I don't think many have thought about it, and manufacturers have polluted perception of these two things with deceptive marketing," said Nicole Cammack, owner of NorthPoint Pets & Co., a pet store in Cheshire, Conn.

Toni Shelaske, owner of Healthy Pet Products, a retailer with three locations in Pennsylvania, agreed.

"Most customers do not understand that a product can be made in the USA but not sourced in the USA," Shelaske said. "They definitely care once they realize the difference."

The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) oversees claims that products are made in the USA. To meet FTC standards, "all or virtually all" of the product's parts and processing must be of U.S. origin, with the product containing "no—or negligible—foreign content."

This leaves room for gray area, Cammack said. "Negligible" is not explicitly defined, and doesn't necessarily mean a small amount of the final product.

"According to the FTC standards, sourcing for foreign

vitamin and mineral mix would be considered 'negligible,' and therefore allow a pet food company to use 'made in the USA' on the label, so long as a significant majority of the remaining ingredients were indeed U.S. sourced," she explained.

The FTC takes into account the economic factors of where both the ingredients and the final product are processed. The economic impact of processing a final product in the U.S. could outweigh foreign ingredient sourcing, meaning a company could still use the "made in the USA" label when its ingredients are sourced elsewhere, Cammack said.

Furthermore, retailers and consumers should be aware that being made in the USA doesn't necessarily mean a product is better quality.

"[A made in the USA label] doesn't guarantee anything, and if someone tells you otherwise, you're being lied to," Cammack said. "Instead, retailers and consumers should be asking questions that actually measure the quality of the food."

Cammack said some of these questions include:

- Will the company provide evidence of certification by a third party for safety and manufacturing practices?
- Will the company provide proof of nutrient analysis

and digestibility profiles?

- Is the company inbound testing its raw ingredients for safety and adequacy?
- Are its diets formulated by someone who is legitimately qualified, like a veterinary nutritionist or companion animal nutritionist?
- Is it conducting nutritional analyses on the final product complete with vitamins, minerals, essential fatty acids and amino acids—or just relying on predictions based on a computer formulation?
- Is the company conducting true digestibility tests on all formulations? This means feeding the food to animals, collecting poop and analyzing it to make sure animals are actually able to digest and utilize the food's nutrients.
- Is it testing the final product to make sure there are not contaminants like heavy metals or bacteria and holding all lots until those tests come back clear?

"At the end of the day, if companies are able to verify that their product is free of contaminants, formulated adequately and made in a safe and clean environment, a country of manufacture becomes less of a qualifier," Cammack said.

INDUSTRY VOICES

What kind of growth or changes do you anticipate or hope to see in the made in USA dog food and treat category over the next five years?

"I do think raw will continue to grow, even if it is just in the topper and treat categories. The foods and treats with the least amount of ingredients I think are really starting to take off and people will continue to look for the least-processed options that they can afford."

—Heidi Neal,
owner of Loyal Biscuit Co.,
which has seven locations in Maine

"I honestly hope that companies start doing their homework and conducting nutritional adequacy studies for their formulations. The [dilated cardiomyopathy] DCM, vitamin D and other issues have been exhausting for retailers. These were further complicated by introduction of taurine supplementation and ancient grain products that further were not validated by any science. If manufacturers continue to keep leaning toward marketing instead of doing basic due diligence, I think it is only a matter of time before we see more scandals like DCM."

—Nicole Cammack,

owner of NorthPoint Pets & Co. in Cheshire, Conn.

"In the future, we expect to see the made in USA dog treat category continue to grow as pet parents continue to upgrade their pets' diets. We also see continued growing interest from consumers for transparency from their food and treat brands. This is an expected result of the overall increase in label reading that has been occurring. Consumers want to know that treat manufacturers know where their ingredients are coming from and how they were raised and processed. And they will continue to demand even further transparency over the coming years."

—Aaron Merrell,

CEO of Plato Pet Treats in Fresno, Calif.



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Wholesome Rewards

Pet owners are turning to treats and chews to keep their dogs happy, and natural, limited-ingredient products are leading the pack.

BY SANDY CHEBAT

Dog treats and chews remain consistent sellers, with sales on an upward trajectory, pet specialty retailers reported.

"Every year, the sale of treats and chews steadily increases," said Andrea Margelis, manager of Pets Naturally, a retailer in Traverse City, Mich. "Consumers are spending more on their pets, especially during the pandemic due to the fact that a lot of pet parents are spending more time with their furry friends."

Top picks in this category are considered safe and natural, with few ingredients.

"First and foremost, [dog owners want] to know that it is safe," said Laura Jones, COO of Jones Naturals, a manufacturer in Rockford, Ill.

Pet owners want products that bring their pets joy, Jones continued, while "giving the dog owner peace of mind that it is a safe, natural, single-ingredient or limited-ingredient chew or treat—not one full of chemicals or ingredients that cannot be pronounced."

Margelis agreed that safety comes first in owner demands for chews and treats for dogs. Shoppers also seek chews that are "long-lasting, natural and highly digestible," she said.

"When it comes to treats, pet parents are looking for all-natural treats," Margelis said. "Especially limited-ingredient treats, since a lot of dogs have allergies and sensitive tummies."

While affordability is important to consumers, they "will pay a premium for chews that occupy their pets," said Mike Thomas, vice president of development for Dallas-based manufacturer QT Dog. "They like watching their pets enjoy themselves."

William Paul, co-owner of The Animal House, which has two stores in Maine, agreed.

"People love their pets as if they were their own children, so it isn't out of the ordinary to see someone spend a little extra to make



SHUTTERSTOCK

sure their babies are well cared for," he said.

Customers at The Animal House appreciate natural ingredients, and freeze-dried raw products are popular.

"This includes treats and chews made from natural pieces or products of animals, such as yak's milk, bones and pizzas," Paul said.

"Customers don't just want something their dogs will love," he added. "They also want it to be safe and healthy."

USA sourcing and manufacturing increase consumer confidence and preference, Margelis reported.

"These trends are stemming from the fact consumers are more educated about pet products, what can be in them and how they are made," Margelis added.

NEW PRODUCTS

NATURAL AND MADE IN USA

New and upcoming treat and chew offerings for dogs meet key consumer demands. Those requirements include natural ingredients and USA sourcing, according to manufacturers.

In September, Jones Naturals introduced Smokey Stuffed Meaty Bones in 2- and 4-inch lengths. The meaty center bones are filled with natural ingredients and a dense stuffing of chicken and rice, with meat as the first ingredient, according to the company.

"These bones are great for

providing the dog with long chewing hours and the challenge of getting to all the stuffing," said Laura Jones, COO of the Rockford, Ill.-based manufacturer.

The following month, the company launched several stuffed beef hooves and tracheas. Each is filled with natural ingredients and dense stuffing, with meat as the first ingredient, company officials said.

Both P Nutty Stuffed Hooves and P Nutty Stuffed Windees contain real chicken and have natural, non-allergenic peanut butter flavoring. Beefy Stuffed Hooves and Beefy Stuffed Windees each are stuffed

with beef-flavored filling.

"Jones Naturals has a stringent process in place to ensure product safety and quality," Jones said, adding that the products are USA made and sourced, and contain no artificial ingredients.

This quarter, Nature's Animals introduced meatless Tiny Treats. Also sourced and made in the USA, these handmade, limited-ingredient biscuits feature a small size as well as all-natural, human-grade ingredients, according to the company.

"The smaller size allows for healthy rewards without lots of



Jones Naturals' new Smokey Stuffed Meaty Bones are filled with natural ingredients and a dense stuffing of chicken and rice, with meat as the first ingredient.

calories," said Timothy O'Brien, president of the Mamaroneck, N.Y.-based company. "The size of the biscuit is perfect for small dogs."

ASSORTMENT OPTIMIZATION

DECISIONS, DECISIONS

In a category with growing sales and so much variety, deciding which dog chews and treats or lines to carry requires a specific strategy, industry insiders said.

"In one of our stores, [sales in this category] can be anywhere from \$5,000 a year and up, [and] I have noticed that it has grown little by little each year," said William Paul, co-owner of The Animal House, which has two stores in Maine. "We base our selection on what trends are happening in our communities."

Because consumers shop for dog treats and chews often—averaging 11 times a year, according to Laura Jones, COO of Jones Naturals, a manufacturer in Rockford, Ill.—diversity is necessary.

"Pets are family, and pet parents love to reward them," she said. "It is important to have a selection of treats and chews that are for a variety of dog sizes. So, having selections for small, medium and large dogs is important, with a variety of protein sources."

Rotation also keeps things interesting for customers, said Mike Thomas, vice president of development for QT Dog, a manufacturer in Dallas.

"Retailers need to keep an open mind," he said. "They can buy a whole chew section from one or two manufacturers, [but] that gets boring. They need to mix it up in order to keep their customers engaged."

The Animal House isn't afraid to freshen up the selection, Paul said.

"If it's something new and we are interested, or we have a customer who buys something similar, we will give it a try," he said. "If it does well, we bring it back. If it does not do well, we won't bring it back in to keep in stock. However, we will do special orders for customers who buy something that isn't kept in-store."

Most retailers said that research is a crucial part of their selection process.

"We do research in regard to the ingredients and the company," said Andrea Margelis, manager of Pets Naturally, a retailer in Traverse City, Mich. "And we test them out on our own pets to ensure we are selling the best products."

5 MARKETING STRATEGIES TO BOOST AWARENESS, SALES

Creating a strategic plan pays off in moving dog treats and chews and gaining customer loyalty, industry insiders said. They offered their best strategies for retail marketing of dog treats and chews.

1. Sampling

"You have to get the chew into a dog's mouth first," said Mike Thomas, vice president of development for QT Dog, a Dallas-based manufacturer.

The company helps by working closely with retail partners and encouraging them with "aggressive

ISO [initial stocking order] deals," he said.

Firsthand experience with the chews and treats is a key marketing strategy for The Animal House, which has two stores in Maine.

"The best way in my mind to market is by trial," said William Paul, co-owner of The Animal House. "I like to purchase new things and try them out with our pets at home and let the customers know how it went for us personally."

2. Education

"Educating the end consumer on the

benefits of bones and how to choose the right bone or chew for your dog is very important," said Laura Jones, COO of Jones Naturals, a manufacturer in Rockford, Ill.

To that end, she said "training store staff and using online media and our website are valuable tools."

3. Effective Displays

"Impactful, attractive displays along with highlighting the health benefits is the logical strategy," said Timothy O'Brien, president of Nature's Animals, a manufacturer in Mamaroneck, N.Y.

4. Emotional Connection

"You want to make an emotional connection with the pet owners," O'Brien added. "People purchase with their emotions."

Owners love their dogs and care about their pets' health and happiness. By conveying those similar feelings, O'Brien said that consumers will connect with and be loyal to you and the products you sell.

5. Social Media

"We use a lot of social media to sell treats and chews," said

Andrea Margelis, manager of Pets Naturally, a retailer in Traverse City, Mich. "We feature products on our Instagram and Facebook as well as our newsletter to showcase the latest products to our customers."

The Animal House also uses social media for marketing.

"[People] get curious based on a post or image," Paul said. "Then they base their decision to buy or not on what [information] you have relayed to them ... or your personal experiences with the product."

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INDUSTRY VOICES



What type of body-part chew for dogs is most popular?

"Beef bones and stuffed products. These products bring the dog enjoyment and keep them occupied for hours. They also keep the dog from chewing on other household objects!" —Laura Jones, COO of Jones Naturals in Rockford, Ill.

"For long-lasting chews, antler and water buffalo horn are right up there. Bully sticks lead the pack in consumable chews. If dogs like to chew on them, people will buy them." —Mike Thomas, vice president of development for QT Dog in Dallas

"Bully sticks are the No. 1 body-part chews. Bully sticks are natural and long lasting; thus, they are the most popular chew."

—Andrea Margelis, manager of Pets Naturally in Traverse City, Mich.

"The most popular body part is the pizzle. Because it is a penis that is stretched and dried into a stick, it is the easiest to give to your pet while telling yourself it is just some kind of bone or hide chew."

—William Paul, co-owner of The Animal House, which has two stores in Maine



MIRAFLORA presents EvenPets by Miraflora
Dog Chews. Grain free and made with all-natural, plant-based ingredients, these savory treats offer a way to ease anxiety during stressful situations and keep dogs of all ages moving by alleviating stress, and hip and joint pain. The chews are made in Colorado and come in a 30-count bag, with each heart-shaped treat containing 10mg of cannabidiol (CBD). A portion of all EvenPet proceeds will benefit 2 Blondes All Breed Rescue, a nonprofit rescue organization based in Denver. miraflora.co

KATS BOTANICALS offers Kratom Dog Chews. The soft chews come in two flavors: a bacon-flavored Calming Formula and a chicken-flavored Joint Formula. The chews each contain 250mg of pure, lab-tested kratom powder. The chews also contain chamomile, passionflower and valerian root powder, organic pea protein, sweet potato flour, palm fruit oil and 100 percent vegan, all-natural meat flavoring. katsbotanicals.com



HUXLEY & KENT presents the Lulubelles Happy Barkday Cake, adorned with polka dots, pink "frosting" and a blue candle. The plush toy contains a squeaker and crinkle for fun. The small size is 3.5 in. wide, and the large is 5 in. wide. The toy, constructed using PowerPlush, is fused with mesh under the baby-soft plush outer layer, and then finished with reinforced seam tape and double-seam stitching. The toy is made with nontoxic dyes and complies with the U.S. children's toy standard ASTM-963 and the European EN-71 rules. It is machine washable and dryer safe. huxleyandkent.com



FROMM FAMILY FOODS presents Fromm Adult Ancient Gold Food for Dogs. The recipe, formulated for adult dogs, features a blend of high-quality protein sources together with a selection of wholesome ancient grains including sorghum, buckwheat, spelt, millet, quinoa, whole barley and whole oats. Traditionally, grains that are considered "ancient" have not been changed over time through cultivation and farming, and are naturally higher in fiber and richer in protein, delivering a number of health benefits to the dog, the company states. These complex carbohydrates are packed with energy and can be a good alternative source to more wildly used grains. They also include a broad spectrum of vitamins and minerals and can act as a natural source of prebiotics, promoting healthy intestinal flora and GI regularity. frommfamily.com

CHAMPION PETFOODS presents Acana High-Protein Biscuits. The crunchy treats are crafted with five simple ingredients, including nutrient-rich liver. These super-premium treats are also protein packed. The biscuits are available in two sizes, one for small breeds and a second for medium and large breeds. Recipes include Chicken Liver, Beef Liver, Pork Liver and Turkey Liver. acana.com



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Pet owners are seeking foods with the highest-quality ingredients for their pampered pooches.

BY LINDSEY GETZ

While the definition of what comprises a premium diet can vary a bit depending on whom you ask, most industry insiders agree a premium diet is one that includes top-quality, limited ingredients and no dyes or fillers. Interest in these diets is continuing on an upward trajectory, as more dog owners are seeking only the best for their pets, insiders report.

"A premium diet for dogs is one that contains high-quality ingredients with real meat first," said Jeanne Blandford, senior director of marketing at Chicken Soup for the Soul Pet Food, a manufacturer in Cos Cob, Conn. "When a consumer looks at the first five to six ingredients in the ingredient deck, they should see meats, grains and vegetables—no corn, wheat or soy, and no meat byproducts. There should be no artificial flavors, colors or preservatives. The food should be manufactured in a safe, regulated U.S. facility."

In response to the demand for those features, Chicken Soup for the Soul Pet Food has introduced a new flavor to its Classic line of adult dry dog food recipes—Chicken Soup for the Soul Beef & Brown Rice. It has real beef as the No. 1 ingredient and no peas or legumes, making for a cleaner label, Blandford said.

Rob Cadenhead, general manager for Gott Pet Products, parent company of Hound & Gatos, a manufacturer in St. Francis, Wis., said that premium diets are those that are made up of the finest, functional ingredients.

"When reading the ingredient label of a premium food, pet owners will notice that a high-quality animal protein is typically listed as the first ingredient," he said. "These foods are also minimally processed, free of additives and preservatives, and do not contain any artificial ingredients, flavors or colors."

In terms of format, Cadenhead said that dry food remains a top choice among pet owners, likely due to the fact that it is convenient and cost-effective. Wet food has been a leading choice for picky dogs or those that need or prefer a softer consistency, he noted.

"Beef and chicken tend to be top sellers in both formats," Cadenhead said. "These are healthy options that act as a great source of protein, iron, and other essential vitamins and nutrients. However, we're also seeing a rise in popularity among alternative proteins, such as lamb, rabbit and duck. These are great choices for dogs that may have aversions or food sensitivities to beef and chicken."

Bethany Lontz, store manager for The Blue Dog Pet Shop in Lemoyne, Pa., said that "chicken and beef remain steadfast favorites."

"It's what customers know and trust that their pets like," she said. "However, we are getting increasing interest in lamb, typically because of food allergies."

Ken Daminger, co-owner of Daminger's Natural Pet Foods in Sewell, N.J., said that he's seeing some increased interest in novel proteins in his store. In particular, customers are responding positively to Steve's Real Food's Lamu formula, which combines lamb and emu and is available in both frozen raw and freeze-dried raw varieties. He said this has also been a good choice for dogs with allergies.

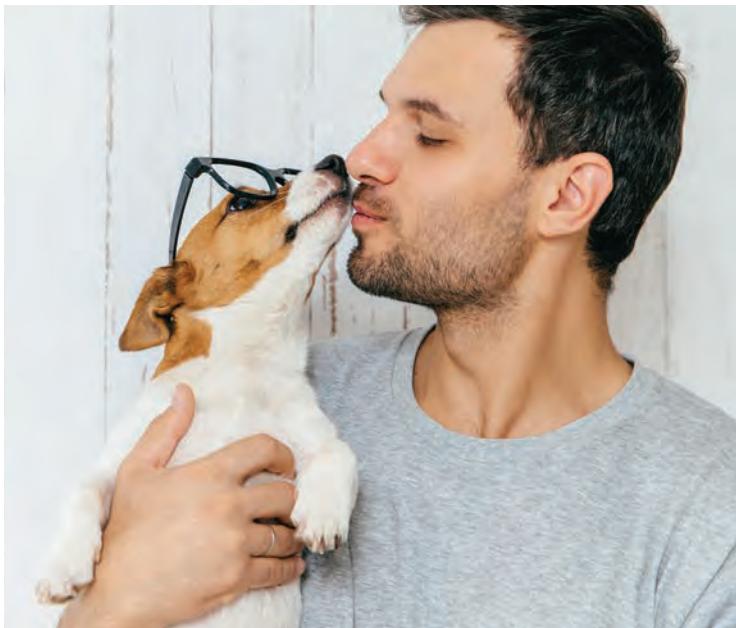
"In general, raw is really starting to move more for us," Daminger added. "I think more people are educated about pet foods and the advantages of feeding raw. Dogs are just healthier on a raw diet, and people see the difference in their pet and keep coming back for more."

Joey Weichmann, national sales manager for Vital Essentials, a pet food manufacturer in Green Bay, Wis., said that in terms of format, there has been a growing demand for meal mix-in or topper-style products. He reported that the company's freeze-dried food category, which includes Mini Patties, Mini Nibs, Nibbles and Toppers, experienced a 68.6 percent sales increase in 2020 compared to 2019.

In May 2020, Vital Essentials launched the Fusion line of premium frozen pet food, which has also been gaining traction, Weichmann said.

"It's a new approach for our brand that offers consumers the ability to 'have their cake and eat it too,'" he said. "Available in beef or

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TRADE TALK

Ann Hudson, vice president of marketing for Whitebridge Pet Brands in St. Louis

Pet food manufacturers seem to continually raise the bar for premium diets. What does "premium" mean to Whitebridge, and where do you see the premium dog food segment heading in the future?

For Whitebridge, premium dog food has four primary attributes: natural, minimally processed, nutritionally correct and palatable. And our two food brands, Tiki and Dogswell, were formulated through that lens. Tiki is a natural and grain-free, non-GMO food line that includes a baked kibble, Aloha Petites. Dogswell is a solution brand that focuses nutrition on the special needs of dogs with hip and joint, skin and coat, and digestibility issues. Expect new foods in both ranges during late summer.

The line between "natural" and "science" is going to continue to blur, and while many science brands have tried unsuccessfully to launch in the natural category, we believe the reverse will be a win in dog food. It is the nutrition dogs need, using ingredients that consumers demand.

The human supplements category has really taken off, and like many trends, has jumped the nutritional divide to accelerate the growing category of pet supplements, especially for dogs. Pet nutrition formulated to solve for common health issues and provide more precise options for growth and aging is where category growth will come from in the future.

The dog population is not really growing, but because they are moving from shelters to homes, there is more demand for higher-quality, premium diets. Shelters take great care but, unfortunately, do not always have the funding they need to feed premium diets. This will bring a wave of new or first-time dog owners into your store, receptive to your recommendations and eager to try premium diets.

chicken, the whole meat and vital organs are fused with 10 percent fruits and vegetables, shaped into patties and flash frozen. It's the highest-quality value-priced frozen dog food on the market."

THE IMPACT OF DCM

Although researchers have found no definitive relationship between grain-free and legume-rich diets and dilated cardiomyopathy (DCM) in dogs, manufacturers and retailers find pet owners still have concerns due to the U.S. Food & Drug Administration (FDA)'s 2018 advisory alerting pet owners and veterinarians to a potential link between DCM and certain grain-free diets, with the matter continuing to impact owners' food choices.

Daminger said that the issue is still "very much on dog parents' radar" and that they continue to make di-

etary choices with these concerns in mind. Daminger said they're educating pet owners on the fact that the research does not support a clear link—but the store also has plenty of options.

Lontz is in the same boat.

"I still get a lot of questions and concerns from pet parents—and I have plenty of options if legumes are something they want to avoid," she said.

Weichmann said that the DCM debate has added a lot of confusion and fear to the market.

"Pet owners want to feel assured that they're doing what's best for their pet, and the DCM debate makes them feel unsure. Fortunately for us here at Vital Essentials, everything that we make is 100 percent meat, so pet parents can maintain a high degree of confidence that our products provide their pets with all the nutrients

they need. We have noticed an increase in pet parents searching for grain-free food with consumer traffic to our website. In fact, our blog on DCM and grain-free food consistently reaches more than 80,000 impressions and more than 2,000 clicks per month."

Blandford added that DCM concerns continue to drive much conversation between manufacturers, retailers, and consumers as FDA investigations and studies continue.

"Current data suggests there is no proven correlation between grain-free and legume-rich diets and DCM," she said. "Science suggests that DCM is largely an inherited disease. That being said, pet parents need to continually monitor how their dog is performing on the diet they are being fed. Many consumers have been shying away from grain-free diets that contain legumes, as a precaution."

"I think more people are educated about pet foods and the advantages of feeding raw. Dogs are just healthier on a raw diet, and people see the difference in their pet and keep coming back for more."

—Ken Daminger of Daminger's Natural Pet Foods

ASSORTMENT OPTIMIZATION

THE RIGHT SELECTION

The key to curating an optimal assortment of premium dog food in a pet specialty store is to make sure that pet owners' needs are met.

"It's not about having a wide and deep selection, it's about having the right selection of products for your clientele," said Joey Weichmann, national sales manager for Vital Essentials, a manufacturer in Green Bay, Wis. "Not every store can carry every brand and products—but choosing dog foods available in a variety of protein sources gives customers the option to rotate protein types. Retailers should also offer dog foods with varying amounts of protein and vegetables in different formats such as frozen, freeze-dried, meal toppers, treats and snacks to meet the needs of everyone who comes through the door."

Denise Strong, co-owner of Pawz on Main, a pet store in Cottonwood, Ariz., agreed and said she does not aim to carry "anything and everything" but is instead focused on curating an assortment of foods that will give her customers options but still meets her own high expectations.

"In selecting each and every food we carry, I consider what I would feed my own pets," she said. "That's how I narrow it down."

Rob Cadenhead, general manager for Gott Pet Products, parent company of St. Francis, Wis.-based Hound & Gatos, added that retailers should make sure they offer both a variety of formats and protein options for their customers to consider.

"It's always helpful to dedicate specific sections of an aisle to dry, wet, freeze-dried and other formats that are available at their store," he said. "Keep in mind that in addition to stocking popular proteins, it's important to carry other novel proteins that would allow retailers to have 'something for everyone.'"

Jeanne Blandford, senior director of marketing at Chicken Soup for the Soul Pet Food, a manufacturer in Cos Cob, Conn., added that thinking about life stages helps, too.

"As shelf space is at a premium, retailers should bring on brands that offer a full range of life-stage recipes in a similar formulation," she said. "These recipes make transitioning each life stage easier for the pet parent. The idea is to have offerings for each stage of a dog's life but not overwhelm the pet parent with so many choices that it becomes daunting."

INDUSTRY VOICES

How can retailers become even more successful with premium pet food sales?

"It boils down to having options. You have to have enough choices that you can meet as many of your customers' specific needs as possible. And you have to be well educated on the products so that you can steer customers in the right direction. We get a lot of repeat customers, so that's the best indication that they're happy."

—Bethany Lontz,
store manager for The Blue Dog Pet Shop
in Lemoyne, Pa.

"We really pride ourselves on getting to know our customers. That's why they shop here instead of online or somewhere else. They count on us for education, and they trust that we've done our research. That brings a lot of value in a time when shopping is getting increasingly impersonal. When it comes to their pet, people still want that guidance and help. We don't just sell them the food—we answer their questions, too."

—Denise Strong,
co-owner of Pawz on Main
in Cottonwood, Ariz.

"It's helpful to chat with customers and learn more about their pet and its specific needs. This allows retailers to get a better understanding of what their shoppers are looking for and adjust their assortment accordingly based on those needs."

—Rob Cadenhead,
general manager for Gott Pet Products, parent
company of Hound & Gatos, in St. Francis, Wis.



Perfect for a walk or a training session, WEST PAW'S Outings Treat Pouch houses a dog's favorite treats. Owners will have no more smelly coat pockets, and they can open the pouch easily with just one hand. The integrated hinge snaps back closed to keep treats trapped inside. The product is made with recycled polyester and has a water-resistant liner to help keep messes contained. It features a small stretch outer pocket for small essentials such as waste bags, money or keys. The waist-worn treat pouch clips to a belt, a waistband or anywhere else. westpaw.com

GLOBAL WIDGET'S Hemp Bombs CBD Dog Chews are available in an eight-count bag, feature a peanut butter flavor and contain 15mg of premium cannabidiol (CBD) in each chew. They are formulated with human-grade ingredients and undergo a multistage lab testing process to ensure they are safe for dogs, the company reports. hempbombs.com



XM offers the **XM Premium Dog Leash**, a stress-free dog leash that brings the proven strength and shock-absorbing flexibility of XM surf leash technology to an ultra comfortable dog leash, the company states. It features a lightweight, non-bulky but very strong shock-absorbing cord, the XM Powercord. The quick-dry leash will not stink and is made with waterproof materials. It has cushion grip padding, and it has unbreakable stainless steel dual rotating XM swivels for tangle avoidance. The leash is available in multiple colors and in lengths from 1 ft. to 9 ft. It is made in the USA. xmwagmore.com

TROPICLEAN'S PerfectFur grooming line for dogs addresses specific needs for specific coats. The products are soap, paraben and dye free, and they are made in the USA with naturally derived ingredients. The line includes Combination Coat, Curly & Wavy Coat, Long Haired Coat, Short Double Coat, Smooth Coat, Thick Double Coat and Tangle Remover. tropiclean.com



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A man in a plaid shirt and cap stands on a grassy hillside overlooking a large body of water and distant mountains, holding a black dog. In the foreground, several bags and cans of ZIWI Peak pet food are displayed against a backdrop of rolling hills and a herd of sheep.

ZIWI offers a range of pet food products, including dry kibble, wet cans, and freeze-dried toppers, all made from 96% New Zealand-sourced ingredients. The company is known for its commitment to ethical farming practices and sustainable ingredients.

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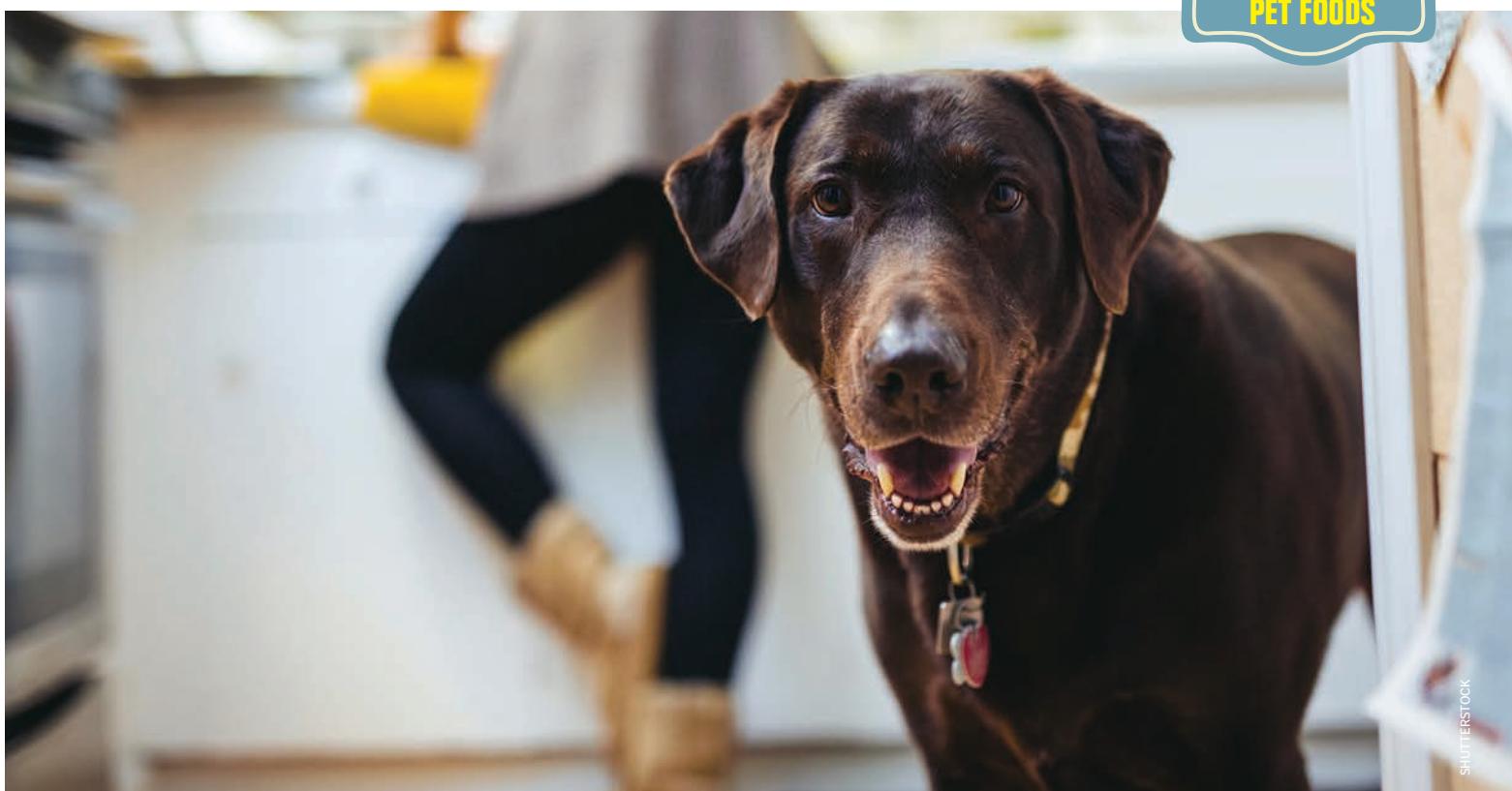
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Deluxe Diets

Chicken and beef are still on top, but dog owners' interest in exotic proteins is piqued, while superfood ingredients provide solutions for some health issues.



SHUTTERSTOCK

BY PAIGE BROCKWAY

Novel proteins and superfood ingredients are gradually gaining ground in the dog food and treat category, as owners seek to solve food intolerances and health problems, and pet industry experts encourage variety and protein rotation.

"Novel or exotic proteins are doing well, but still represent a smaller portion of the marketplace," said Darren Fujii, chief growth officer/national sales manager for Perham, Minn.-based KLN Family Brands, which manufactures NutriSource Pet Foods.

Demand has gone up for proteins that meet ethical standards, like certified grass-fed beef and free-range chicken, said Mike Hamilton, NutriSource's director of contract manufacturing.

"We are also seeing more non-meat flavors, like peanut butter and cheese, coming into the market," he added.

Customers gravitate toward meat-free bagged treats at Natural Pet Essentials in Charlottesville, Va., probably because they are concerned about protein intolerance, said owner Kim Matsko. When it comes to bulk bar options, bully sticks, salmon skins and duck necks are some of the most favored.

"Training treats are always big sellers for us, and we notice a lot of pet parents sticking with peanut butter and cheese-based treats," she added. "By the same token, if they are using meat-based treats, salmon and duck seem to be popular options."

When it comes to diet, chicken and beef remain the most-sought-after proteins, but retailers say options like fish, venison, rabbit and kangaroo aren't too far behind. Adam Balbo, manager of Loyal Biscuit Co.'s store in Bath, Maine, said pork is gaining ground quickly because of its consistently good price point and lack of association with allergies.

Turkey, lamb and fish are all trending up for NutriSource, Hamilton said.

"On a growth perspective, [novel and exotic proteins] vary, some growing faster than the chicken and beef diets, and some growing slower," Fujii said.

Manufacturers and retailers agree that novel proteins tend to perform best in dry and canned diets.

"Pets eating raw and freeze-dried diets have lower levels of reactivity to foods, likely due to their lack of processing, so fewer raw feeders seek exotic protein options, in my

experience," Matsko said.

Food allergies are what typically push owners to try new proteins, but retailers and manufacturers recommend rotating proteins for all dogs to provide nutritional variety and to prevent food intolerances in the first place.

"The longer a pet is exposed to a particular ingredient or protein over time, the increase in likelihood that a food intolerance will develop," Matsko explained. "That being said, I never recommend people rotate in exotic proteins out of the gate. While it is important to offer variety, it is equally important to keep a few tricks in our back pocket just in case food allergies or intolerances do develop."

Sustainability is now a major force in the pet food industry, said David Yaskulka, CEO of Nature's Logic, a manufacturer in Lincoln, Neb.

"It's not a coincidence that as millennials became the largest cohort of pet parents, lifestyles of health and sustainability ('LOHAS' consumers) drive growth," he said.

FoodScience Corp., a manufacturer in Williston, Vt., recently introduced Pet Naturals Impawsibly Good Treats, which are made with meatless protein and respond to consumer trends in sustainability, said vice president for marketing Derek Archambault.

To illustrate the environmental impact of the pet food industry, Archambault pointed to a 2017 University of California, Los Angeles study.

"[The study found that] in the U.S., dogs and cats eat as much as one-fifth of the human population, and if our cats and dogs were their own country, they'd rank fifth in global meat consumption, making them responsible for 25 percent to 30 percent of the environmental impact of meat consumption in the United States," he explained.

Pet Naturals uses a variety of meat proteins in its diets and treats, but Archambault said Impawsibly Good Treats gave the brand a way to provide both health and ecological benefits for dogs.

"Doing a plant-based protein treat was right in our manufacturing wheelhouse, so it felt like it responded to consumer trends, and it was something that really fit what we do very well," he said. "From a nutrition standpoint, we decided that it was an opportunity to bring something different to the table for pet parents."

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NUTRISOURCE
PET FOODS

NEW PRODUCTS

IN FOR A TREAT

New dog treats on the market feature a variety of proteins to please any canine palate.

KLN Family Brands launched new Jerky Strips through its NutriSource and PureVita brands in January.

The Perham, Minn.-based company offers four new NutriSource Jerky Strips recipes: Prairie Select (quail, duck and chicken), Outback Select (lamb, beef and kangaroo), Woodlands Select (wild boar, turkey and salmon) and High Plains Select (beef, salmon and turkey).

In addition, there are four new NutriSource and PureVita Limited Ingredient Jerky Strips: Beef, Duck, Salmon and Turkey.

All eight recipes are made up of 90 percent meat with organic pumpkin and apple cider vinegar, and no grains or gluten.

Nature's Logic in Lincoln, Neb., launched a trio of Biscuit Treats in December to "terrific" consumer response, said CEO David Yaskulka. Options include Red Recipe, Fowl Recipe and Calming, which contains organic hemp seed oil.

The protein-rich treats contain probiotics, whole grains and bone broth with glucosamine and chondroitin. The treats and their packaging are made with 100 percent renewable electricity, and the Certified Plastic Neutral packaging is made from 45 percent post-consumer recycled materials.

In late 2020, Pet Naturals in Williston, Vt., released its Impawsibly Good Treats, which are made with four meatless protein sources: quinoa, chia, brewer's yeast and oats. The treats pair vegetarian ingredients with savory, meaty flavors of Chicken, Beef and Pepperoni to satisfy the desires of both sustainably minded pet owners and their dogs, said Derek Archambault, vice president for marketing of FoodScience Corp., which makes Pet Naturals.

Pet Naturals also launched its Heartibles Heart Healthy Dog Treats this winter. The treats, which come in Salmon, Chicken, Cheese and Peanut Butter flavors, feature taurine and omega-3 fatty acids to support heart health. They are made without chickpeas, lentils or other legumes and can be part of grain-free, raw or other specialty diets.

"We saw that heart health was unaddressed in the treats market and developed Heartibles as a natural solution to meet consumer needs," Archambault said. "As concern about pets' overall diet and its effect on heart health continues to grow, Pet Naturals is positioned to provide treats that put nutritional ingredients first."



KLN FAMILY BRANDS



FOODSCIENCE CORP.

► Pet Naturals' Impawsibly Good Treats are made with four meatless protein sources.

"Our customers tend to come in asking us what the 'best' thing for their dog is, and that certainly varies from dog to dog. There may be a superfood we recommend, but only if that ingredient will serve the dog well—not for the sake of marketing."

—Adam Balbo of Loyal Biscuit Co.



SHUTTERSTOCK

INGREDIENTS

SPOTLIGHT ON SUPERFOODS

"Superfood" is a buzzword that has popped up in both human and pet markets—but what makes a food super?

"Superfood" is a pretty loosely defined term in the marketplace in general, but for us we look for things that are nutrient dense, nutrient rich and deliver a bunch of potential health benefits for the pet," said Derek Archambault, vice president for marketing of FoodScience Corp., the Williston, Vt.-based maker of Pet Naturals.

Nature's Logic, a manufacturer in Lincoln, Neb., has been "ahead of the curve" with superfoods, said CEO David Yaskulka. The manufacturer focuses on providing 100 percent natural diets with no synthetics, so all the nutrition in its diets comes from food rather than vitamin packs.

"Every ingredient serves a specific nutritional purpose," Yaskulka said. "Some of the more popular superfoods that we already include in our recipes include blueberries, which are high in fiber and antioxidants; kale, which is a good source of vitamin K, iodine and iron, and contains unique antioxidants; and pumpkin, which is also high in fiber and antioxidants as well as beta carotene. Our newest line of biscuits is infused with bone broth, giving a

healthy boost of glucosamine and chondroitin."

Goat milk and bone broth both rank high on retailers' lists of most popular superfoods. Goat milk is notable for its high levels of natural probiotics, vitamins and minerals, while bone broth has great benefits for joint and digestive health, said retailer Kim Matsko, owner of Natural Pet Essentials in Charlottesville, Va.

But for the most part, customers aren't specifically seeking out superfood ingredients. What they are looking for is solutions for gut, joint, and skin and coat health, Matsko said.

"Our customers tend to come in asking us

what the 'best' thing for their dog is, and that certainly varies from dog to dog," said Adam Balbo, manager of Loyal Biscuit Co.'s location in Bath, Maine. "There may be a superfood we recommend, but only if that ingredient will serve the dog well—not for the sake of marketing."

Some superfood ingredients are showing up again and again in brands across the market.

"In general, we are

seeing a lot of salmon and salmon oil, carrots, spinach, blueberries, pumpkin, sweet potato, turmeric, coconut oil, ancient grains, eggs and apple cider vinegar," said Mike Hamilton, director of contract manufacturing for NutriSource Pet Foods, which is made by Perham, Minn.-based KLN Family Brands.

NutriSource, Nature's Logic and Pet Naturals all incorporate pumpkin into their food and/or treats for its high content of fiber, antioxidants, vitamins and minerals.

"Most dogs love pumpkin," Matsko said. "Not only is it a great source of fiber, but it's also

high in beta carotene, which is great for skin and coat health and also eye health."

Pumpkin is paired with apple cider vinegar to complement the proteins in the new NutriSource and PureVita Jerky Strips.

In its Pet Naturals Superfood Treats, FoodScience Corp. combines pumpkin with superfood fruits, veggies and oats.

"The [treats'] kale, blueberry, apple, pumpkin and spinach provide a variety of vitamins, minerals and other nutrients, antioxidants, flavonoids and phytonutrients that can support a dog's health," Archambault said.

EDUCATING RETAILERS

MEET THEM WHERE THEY ARE

It is important for retailers to know the dog foods they sell inside and out so they can educate customers on the products.

Pet Naturals, a brand made by Williston, Vt.-based FoodScience Corp., recently introduced an education portal with short interactive modules that are up to about 10 minutes long to teach retailers about its products and how to talk to consumers about them. The company offers retailers incentives like coupons for completing modules.

Quizzes and online learning work best for Dog Krazy, which has employees spread out across seven store locations in Virginia, said president Nancy Guinn.

On the other hand, Adam Balbo, manager of Loyal Biscuit Co.'s store in Bath, Maine, said he prefers that manufacturers' representatives visit the store to educate staff rather than rely on an online portal.

"It's much easier to ask questions in real time than it is to go through an online portal and hope that the answer might be among that information," he said.

Kim Matsko, owner of Natural Pet Essentials, a pet store in Charlottesville, Va., agreed.

"I'm old school and like planned store visits so we can take the time to talk directly with our manufacturers and reps," she said. "I know we can't always find time to sit down and watch an hour-long webinar, and talking directly to an individual is so much more personal and rewarding."

NutriSource Pet Foods, which is made by Perham, Minn.-based KLN Family Brands, trains its retailers at any chance it gets, said Darren Fujii, chief growth officer/national sales manager.

"Our sales team regularly visits our retailers and utilizes this time, as well as online at times, to provide training, answer questions, and provide further in-depth knowledge about our products and proprietary Good 4 Life supplements," he said.

The company's proprietary Good 4 Life supplements system is made up of: Sel-Plex, a form of organic selenium yeast that acts as an antioxidant to support brain function; Bioplex, a patented collection of organic trace minerals—zinc, copper, manganese, cobalt and iron—to support skin and coat health; Bio-Mos, a prebiotic derived from yeast that promotes good bacteria in the gastrointestinal tract; and Yea-Sacc, a yeast culture with five live bacteria that stimulates microbial digestion to support gut health.

"We supplement the in-person training with reference materials and information," Fujii added. "Finally, our team is always available for specific questions that may arise during customer interactions."

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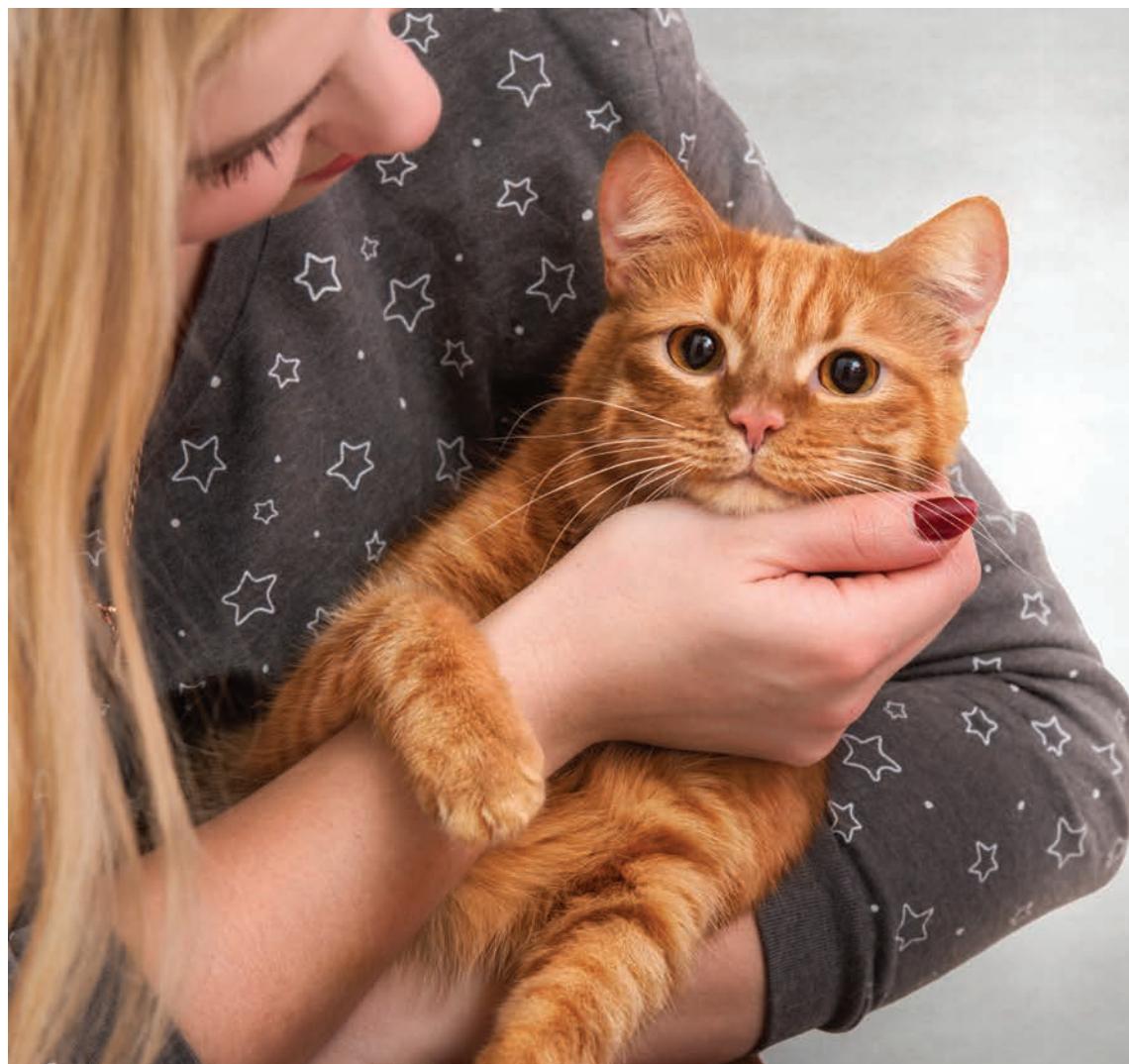


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Addressing Cat Litter Concerns

Sustainability and natural ingredients continue to interest consumers, and litters that promise to solve box avoidance issues are popular as well.



BY CHRIS AUMAN

Many cat owners stick to their litter brand until an issue, such as an illness, aging or stress, forces them to make a change, but other preferences factor in to consumers' decision-making, as well. The demand for natural ingredients has also increased, along with adoption rates that bring new cats into the home. These factors and more are influencing buying choices and sales in the litter category.

Jean Broders, senior brand manager for Muscatine, Iowa-based Kent Pet Group, maker of World's Best Cat Litter, said a big sales booster is the increase in cat adoptions.

"This is positive news to a category that is having minimal growth with the exception of e-commerce business," she said.

Broders also cited ongoing concern about pet anxiety during the coronavirus pandemic.

"It's important for retailers to offer an attractant litter, which can help address stressful issues a cat might be having and keep them going in the litterbox," she said, recommending World's Best Cat Litter Picky Cat as a solution to this problem.

Sustainability is another trend, and one that is being led by younger consumers.

Helen Cantrell, director of sales and marketing for Naturally Fresh, a brand of Corning, Calif.-based manufacturer Eco-Shell, noted that millennials "are the largest pet-owning population in the U.S." She said that this generation is also the future of sustainability. Cantrell referred to The Conference Board *Global Consumer Confidence Survey*, conducted in collaboration with Nielsen in 2017, which found that 83 percent of millennials think it's extremely or very important that companies implement programs to improve the environment.

"Seventy-five percent said they will definitely or probably change their purchase/consumption habits to reduce their impact on the environment," she added.

David Yaskulka, CEO of Lincoln, Neb.-based manufacturer Nature's Logic, sees this increase in LOHAS (lifestyle of health and sustainability) consumers as well, and his company focuses on sustainability.

"Nature's Logic is proud to be [one of the] top 20 [most sustainable brands] in the [pet] industry according to the Pet Sustainability Coalition," he said.

Owners are looking for several features in their litter, he noted.

"Cat parents want 100 percent natural options that are silica and dust free," Yaskulka said. "They also want less mess. So, for example, non-clumping pine litter works great for longhaired cats. It has low tracking and low dust, which both mean low mess."

Kellie Branca, district manager of Cherrybrook Pet Supplies, a small chain of pet stores in New Jersey, sees this on the retail side as well.

"Overall, consumers seem to be trending to more natural options for everything related to their pets, and litter is no exception," she said.

Yet Branca noted that clay litter still has a place.

"Clay tends to be cheaper, and many customers are just used to using clay litter with their cats for decades, so there is no reason to make the switch if the cat is not complaining," Branca said.

Janice Yamamoto, director of marketing for Laguna Niguel, Calif.-based manufacturer Next Gen Pet Products, said natural cat litters are trending but cautioned that there is no universal meaning behind this term. "The [natural] adjective doesn't always mean the same thing from brand to brand," she said.

THIS ARTICLE IS BROUGHT
TO YOU IN PART BY
**KENT
PET GROUP**

"Natural materials, a natural way to fight odor, natural fragrance—with Next Gen cat litters, natural means all those things."

She pointed to Next Gen Pet's Fresh cat litter line that fights odor naturally with ingredients such as green tea and hinoki cypress oil, which are sourced from sustainable ingredients.

World's Best Cat Litter is also focused on providing natural solutions to controlling litterbox odor.

"There are many consumers looking for a scented litter," Broders said. "We recently launched our Multiple Cat Lotus Blossom formula, which offers a light, floral scent with added natural botanicals. With so many consumers working from home, odor control is more important than ever before. Our Lotus Blossom formula offers the same great odor control, plus, for those scent seekers, a light, floral scent."

In December, Naturally Fresh Cat Litter relaunched its Herbal Attraction formula, which is made with all-natural walnut shells and is one simple solution for cats of all life stages, according to the company. The litter is designed to help cats with litterbox avoidance issues and is ideal for senior cats that aren't using the litterbox, fussy cats with litterbox acceptance issues and kittens being trained to use the litterbox for the first time.

"It offers a natural solution for attracting cats of all life stages back to the litterbox, making the litter-buying process less complex for cat parents," Cantrell said.

The litter contains a blend of natural herbs that lures cats to the litterbox but remain undetectable to cat owners, Cantrell added.

CONSUMER AWARENESS

Much of the onus for promoting cat litter brands falls on manufacturers.

"Now more than ever, brands need to make sure they have consumer-friendly, engaging, easy-to-navigate websites and social platforms," Broders said.

She recognizes that many cat owners go online to get information about products, which is a great opportunity to let consumers tell a brand's story through product reviews.

Consumers themselves, however, are a key promoter of cat litter.

"Word-of-mouth, or recommendations from friends, is still the No. 1 factor in enticing a customer to seek a new product," Branca noted.

Cantrell sees consumers as being curious enough to educate themselves about the benefits of sustainable, biodegradable and nontoxic products, but said retailers should bolster their own litter knowledge, too.

"It's imperative for retailers to also educate themselves and carry products that align with their consumers' evolution of buying habits," Cantrell said.

MERCHANDISING ATTRACTING CAT OWNERS

While cat litter is not an impulse purchase item for shoppers, pet specialty retailers can call attention to the category through merchandising and promotions.

"We have a section called our 'Cat Corner,'" said Melissa Whitton, owner of Most Valuable Pets in Lexington, Ky. "Our litter is in-line and merchandised next to our cat food. Both food and litter are our main revenue in our cat section."

David Yaskulka, CEO of Lincoln, Neb.-based manufacturer Nature's Logic, recommends floor stacking large bags of litter.

"[Our] litter can be merchandised in a 'Better for the Environment' or 'All-Natural Cat' display that includes Nature's Logic cat kibble, cat cans, supplements and treats," he said.

He also suggests that retailers call out a litter's natural attributes. For example, Nature's Logic All-Natural Cat Litter is a 100 percent natural cat litter that has no synthetic ingredients, has excellent odor control, is low dust and does not track, he said.

Manufacturer-provided displays can help attract shoppers, too.

Laurie Wilson, owner of Teca Tu—A Pawsworthy Pet Emporium in Santa Fe, N.M., has seen success with such displays.

"When we decided to carry Sustainably Yours litter, [the company] provided us with a cool display where customers could squeeze water onto the litter to see how it clumped and what it looked like," she said.

Retailers have also reported success with special offers from manufacturers.

"Occasionally, we see a new product with an aggressive coupon at product launch, which will spark the customer to test something new," said Kellie Branca, district manager of Cherrybrook Pet Supplies, a small chain of pet stores in New Jersey. "For example, Ökocat comes to mind when they had a 'first box free' promo mailed out on postcards. We saw a decent redemption rate with those from both existing customers and new customers who were used to getting their litter at the grocery store."



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"It's important for retailers to offer an attractant litter, which can help address stressful issues a cat might be having and keep them going in the litterbox."

—Jean Broders of Kent Pet Group



► World's Best Cat Litter Multiple Cat Lotus Blossom formula offers a light, floral scent with natural botanicals.



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WHITEBRIDGE PET BRANDS presents Tiki Cat Grill Pâté

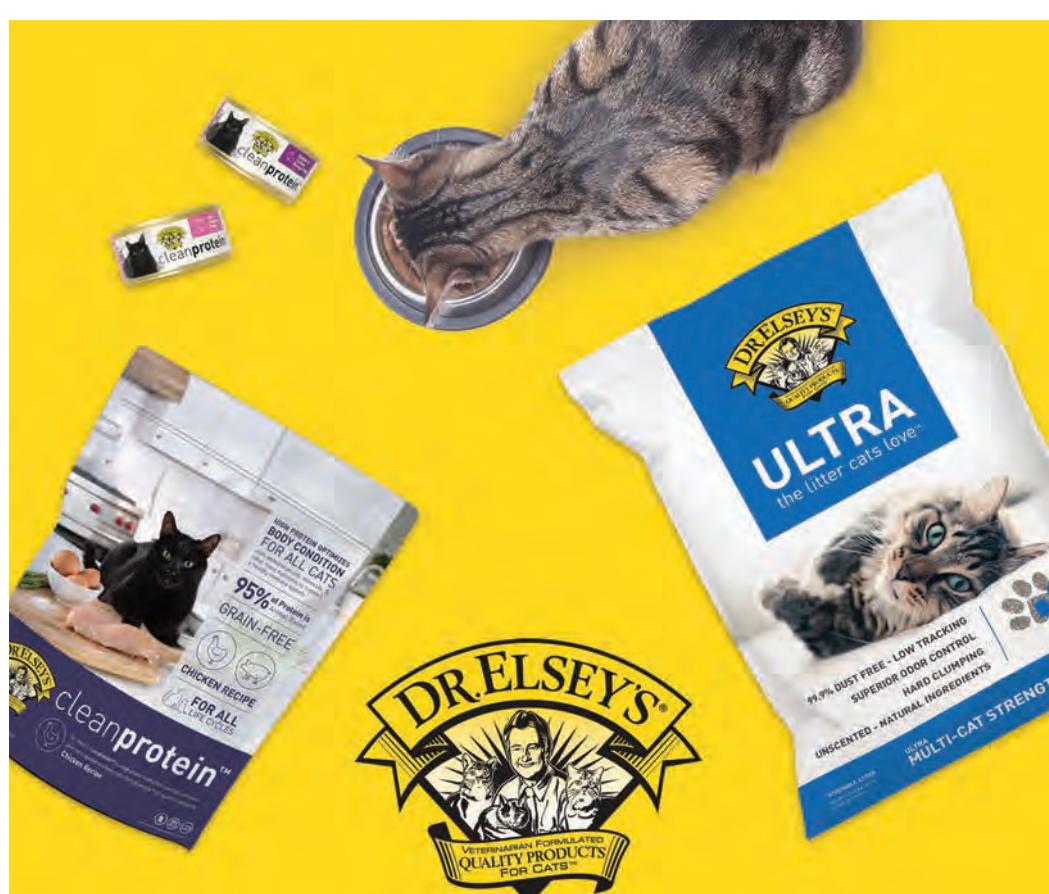
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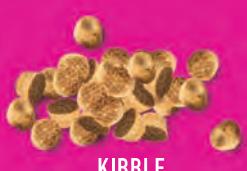
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Tiki Cat

A Call for Quality

Retailers are focusing on variety and quality ingredients to meet consumer demand for premium cat food.

BY ETHAN D. MIZER

Cat owners seek out variety in both formats and flavors as retailers and manufacturers work to meet demand and educate customers in the premium cat food category.

Raw cat foods, retailers noted, are increasingly popular.

"If trends continue as they are, raw will see an increase with canned food," said Heather Bearz, co-owner of Cheshire Cat & Dog Too, a pet store in Cheshire, Conn. "Also, customers are looking for more exotic proteins, such as rabbit or venison. It seems people are starting to get away from chicken, beef and lamb."

There are challenges to getting cats to accept raw diets, but the market for these products continues to expand, industry insiders reported.

"A lot of people are trying raw with cats," said Caroline Gunther, owner of Wag! A Unique Pet Boutique in Hendersonville, N.C. "Cats are hard to switch to raw, fickle as they are by nature. But a lot of people are trying to incorporate some raw or freeze-dried."

The popularity of raw diets is growing quickly, but customers are still sensitive to price point.

"We're really big on raw food," said Kenzi Miller, sales associate for The Healthy Pet, a pet store in Eugene, Ore. "Cats need a lot of moisture. If customers are feeding a kibble-based diet, we need to make sure that their cats have a lot of moisture in their diet. Also, affordability is an issue. We try to find a right diet that meets our customers' budget needs."

Frequently, cat owners are seeking an assortment of foods to offer, as variety has become a larger concern than in the past, both retailers and manufacturers reported.

"We continue to see an increase in demand for feline diets, which is driven, in part, by the demand for variety in formulations and in ingredients coming from pet parents," said Bryan Nieman, brand director for Fromm Family Foods, a manufacturer based in Mequon, Wis. "The trend toward humanization of pets and their increasing importance in the family unit has absolutely influenced buying decisions, driving pet owners to seek out better sources of nutrition and demonstrate an openness to spend more to achieve this."

Consumers are also looking for USA-made foods, insiders reported.

"Feeding cats a premium diet is definitely a reflection of the humanization of pets," said Kate Benjamin, creator of the Hauspanther Collection by Primetime Petz, a manufacturer based in Rockwall, Texas. "Consumers are looking for food products that are made in the USA with primarily U.S.-sourced ingredients."

Customers often have multiple considerations when buying cat food, including availability, price point and palatability.

"Reliability is the question," said Holly Sher, president of Evanger's Dog & Cat Food Co., a manufacturer based in Markham, Ill. "People want [cat foods] made in the USA. People want to make sure they always have the food they want. ... First of all, cats have to eat the food. Cats can go on 'hunger strike.' You can't have just one SKU. We can't offer a single organic SKU, for instance. We need three or four."

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TO YOU IN PART BY
**WHITEBRIDGE
PET BRANDS**



SHUTTERSTOCK

Tiki Cat®

TRADE TALK

Ann Hudson, vice president of marketing for Whitebridge Pet Brands in St. Louis

Cats are known for their pickiness. How does Whitebridge merge premium nutrition with palate-pleasing tastes for cats, and how can retailers encourage customers to embrace premium cat foods?

Premium nutrition is healthy nutrition, and healthy nutrition tastes good. With about 470 taste buds (humans have 9,000), cats really can be picky, but the great thing about cats is that what they like best is what they need most—meat. Cats are obligate carnivores and are historically adapted to detect the taste of meat and its components, like amino acids, which stimulate a savory taste experience called umami. Meat contains the necessary nutrients for cats to survive and thrive. Cats are not adapted to experience the "sweet" taste of sugar-laden carbohydrates for a reason—they aren't healthy.

Cats are naturally disposed to eat healthy, and Tiki Cat has high-protein diets, made from meat, fish and poultry, and with low or no carbohydrates. Good nutrition tastes even better when it comes in a variety of flavors and textures. Tiki Cat has more than 70 different combinations of flavors and textures in complete and balanced foods. We guarantee there is something to like for even the pickiest of cats, and we have another 17 treats or toppers to make kitty's life that much more enjoyable. While most of the line is wet food, there are a few crunchy and baked options for added variety.

Wet food is a smart basket builder because it's a small investment for the consumer and it's the responsible recommendation for cats.

- More protein for carnivores—look for grain-, fruit- and vegetable-free diets.
- More moisture increases hydration—look for broth, not water, for better palatability.
- More variety—lots of choices and can be fed on rotation without digestive issues.

This simple story is easy to share and easy to understand, and wet keeps cat owners coming back into the store time and again. That's why it's the fastest-growing segment in food.

"Our Classic line is our most value-based product line, and it has seen huge growth," Sher added. "Customers are certainly looking for premium, but affordable premium."

PALATABILITY IS A DRIVING FACTOR

Premium diets are in demand, and variety is increasingly important to customers. However, underlying this shift is the basic need for cat diets to be palatable.

"Our cat customers have some pretty picky pets at home," Miller said. "We see a lot of people either buying the same thing or mixing it up. A lot of customers who are looking for different foods want something that's easy to feed."

This is part of the reason demand for a variety of foods has grown, retailers reported.

"Cats are so hard," Gunther said. "We sell roughly equal amounts of all this stuff. A lot of our customers buy all of it. They buy wet, dry and freeze-dried so that they have variety and to keep it interesting. Interest in variety of all animal food products has been increasing over the last several years—more so in the dog category, of course. Everything happens first in dog. It always does."

Some retailers find that premium canned cat foods outsell dry kibble, while others find the opposite situation to be true.

"Our most popular cat food is still dried, but people want a more natural diet," Bearz said. "As far as texture, that is a preference the consumer makes based on their animal. We always ask if a consumer needs help, and if they show an interest,

then we talk about the different diets. We always ask if their cat has any underlying medical conditions such as diabetes, and we talk about specific diets that can help with different ailments. If a consumer is only looking for the best, then we talk about the different ingredients and what might work best for their cat."

Manufacturers focus on providing a wide variety of offerings to ensure diets are palatable and that cats are getting the quality nutrition they require.

"Cats tend to be more finicky," Nieman said. "Palatability is an important part of feline nutrition and part of the larger market trend that calls for variety of diets. Certainly, finding a cat food that offers complete and balanced nutrition is incredibly important, but palatability and the cat's willingness to eat is impacted by format, texture, moisture, ingredients and a variety of other factors. Canned food can be a very important part of a cat's diet and an excellent way to provide additional hydration for felines that don't drink as much water as needed. Canned diets also offer a greater variety of flavors and ingredients, and can be a great complement to or alternative for dry diets, satisfying the demand for variety and the challenges of finicky eaters."

Offering a wide selection is important for retailers to be successful in the cat food category.

"Retailers need to offer more of a variety," Sher noted. "That's the most important part. When customers go shopping for their premium pet food, they want something a little different. I've heard from customers who have picky cats and can't feed them anything else. They need to make sure they can find the brand their cats will actually eat."

"Premium diets consist of high-grade, human-quality ingredients. People are trying to get away from byproducts and ingredients that they can't pronounce. If the ingredients look good, people are willing to spend a little more for the health of their animal."

—Heather Bearz of Cheshire Cat & Dog Too

NEW PRODUCTS

OFFERING SPECIFIC SOLUTIONS

Several manufacturers are introducing premium foods for cats, and many are formulated to address specific health needs.

"We're introducing five cat SKUs, which are coming out of the Evanger's X line, EVx," said Holly Sher, president of Evanger's Dog & Cat Food Co., a manufacturer based in Markham, Ill. "It's a new restricted diet. They're 5.5 ounces and come in five different formulations: a bland diet, weight management, senior and joint health, urinary tract and low phosphorus. We worked with a nutritionist on this, and they're speaking to the most common health problems for cats nowadays."

Fromm Family Foods recently launched new packaging for its Fromm Gold recipes for cats, including Kitten Gold and Adult Gold, said Bryan Nieman, brand director for the Mequon, Wis.-based manufacturer.

The packaging updates reflect branding and design already established in the packaging for Fromm Gold recipes for dogs.

"We also launched a new recipe in the line," Nieman said. "Healthy Weight Gold is formulated for both senior and less-active cats needing to support a healthier weight and lifestyle."

Additionally, Fromm introduced PurrSnickety pâtés for cats, featuring three new canned recipes—Chicken Pâté, Salmon Pâté and Turkey Pâté—formulated to be nutritionally balanced and with single-sourced proteins and fewer added ingredients to improve digestibility, Nieman stated.

Dry diets continue to be popular, and Fromm has expanded its offerings in this segment, as well. In October, the company introduced a new dry cat food recipe to its Four-Star Nutritionals line, Trout & Whitefish. The recipe includes trout and whitefish together with whole grains, and select fruits and vegetables, as well as *Miscanthus* grass, an insoluble fiber that can provide digestive support and bowel regularity for cats.

Increased demand for raw and freeze-dried diets has pushed manufacturers to focus more on the segment.

"We chose to develop a line of freeze-dried raw products for cats because this process creates a premium raw product that is safe and shelf stable ... with nutritional benefits and a texture and flavor [formulated to be] appealing to cats," said Kate Benjamin, creator of the Hauspanther Collection by Primetime Petz, a manufacturer based in Rockwall, Texas. "All of the protein used in the Hauspanther freeze-dried raw line is sourced in the U.S."



SHUTTERSTOCK

MEETING PREMIUM DIET DEMAND

WHAT PARAMETERS ARE IMPORTANT

High-end cat foods are in demand, in a variety of formats, and pet specialty retailers are focused on multiple parameters to ensure that what they are offering meets customers' needs.

"Customers are looking for a higher-quality food for their cat," said Kenzi Miller, sales associate for The Healthy Pet, a pet store in Eugene, Ore. "When I think of a premium cat food, I don't want any sort of corn, wheat or gluten. I always want the first ingredients listed to be meat based. Having an overall clean food would make me think it's a premium diet."

Fresh ingredients are important to consumers, said Holly Sher, president of Evanger's Dog & Cat Food Co., a manufacturer based in Markham, Ill.

"It's the freshness that really gives out the perception of [the food being] super premium," Sher said. "We source 90 percent of our stuff within 50 miles from our plant."

Customers expect premium foods to be made with limited ingredients that are of high quality, industry insiders reported.

"Premium diets consist of high-grade, human-quality ingredients," said Heather Bearz, co-owner of Cheshire Cat & Dog Too, a pet store in Cheshire, Conn. "People are trying to get away from byproducts and ingredients that they can't pronounce. If the ingredients look good, people are willing to spend a little more for the health of their animal."

Getting to know manufacturers can help retailers identify quality diets that they can support.

"We look at sourcing of quality ingredients," said Caroline Gunther, owner of Wag! A Unique Pet Boutique in Hendersonville, N.C. "We look at the reputation of the company, the integrity of the company and what its mission is."

There is an educational component to offering premium diets, retailers and manufacturers reported.

"Retailers that have a strong working knowledge of the products they sell and how they benefit pets will have a better opportunity to educate customers and motivate a purchase," said Bryan Nieman, brand director for Fromm Family Foods, a manufacturer based in Mequon, Wis. "We offer a variety of training materials on our product offerings, including a training video series with our nutritionist discussing features, benefits, and talking points to help drive decisions and sales."

Education is often a joint venture between retailers and manufacturers, and working together produces better results for both consumers and retailers.

"It's the stores that educate their customers that stand out," Sher said. "The stores actually do their homework. ... Having reps go into the stores to educate them ... is very important. We train our reps. They come to Evanger's, they see how the food's made. And then they go into the stores and they educate the stores, talk about what works in stores."

INDUSTRY VOICES

What do consumers think of first when they think about premium cat diets?

"Customers tend to respond to labeling that says 'organic' or 'natural,' which really doesn't tell me much. That's all just marketing. If you look at the back of the label for ingredients, some of these foods still have wheat and gluten. It still has chicken byproduct, and it still has corn. That type of labeling doesn't necessarily mean a food is premium."

—Kenzi Miller,

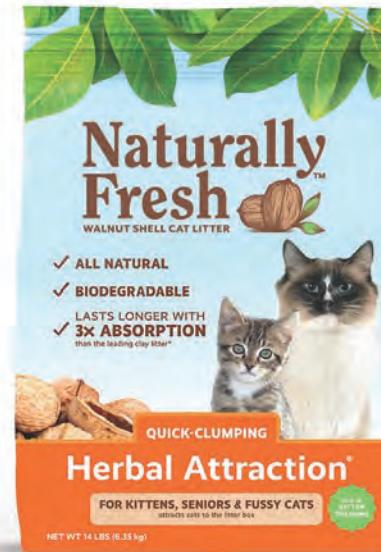
sales associate for The Healthy Pet in Eugene, Ore.

"In the minds of customers, premium can mean many things. We ask our customers, and they may say they want all natural, or that they want the best. We ask, 'What does that mean to you?' Because it means different things to different people. Everyone qualifies that label differently." —**Caroline Gunther,**

owner of Wag! A Unique Pet Boutique in Hendersonville, N.C.



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ZIPPYPAWS

BY PAIGE BROCKWAY

The dog and cat toy market is going strong, with puzzle and enrichment toys experiencing a boost over the past year.

"The pet toy market is at a great steady incline," said Grant Jape, assistant marketing manager for ZippyPaws, a manufacturer in Chino, Calif. "All forecasts and trends are looking promising for the industry, and that's mainly due to the fact that there will always be cute puppies to please."

Jape said the top three factors dog owners are looking for in a toy are durability, unique squeakers and relatability.

"The first two factors are mainly for the pups," he said. "The relatability factor is the cherry on top and tailored for dog owners. Our products such as the Happy Hour Crusherz or plush Donutz give dog owners a good laugh, but our quality is what keeps them buying."

Offering relatable products that appeal to humans and not just pets is also a focus for SodaPup, a manufacturer in Boulder, Colo. Pet owners are quite diverse, and there are many different segments that can be targeted within the dog-owning population, said president Adam Baker.

"After all, dogs will chew on anything we give them," he said. "So, our philosophy is to build toys for the dog owner, not the dog."

SodaPup has multiple sub-brands aimed at different consumers. For example, the SodaPup brand celebrates junk food and manufactures toys that are shaped like soda cans, hot dogs and popcorn.

"One of our best-sellers is a treat dispenser in the shape of a coffee go-cup," Baker said. "For a suburban mom with a couple of kids and a family dog, who loves her Starbucks, the coffee cup design resonates with her."

SodaPup's USA-K9 brand, on the other hand, resonates with a different, more predominantly male audience that includes military members, members of law enforcement, veterans and owners of "tougher" breeds such as Malinois, German shepherds and pit bulls, Baker said, adding that one of USA-K9's best-sellers is a gre-

nade-shaped treat dispenser.

"This is a design that I was highly discouraged from making because it isn't politically correct," Baker said. "But the market is dominated by 'cute and colorful' designs targeting women, while many other types of consumers are underserved. We created the grenade design specifically to speak to some of these other consumers."

Demand is way up for "brain game," slow-feeder and puzzle toys, said Spencer Williams, CEO and owner of West Paw, a manufacturer in Bozeman, Mont. Sales of the manufacturer's 5-year-old Toppl treat-dispensing toy were up 160 percent in 2020 as compared to 2019, according to Williams.

"This became even more apparent during the coronavirus pandemic," he said. "More people worked or attended school from home, so it was even more important to keep dogs busy so we could all get things done."

Williams said customers are willing to pay more for toys that offer innovative solutions.

"Toys that are mentally stimulating or treat-dispensing are great examples of where unit sales do not decline with higher pricing," he said. "This makes sense because mentally stimulating toys help dogs and their owners by keeping their minds active and providing outlets that mitigate bad behavior."

Toppls were one of 2020's best-sellers at Just Dog People, a pet store in Garner, N.C., alongside Benebones, said owner Katie Ast.

"Made in the USA and 'shop local' are [also] trends that are growing by the week," Ast said.

When it comes to cats, owners want safety, quality and enjoyment for their pets, said Kris Kaiser, marketing specialist for Ducky-World Products. The Roseville, Minn.-based manufacturer stuffs its Yeowww! Catnip into shapes that are recognizable for humans and stimulating for cats, such as fruits, crayons, fish and cigars.

"Our Chi-Cat-a Banana is one of our most popular toys, and many of our customers believe their cats love the shape of the toy," Kaiser said. "The curve makes it easy to grab with the front paws and bunny kick."

NEW PRODUCTS

OFFERING A PLAYFUL VARIETY

Last year saw a bevy of new toys hit the market, from the catnip filled to puzzle toys and SKUs in people-pleasing designs shaped like beer bottles, snowflakes and even a marijuana leaf.

DuckyWorld Products introduced its Yeowww! Sun, Moon & Stars catnip toy set in early 2020. The Roseville, Minn.-based manufacturer fills the cotton twill toys with Yeowww! Catnip, its own blend of organic, U.S.-grown catnip with no stems, twigs or fillers, said marketing specialist Kris Kaiser.

"Many people say that their cat has never responded before to a catnip toy until they tried a Yeowww! Catnip toy," Kaiser said. "We believe that is due to the quality of catnip inside the toy, as well as the toy being filled with nothing but catnip."

In August, ZippyPaws, a manufacturer in Chino, Calif., released its Brewery Collection, which joins the Happy Hour Crusherz line. Happy Hour Crusherz are plush toys designed to look like bottles of whiskey, tequila, champagne and other beverages. Each comes with a squeaky cap and a replaceable water bottle inside to keep dogs chewing and engaged. The new collection includes Stout, Pilsner, Lager and IPA.

West Paw, a manufacturer in Bozeman, Mont., launched the Zogoflex Echo Rumbl in September. The slow-feeder puzzle toy features a fish-trap opening and comes in two sizes to fit a range of dry foods or treats.

Zogoflex toys are durable, dishwasher safe and recyclable through West Paw's Join the Loop program, through which the company collects certain products from its customers and recycles them back into new toys and apparel indefinitely, according to the manufacturer. Like the other Zogoflex Echo toys, Skamp and Zwig, Rumbl has a hollow center for lightweight, springy fun.

In the last half of 2020, SodaPup, a manufacturer in Boulder, Colo., introduced more than 20 new SKUs. Two of president Adam Baker's favorites are the nylon Snowflake and Colorado Maple Leaf.

Both toys are built for aggressive chewers, and owners can smear peanut butter or other soft foods into the toys' depressions.

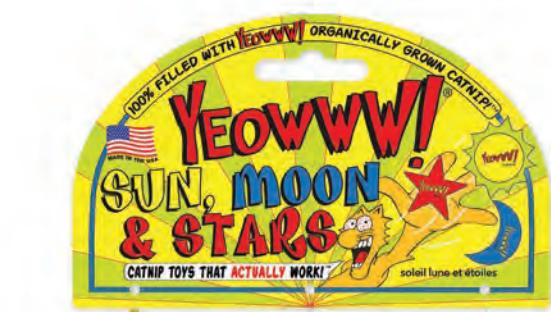
"We have taken nylon chew toys and evolved them into enrichment toys, giving them a dual purpose, and thus greater utility and value," Baker said. "It's a hybrid between a lick mat and a chew toy."

Baker said he was discouraged from creating the Colorado Maple Leaf, which is designed to look like a marijuana leaf, but he said the product was a hit right away and shows SodaPup's "willingness to step outside the box and create fun and unexpected toys that might have broad appeal."



ZIPPYPAWS

► ZippyPaws' new Brewery Collection includes Stout, Pilsner, Lager and IPA toys.



DUCKYWORLD PRODUCTS

► DuckyWorld Products' Yeowww! Sun, Moon & Stars catnip toys are filled with Yeowww! Catnip, organic, U.S.-grown catnip.



SODAPUP

► SodaPup was discouraged from producing the Colorado Maple Leaf dog toy, but it's been a hit, the company reports.

SodaPup's
Snowflake dog toy



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PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT

THE QUEST FOR DURABILITY

Manufacturers and retailers agree that toys' durability is a top priority for dog owners.

"Dog people want long-lasting toys that can't be destroyed in five minutes, and they want it at a good price," said Katie Ast, owner of Just Dog People, a pet store in Garner, N.C.

When building their assortments, retailers should remember that small dogs need durable toys, too.

"You would think bigger dogs go through toys faster than smaller dogs, and often they do," Ast said. "However, small dogs destroy toys just as often. It's usually the smaller dogs that sit and chew at a seam, or an eyeball on a stuffed toy, until the 'inside' is on the 'outside.'"

Durability is a big concern for ZippyPaws, a manufacturer in Chino, Calif. The company offers a wide range of non-plush toys made from latex, ZippyTuff thermoplastic rubber (TPR), rope and more.

"They are built for tough, heavy chewers," said assistant marketing manager Grant Jape. "We have many pups in the office, and luckily for them, they get to test out our prototypes and samples. If our products do not pass our dogs' standards, then we go back to the drawing board."

The company also sells a line of toys made from real fire hose. The idea was born when the company was looking for strong materials beyond TPR and rubber components, Jape said.

"We discovered the fire hose material and how firefighters rely on its toughness and durability when they need it the most," he said. "We wanted to bring that confidence to our toys."

Even ZippyPaws' plush toys are designed to hold up to chewers, with many featuring strong border

webbings stitched together with the company's Z-Stitch pattern.

West Paw prides itself on the durability and safety of its Zogoflex material, a nontoxic thermoplastic elastomer (TPE) material manufactured in Bozeman, Mont. It is infinitely recyclable through the company's Join the Loop program.

"All Zogoflex toys are designed with durability in mind, and we provide options for a range of chew and play habits," said Spencer Williams, CEO and owner of the Bozeman, Mont.-based company. "Our classic Zogoflex has a solid core but offers great flexibility for tough chewers and interactive play. Zogoflex Echo has a hollow core and is built for dogs that love the chewy, durable, bounce-back resistance. Our Rowdies plush toys are made from a HardyTex fabric and Zogoflex chew zones, so they are the perfect durable toy for dogs who prefer plush over our harder plastic toys."

SodaPup, a Boulder, Colo.-based manufacturer, has put significant resources into developing a proprietary rubber compound that is highly durable.

"Natural rubber is a cross-linked polymer," said president Adam Baker. "This means that during the manufacturing process, the material changes its molecular structure while curing under high heat and pressure. The molecules cross-link, which gives it very high tear strength."

Not all rubber compounds are created equal—manufacturers can adjust ingredients based on their performance and pricing goals. Brands that prioritize low pricing often manufacture in China and add fillers like clay to their rubber compounds, Baker said.

"Since those budget rubber compounds contain more filler and less rubber, there are fewer cross-linkages, and, therefore, they have lower tear strength," he said.

MERCHANDISING

PLAYFUL DISPLAYS

Humanizing pets is a way for retailers to get creative with their toy displays, said Grant Jape, assistant marketing manager for ZippyPaws, a manufacturer in Chino, Calif. For example, Jape said, retailers have used ZippyPaws' food-related products, such as Birthday Cakes and NomNomz, to create bakery displays.

Just Dog People, a pet store in Garner, N.C., keeps a birthday table stocked year-round with birthday-themed collars and leashes, cookies and cakes, hats and other party favors, said owner Katie Ast.

The store changes two of its tables monthly to fit themes such as senior dogs, new adoptions and seasonal displays. Two of Ast's favorites from 2020 were the "stuck in the house" and "paw-litical" tables.

The "stuck in the house" table featured puzzle toys and long-lasting chew toys to keep dogs busy while their owners worked from home. The "paw-litical" table showcased patriotic gear, plush elephants and donkeys, and made in the USA treats. Customers were asked to vote for their favorite dog breed, and two winners received their choice of a political toy.

"We really had fun with this year's paw-litical table," she said. "Our community really enjoyed it as well. We noticed many customers taking photos with the table, and at least one person a day made it a point to tell us how much they enjoyed the patriotism of the table."

Retailers should also take advantage of manufacturer-created displays, recommended Kris Kaiser, marketing specialist for Roseville, Minn.-based manufacturer DuckyWorld Products, which is known for its Yeowww! Catnip toys.

"Our displays sell up to 40 percent more product than being pegged," Kaiser said. "We have smaller displays for countertops and shelves, as well as larger displays that showcase a lot of product while taking up a very small footprint."

Stores should keep displays, shelves and peg hooks full, as full displays sell more product, Kaiser noted.

Cindra Conison, owner of The Quirky Pet in Montpelier, Vt., makes cat grab bags with toys and catnip at tiered prices, so customers can just grab them and go.

"You've got to help people along," Conison said.

As a special touch, she offers to add a squirt of catnip oil into cat owners' bags at checkout.

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Preserving Pet Health

Pet owners value the role supplements can play in preventing and addressing the health issues their companion animals face.

BY LINDSEY GETZ

In the same way that pet owners are increasingly proactive about their own health, they no longer want to wait until something is seriously wrong with their pet to seek help. By the same token, many pet owners are taking faster action at the first signs of a problem—and looking to avoid medications with side effects whenever possible. All of this has made the supplement category soar.

The statistics back this up. According to market research firm Packaged Facts, pet supplement usage rates rose from 29 percent in spring 2019 to 38 percent in winter 2020 for dogs. For cats, usage rose from 17 percent in the spring to 19 percent in winter 2020. The top condition for which supplements are purchased remains joint/mobility conditions, followed closely by general health, skin/coat and immune health, according to the Packaged Facts November/December 2020 Survey of Pet Owners.

Lara Bernhardt, director of consumer marketing for H&C Animal Health in Parker, Colo., said there's no question that shoppers are looking for similar types of preventive health support for their pets that they seek for themselves, and the number of available pet options is growing.

"Supplements are not new, but we are seeing the evolution into innovative delivery modes, such as toppers, broths, water-soluble supplements and more," Bernhardt said. "There is a lot of interest in calming supplements like our Daily-dose Dental + Calming Chew, featuring GABA [gamma-aminobutyric acid] and melatonin. We are also tracking demand for hip and joint supplements with new formulations that are not just glucosamine and chondroitin."

Bernhardt said that the company's Angels' Eyes Natural Tear Stain Soft Chews in Sweet Potato flavor has been performing well in the supplement category. This product is a blend composed of natural antioxidants to help prevent tear stains before they start, working from the inside out.

Carl Borucki, manager of The Natural Pet Center at Ireland Corners in Gardiner, N.Y., said that his goal is to help pet owners realize the value of using supplements for preventive care, rather than waiting until there's an issue.



SHUTTERSTOCK

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**WHITEBRIDGE
PET BRANDS**



TRADE TALK

Ann Hudson, vice president of marketing for Whitebridge Pet Brands in St. Louis

What are some of the most common reasons consumers seek supplements for their pets, and how can retailers best support pet owners shopping this category?

Maintaining a healthy body is important for many people, a concept that easily transfers to pets. According to Packaged Facts' report *Pet Supplements in the U.S., 8th Edition*, pet supplement sales rose an estimated 21 percent in 2020 to reach nearly \$800 million, quadrupling the rate of growth observed in 2019, making it one of the fastest-growing categories in pet. Brick-and-mortar is focused on private label, but online offers an opportunity for smaller brands, since owners rely heavily on reviews to make choices for their own pets.

It is a do-it-yourself category, and pet owners are typically trying to solve for three primary health issues, according to Packaged Facts: 52 percent are shopping for hip and joint, 26 percent skin and coat, and 18 percent for digestive aids.

Products for skin, digestion and mobility are found in the supplement aisle, but the same active ingredients are also in food and treats. Dogswell simplifies the science. By merging the benefits of proven actives with chews, treats, and wet and dry food, it is a holistic feeding solution.

Dogswell Jerky is supplemented with active ingredients to solve all four issues, but we are jumping into the supplement space with the launch of Alaskan salmon oil and all-natural Hip & Joint Chews that contain boswellia, MSM and coconut oil.

Crazy idea, but maybe retailers should merchandise functional food, treats and supplements together and create a Hip & Joint section in the store. A brand like Dogswell offers the same functional benefits in multiple formats. It is the No. 1 need of dog owners and a whole new way to look at the category.

"It's great if we can get big dogs on a hip and joint supplement early," he said. "Of course, we also sell supplements for cats and are seeing more interest there. People care more than ever about pets and want to do what they can to protect their health."

Larry Simon, founder and CEO of Somerville, N.J.-based Little Big Shots, the maker of Immune-D, said that immune supportive supplements are popular for pets right now, just as they are for people. He also said that any supplements that support healthy joints, bones or the digestive tract appear to be leading.

Immune-D supplements will soon be joined with a new product called Immune-d Plus.

"Besides giving your beloved dog a healthy immune system, we added the No. 1 concentrated omega from Norway, vitamin C, and other clinically tested ingredients," Simon said. "This new formulation will give your dog a better coat, and help with skin rashes, allergies, eye health, muscles, bones and, of course, the immune system."

In general, retailers are seeing a lot of interest in supplements for senior pets. Eric Mack, owner of Purrrfect Bark in Columbus, N.C., said that aging pets are a hot topic at his store.

"People are home a bit more now and noticing some of their older pets having issues," he said. "Joint health is still a really big part of that, but senior-focused supplements in general are really popular."

Claudia Loomis, executive vice president of Cherrybrook Pet Supplies, a small chain of pet stores in New Jersey, agreed. She said that supplements that can assist senior pets—particularly with cognitive deterioration—are trending.

"Because we specialize in natural and holistic foods, our customers' pets tend to be healthier with fewer chronic health problems," she said. "Even so,

the one thing that our pets cannot escape is aging."

OPTIMIZING THE ASSORTMENT

For pet specialty retailers, curating an optimal assortment of pet supplements is important to ensure that all customers' needs are met.

"Retailers can optimize their selection of products by touching on all areas of vitamin and mineral deficiencies a dog is confronted with as they become older," Simon suggested. "Specialized supplements have become as important to dogs as specific supplements are to humans."

Retailers aiming to put together an optimal assortment might have to do some research and learn all they can about the options available, Loomis said.

"There are brands that offer full lines of supplements—from puppy vitamins to uro support to geriatric supplements," she said. "But we have found that in order to offer a comprehensive selection, we have to bring in one to two products from one company and a few from another. We also carry many single products that are specific to one chronic condition."

Mack said it's important that retailers find one company that fits their standards and that covers a wide variety of types of pets. But after creating a solid lineup there, he would suggest filling in the remaining space with better or more unique brands—or specific items for specific concerns.

Making wise choices does boil down to research, concurred Regina Flight, pet brand manager for NOW Health Group in Bloomingdale, Ill.

"The supplement category is growing, and you should do your research on the products that you bring into your stores," Flight explained. "You want to carry a line that is trustworthy, and the manufacturer has a good reputation. It's OK to ask a lot of questions

about the brands."

The research will be time well spent, as a knowledgeable retailer makes for the best customer experience, Bernhardt said.

"Success in supplements comes from being as educated as possible on the ingredients, benefits and clinical studies behind any product," she said. "There is no more powerful sales tool than being able to recommend a product confidently and accurately to a customer. One additional tip is to be choosy about the products you carry. Resist the urge to have something on the shelf purely because it's trendy. Make sure the science behind it supports all the claims."

SMART DISPLAYS

How a retailer displays and promotes its assortment of supplements will impact the store's sales in the category.

While pet supplements may already be on shoppers' radars, eye-catching signage can help close a sale, Mack said.

"Have supplements in a visible spot with a clean presentation," Mack suggested.

At Cherrybrook Pet Supplies, supplements are merchandised directly across from food aisles, Loomis said.

"It's a natural discussion to have when discussing nutrition," she explained.

Simon agreed that displaying supplements near the food section is the best way to promote their benefits. It also helps facilitate conversations and answer important questions.

Simon said that retailers will sell more supplements if they take the time to educate consumers on the benefits of supplement support, including a longer, more vibrant and overall healthier life.

"People are home a bit more now and noticing some of their older pets having issues. Joint health is still a really big part of that, but senior-focused supplements in general are really popular."

—Eric Mack of Purrrfect Bark

INDUSTRY VOICES

How can retailers ensure that cat owners are aware of the benefits of supplements for their pets?

"Lickable supplements are great for cats. Cat supplements are merchandised across from the cat food—we do not have cat supplements mixed in with our dog offerings."

—Claudia Loomis,
executive vice president of Cherrybrook
Pet Supplies in New Jersey

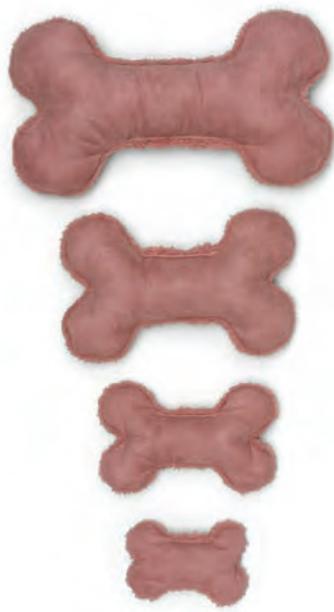
"Having a store cat is one of the best ways to push anything cat related. This has worked well for us with our most recent senior resident, while he was still here with us."

—Eric Mack,
owner of Purrrfect Bark
in Columbus, N.C.

"If you want to sell more cat supplements or give cats more attention, you should carry plenty of product variety. We do have a pretty big line of supplements for cats, and though dogs might get more interest, supplements for cats are picking up."

—Carl Borucki,
manager of The Natural Pet Center
at Ireland Corners in Gardiner, N.Y.





WEST PAW now offers **Big Sky Plush Toys** in dusty rose. Built for moderate play and designed for fun, snuggles, shaking and tugging, the toys are available in the shapes of iconic Montana wildlife. These toys are brought to life from excess Big Sky Blanket fabric, so they're able to keep waste out of the landfill. The toys are handcrafted in Bozeman, Mont. They contain an audible squeaker and are machine washable. westpaw.com



FLUFF TROUGH'S product of the same name features a patented design with a removable silicone insert. The vet-approved ergonomic shape has an open front so pets don't have to bend their necks at a 90-degree angle to eat. This helps to promote better digestion, better posture, less mess and less gas, as well as a more comfortable dining experience, the company states. The nontoxic, BPA-free insert

is made from high-quality, food-safe materials and can be put in the dishwasher. Originally designed for small to medium-sized flat-faced dog breeds, the product also works well for other small or medium-sized dogs, cats, miniature pigs, senior pets and pets with mobility issues. flufftrough.com



ZOO SNOODS' Baby Alien Dog Snood features large alien ears made with high-quality yarn to keep a pup's ears warm and toasty in cold and wet weather. It has stretchy yarn for increased comfort and a woven elastic band for a flexible fit. The product is machine washable and can be washed by hand. zoosnoods.com

SCOUT & ZOE'S presents **Super Fly**, pet treats created with black soldier fly larvae. The line of products includes Super Fly Black Soldier Fly Larvae, Super Fly Black Soldier Fly Food Topper and Super Fly Black Soldier Fly Jerky. Black soldier fly larvae have a small carbon footprint and are beneficial for pets and the environment. The products contain high amounts of protein, lauric acid and amino acid. They feature no rawhide, pesticides, grains or chemicals. scoutandzoes.com



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Function in Focus

As the benefits of cannabidiol (CBD) become more widely understood, pet owners are seeking more specialized products for their pets.

BY SANDY CHEBAT

New pet owners as well as those who spent more time with their furry companions due to stay-at-home orders in 2020 have helped keep the momentum for the cannabidiol (CBD) pet product category going, according to industry insiders.

"In 2020, we saw a significant uptick in pet adoptions around the world due to the global pandemic," said David Martinelli, vice president of marketing at Pet Releaf, a CBD manufacturer in Littleton, Colo. "With these adoptions, people have been seeking out alternative holistic methods to better situate their new family members, and they are seeking out solutions like CBD."

Across the nation, retailers said sales of these products are up for dogs as well as cats. Many, like Geoff Schroer, owner and operator of Furly's Pet Supply in Lake Forest, Calif., attributed some of the uptick to people spending significantly more time with their pets.

"We have seen an increase in CBD sales within the last 10 months," he said. "With COVID-19, many families are working from home and are more aware of the anxiety, stress and pain their pets are experiencing simply by observing it."

Another reason for the increase in CBD sales for dogs and cats is education, said Aidan Gannon, owner of Petzlove, a pet store in Lone Tree, Colo., adding that people are less nervous about buying and using these products.

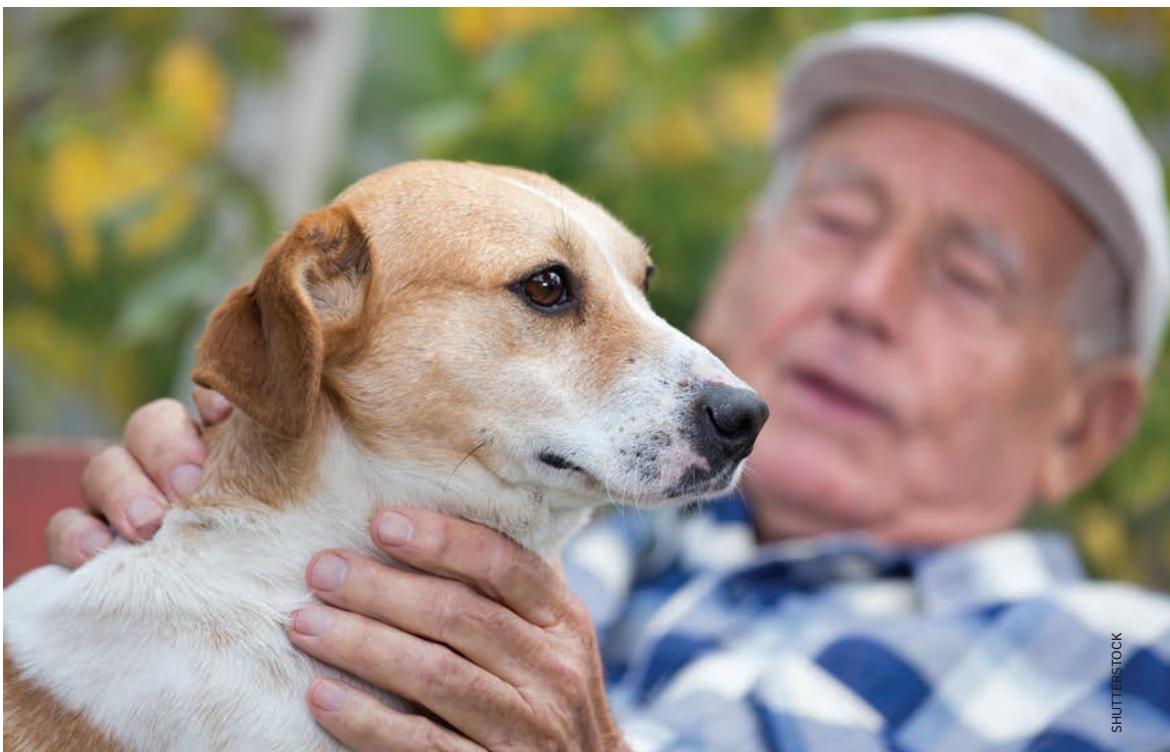
"Five years ago, people were more uncertain about CBD, so you had to talk them into it," he said. "Once it became mainstream, with ads on TV, people could see it advertised and kept front of mind. Now they come in asking for the section and seeking CBD out."

Beyond helping to calm stressed or anxious pets, CBD products are being sought out to address physical ailments and overall health.

"We're seeing more specialized products featuring CBD for both dogs and cats," said Julianna Carella, founder and CEO of Treatibles, a manufacturer in Nashville, Tenn. "Now that savvy consumers better understand the benefits of CBD, manufacturers have begun adding CBD to these established formulas. For example, CBD for joints with added glucosamine, CBD for calming with added herbs and vitamins, etc."

In addition, pet owners are seeking out CBD products to address skin problems and neurological issues, Carella added.

There are a variety of methods available



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TRADE TALK

Will Billings, CEO of HempVet Pet Health Remedies in Burlington, Vt.

What should pet specialty retailers know or understand in order to successfully sell cannabidiol (CBD) products? What is the best way for them to educate themselves on these products?

Pet retailers should partner with science-based brands that are formulated by a board-certified animal nutritionist with a proven track record of formulating for a variety of animal species. It is also important to consider that the effectiveness of hemp and CBD will increase when blended with multiple active ingredients.

CBD is just one molecule within the hemp plant, and hemp is just one ingredient in a well-designed and efficacious product. At HempVet, we expertly formulate with high-quality and proven ingredients, including broad-spectrum USDA [U.S. Department of Agriculture]-certified organic hemp with naturally occurring CBD as well as patented calming, neurological and immunity-boosting colostrum peptides, essential oils and other active ingredients to deliver a highly synergistic effect.

Retailers should look for condition-specific formulations, including anxiety, hip and joint pain relief, and immunity support. Condition- and species-specific formulations, when expertly blended, will provide more targeted benefits than a one-size-fits-all product. Brands that offer multiple delivery methods, including soft chews, oils, topicals and powders, are better suited to meet a pet's unique requirements and offer pet retailers upsell opportunities. Finally, seek brands that stand behind their products by offering superior training and support to address detailed and sometimes complex customer questions.

The single most trusted source for accurate and nonbiased educational information on CBD, and the entire supplement category, is the National Animal Supplement Council (NASC). The NASC provides a comprehensive list of certified brands that have undergone an extensive audit and review process, and they methodically track these certified brands to ensure their claims and ingredients are both safe and regulatory compliant.

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to administer CBD, and retailers report customers look for oil or tinctures first, followed closely by chews.

"Go back a couple years and CBD oil was 70 percent of my market of units sold," Gannon said. "Now it's 50-50 with the CBD treat units."

He also noted more reception on the cat side, with most CBD companies providing a dedicated cat line. There's a wider range of offerings for cats with products labeled especially for them.

"Cats seem to prefer the treats over the oils," said Dean Robbins, president of Bark Appeal, a manufacturer in San Clemente, Calif. "Whether it's the ease of distribution or the flavor, that's what we've seen."

Schroer agreed that chews are sometimes considered more convenient.

"Lately we've noticed an uptick in the demand for chews and treats with CBD for both cats and dogs," he said. "They're easy to use and, in certain circumstances, more convenient than oil tinctures."

"Five years ago, people were more uncertain about CBD, so you had to talk them into it. Once it became mainstream, with ads on TV, people could see it advertised and kept front of mind. Now they come in asking for the section and seeking CBD out."

—Aidan Gannon of Petzlove

NEW PRODUCTS

CHEWY AND FUNCTIONAL

With the rise in demand for cannabidiol (CBD) products for dogs and cats, manufacturers have stepped up their offerings. Most new releases address the need for trial sizes and customers' preference for functional options.

Closing 2020, Littleton, Colo.-based Pet Releaf upgraded its Edibites, which are now available in flavors that are formulated with functional ingredients designed to target specific ailments. Each formula comes in Small & Medium Breed, Large Breed and Trial Size options.

For anxious pups, the company offers CBD Calming Edibites Soft Chew in Peanut Butter and Carob Swirl flavor. The chews contain ingredients like chamomile and baobab to help promote calmness and relaxation, company officials said.

Pet Releaf's CBD Digestive Health Edibites Soft Chew in Sweet Potato Pie flavor aim to combat occasional stomach upset. This formula incorporates ginger and marshmallow root to help support a healthy digestive tract, officials noted.

CBD Hip & Joint Edibites target joint mobility and come in Peanut Butter and Banana flavor. The supplements are designed to be included in a pup's daily regimen and feature ingredients such as glucosamine, chondroitin and noni to help support a normal inflammatory response, mobility and healthy joints, the company stated.

For overall wellness, Pet Releaf makes CBD Immunity Boost Edibites in Blueberry and Cranberry flavor. As the name suggests, they contain blueberry and cranberry to help support antioxidant function in dogs, officials said.

Bark Appeal recently released Purely Ex-Tracted Premium Pet Treats containing 150 milligrams of CBD per bag of 30 treats. The San Clemente, Calif.-based company's CBD is organically grown in Oregon, processed and manufactured at an U.S. Food & Drug Administration (FDA)-registered plant in Florida and Farm Bill compliant, the manufacturer stated.

Treatables has several introductions scheduled for this year. This spring, the company will launch intro-size packs of its line of Soft Chewables for dogs and for cats.

"We are sensitive to the fact that high-quality hemp-derived CBD products for pets are priced at a premium," said Julianna Carella, founder and CEO of the Nashville, Tenn.-based company. "For pet parents wishing to introduce a CBD product, but aren't sure if their pet will take to something new, that can be a turnoff. The intro packs are a cost-friendly option."

Original Soft Chewables for dogs come in Beef Liver flavor, while Soft Chewables for cats comes in Chicken Liver flavor. Both contain organic, full-spectrum hemp CBD oil, turmeric, papain and bromelain. Tater Tot's Sweet Potato Soft Chewables for dogs feature organic, full-spectrum hemp CBD oil and calming ingredients such as valerian root, passionflower and chamomile.

Later this year, the manufacturer will unveil new hemp CBD oil in a Peanut Butter flavor.



CONSUMER EDUCATION

EMPOWER STAFF TO SHARE THEIR KNOWLEDGE

Cannabidiol (CBD) is gaining traction in the mainstream, yet proper employee training and consumer education are required to boost sales as well as reduce misuse and returns.

"Educating consumers is one of our highest priorities since many who come to us are unfamiliar with how the products work and the best way to use them," said Geoff Schroer, owner and operator of Furry's Pet Supply, a pet store in Lake Forest, Calif.

Aidan Gannon, owner of Petzlove, a pet store in Lone Tree, Colo., agreed, breaking the educational essentials into three key areas.

1. Know your product and the manufacturers.

"The most important things staff must know when working with new CBD customers is the benefits of the product and the companies they are looking at," Gannon said. "You want to know where the CBD comes from, how long they've been doing it and the consistency of the lab work."

Most manufacturers provide retail partners with brochures and educational materials, and are available to answer questions and offer suggestions.

"We provide our retailers with as much background on our sourcing so they can be confident in the products they are selling to their customers," said David Martinelli, vice president of marketing at Pet Releaf, a manufacturer in Littleton, Colo. "Additionally, we provide on-demand training through our retailer dashboard and full-time Education Manager to answer any questions they may have regarding the products or ensure we get them the

appropriate information in a timely manner to help them better educate their customers on all of the positive benefits of CBD."

2. Be able to give testimonials about the products.

Gannon recommended that retailers know how the CBD products they carry work, ideally via firsthand experience.

"You need to test them yourself to see how fast acting and potent they are," he said.

3. Explain how CBD works while in a pet's system and that customers can only see effects with continued use.

To improve customer satisfaction and cut down on quick returns, Gannon said he makes sure customers know the product must be used four to seven days to see if it is making a difference in the pet.

"Some people expect an instant reaction, but they must take their time and use it to see the results," Gannon said. "They also ask, 'How long for long-lasting effects?' CBD is not like an antibiotic; it must be in [the] system consistently to keep working."

It's also wise for retailers and staff to ask about a pet's current medications before recommending CBD products, Gannon said. For example, there can be interactions with particular medications, like those used for seizures, he said.

Schroer stressed that identifying the right product for each pet's needs and how to administer it are key.

"Of utmost importance is that all of our staff are trained to identify which product best services the various needs and how to properly determine the proper application and dosage of the product for each specific pet," Schroer added.

OVERCOMING 3 BIG OBSTACLES

The cannabidiol (CBD) industry has experienced plenty of growing pains, and the pet category is no exception. CBD pet product manufacturers and independent retailers shared the main challenges they continue to overcome—and how they are doing it.

1. The misunderstanding that CBD is pot or can get pets high.

While more people understand that cannabidiol does not contain the psychoactive ingredient tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), confusion remains for many, retailers said.

"Educating consumers is going to be the name of the game," said Dean Robbins, president of Bark Appeal, a manufacturer in San Clemente, Calif., adding that it's an opportunity to bring value "by giving accurate information and guidance when picking products for their pets."

Aidan Gannon, owner of Petzlove, a pet store in Lone Tree, Colo., said as people are exposed to accurate information about CBD over time, they are getting used to it.

"Our local networks have done pieces on CBD to explain what it is and understand it better, so the message in Colorado is out there," he said.

2. Price can be an impediment.

Quality CBD products are not inexpensive, so trying them out without knowing if the pet will take to them can give owners pause, said Julianna Carella, founder and CEO of Treatables, a

manufacturer in Nashville, Tenn.

This is where trial or sample sizes have proven very effective, Gannon said.

"Many customers won't make the cost jump without trying the CBD product first," he said. "Thankfully, many companies out here offer the trial sizes, and we sell a ton of them. That typically leads 50 to 60 percent of people to return for the larger sizes."

3. Legislation and regulation.

While the 2018 Farm Bill helped the industry by providing hemp farmers more flexibility and protection from over-regulation, there is more to be done, according to Carella.

"Unfortunately, there is still sometimes a disconnect between the hemp industry and the financial entities that are vital to our businesses," she said.

As an example, she cited the Secure and Fair Enforcement (SAFE) Banking Act of 2019, which would prohibit a federal banking regulator from penalizing a depository institution for providing banking services to a legitimate marijuana- or hemp-related business.

"We had been hopeful that when the House of Representatives passed the SAFE Banking Act by a vote of 321 to 103 in September of 2019 it would be the end of the confusion. Unfortunately, the SAFE Banking Act has been stalled in the Senate's banking committee."

INDUSTRY VOICES

How much do consumers typically spend on cannabidiol (CBD) products for their pets?

"It fluctuates quite a bit. On the higher end, some spend upwards of \$200 a month on CBD. The vast majority of customers spend \$60 every two months."

*—Aidan Gannon,
owner of Petzlove in Lone Tree, Colo.*

"Most consumers purchase a CBD product at least once every two months, spending about \$300 to \$500 per year. This is a gradual increase from previous years."

*—Geoff Schroer,
owner and operator of
Furly's Pet Supply in Lake Forest, Calif.*



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HEALTH EXTENSION PET CARE presents **Little Cups**. The meat-first pâté recipes are created with whole food ingredients such as real chicken and turkey, whole fruits and vegetables as well as natural ingredients such as pure coconut oil to help support optimal health. The 3.5-oz. peel-top cups come in a variety pack of 12, with six Chicken and six Turkey, available in both Small-Breed and Puppy. They are a convenient standalone meal or a perfect addition to mix in with kibble. The recipes do not contain any GMO ingredients, wheat, corn, soy or artificial preservatives. healtheextension.com



SODAPUP'S Mod Bone and Mod Wishbone take nylon dog chew toys to the next level. Treat pockets on the shaft of these toys are perfect for spreading peanut butter and other soft foods into. The toys' curved designs make it easy for dogs to pick them up off the floor. sodapup.com



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Targeting Teeth

Retailers can help pet owners find natural dental care products that fit their budget, comfort level and routines.

BY PAIGE BROCKWAY

As manufacturers and retailers continue to drive home the importance of dental health care for dogs and cats, pet owners are turning to natural solutions that are also simple and cost-effective.

Despite the coronavirus pandemic, Tropiclean Fresh Breath dental care products saw a 15 percent increase in sales between 2020 and 2019, said James Brandly, trade and marketing communications specialist for Saint Peters, Mo.-based Cosmos Corp., maker of Tropiclean Pet Products.

Sales of natural dental products are also up for Pure and Natural Pet, a manufacturer in Norwalk, Conn. Vice president of sales and marketing Julie Creed said the uptick is thanks to rising awareness of the importance of dental care and retailers creating additional shelf space for the dental category.

"Consumers are looking for natural and healthy products that improve their pets' health, and this includes dental care," Creed said.

They want convenience, too.

At Just Dog People, a pet store in Garner, N.C., owner Katie Ast said Tropiclean's Fresh Breath Oral Care Gel is a category best-seller. The brushless gel comes in Peanut Butter, Vanilla Mint and Berry, with formulas for cats and puppies, too.

"Customers love this because it is low maintenance," Ast said. "You just put a glob on the molars ... No brushing or fighting the dog."

Other popular sellers at Just Dog People include Tropiclean's Fresh Breath Dental Health Solution water additives, Primal Pet Foods' raw bones, Benebone Dental Chews and Whimzees' chews.

At Animal Connection, a pet store in Charlottesville, Va., good old-fashioned toothbrushes and toothpaste win out, said owner Pattie Zeller.

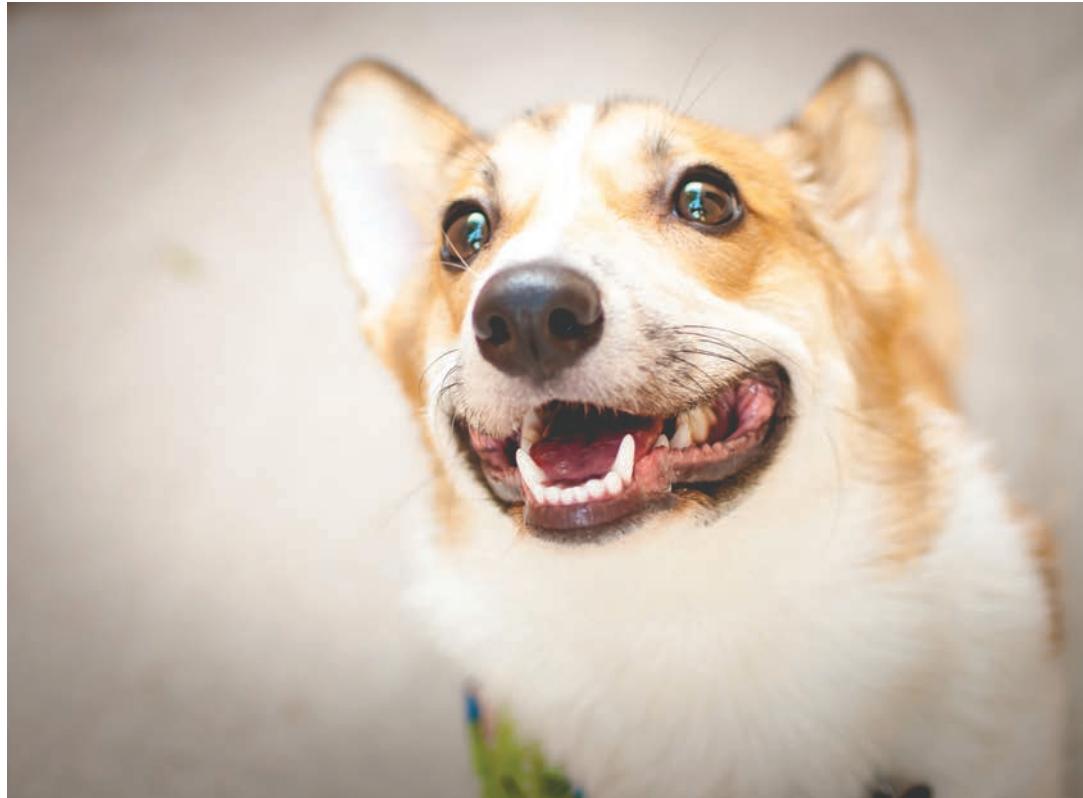
Using a toothbrush and enzymatic toothpaste is the most cost-effective teeth-cleaning method and an excellent way to maintain dental health, said Rachel Cloutier, field training manager for Wag N' Wash Woodmen, a groomer and pet store in Colorado Springs, Colo. Both Wag N' Wash and Animal Connection offer teeth brushing as a walk-in service.

Brandly agreed that brushing is key.

"Brushing our pet's teeth is the most effective strategy to achieve optimum results when it comes to dental health," Brandly said.

Chews are the most widely used dental products for pets, though not necessarily the most effective, according to David Levy, executive vice president of Minneapolis-based Primal Health and founder and CEO of Pet Product Innovations in Des Plaines, Ill. Levy said chews help pet owners address a problem and feel like they're treating their pets at the same time.

"The issue, in my opinion, is that the majority of chews are made of carbohydrates, which actually feed the bad bacteria that live below the gum line that cause periodontal disease," he said. "All the other options often only mask odor and cover up the underlying problem, or only work to minimize plaque on the tooth surface, but do not act below the gum line,



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where help is really needed."

Primal Health's Teef for Life brand focuses instead on improving the whole oral microbiome for better oral health with a water additive that limits bad bacteria while feeding good bacteria with a prebiotic, Levy said.

Regardless of which dental care method pet owners choose, the biggest obstacle is making it a part of the household routine, Cloutier said.

"The biggest hurdle is just doing it—not making excuses that it's difficult, costly or time-consuming," she said. "Oral hygiene isn't just a one-and-done thing. It has to be consistent."

FRESHENING UP THE DENTAL CATEGORY

Both Tropiclean Pet Products and Pure and Natural Pet made changes to their dental product lineups in January.

Tropiclean redesigned its entire Fresh Breath portfolio to freshen up its look, strengthen cohesiveness across its brands, and provide greater transparency for retailers and customers, according to the company.

The products formerly known as Fresh Breath Water Additives have been renamed Fresh Breath Dental Health Solutions. They now carry the National Animal Supplement Council (NASC) Quality Seal and the Veterinary Oral Health Council (VOHC) seal. The NASC Quality Seal "identifies products from companies that are committed to quality, vigilance, and continuous improvement to promote the well-being of companion animals and horses," according to NASC's website, while the VOHC seal recognizes products that meet standards to help control plaque and tartar in pets.

"While our Fresh Breath products now have a new look—and in the case of our Dental Health Solutions, a new name—they still provide the same fresh breath our customers have come to trust and are made with naturally derived ingredients," Brandly said.

Pure and Natural Pet launched its Organic Dental Solutions Bamboo Kits. Each kit features organic Canine Tooth Gel and an environmentally friendly bamboo toothbrush. The kits use eco-friendly packaging and benefit the environmental charity One Tree Planted.

Based on early ordering of the kits, Creed anticipates that they will become one of the company's top sellers.

INGREDIENTS

RECIPES FOR PEARLY WHITES

Many manufacturers focus on offering pet oral care products made with natural ingredients.

The entire TropiClean Fresh Breath line is made with naturally derived ingredients.

"TropiClean defines ingredients to be naturally derived if they are either naturally occurring raw materials or are adapted from naturally occurring plant- or mineral-based raw materials," explained James Brandly, trade and marketing communications specialist for Saint Peters, Mo.-based Cosmos Corp., maker of TropiClean Pet Products.

Two active ingredients featured in the Fresh Breath line are zinc chloride, which helps reduce and control plaque growth, and green tea leaf extract, which has antibacterial properties and helps prevent plaque and tartar formation, Brandly said.

Rather than focusing on eliminating oral bacteria altogether, Teef for Life, made by Primal Health in Minneapolis, aims to target harmful bacteria under the gum line while supporting beneficial bacteria in the mouth.

The brand's Protektin 42 powder water additive uses just four ingredients:

1. Soluble fiber to neutralize bad bacteria.
2. Amino acids to prevent plaque buildup and odor from bacteria.
3. Vitamins to support beneficial bacteria.
4. Sodium bicarbonate to strengthen and whiten teeth.

"We go beyond to source human-grade, plant-derived, unadulterated ingredients that specifically work to improve the oral microbiome by growing the beneficial bacteria that will help your pet's health," said David Levy, executive vice president of Primal Health and founder and CEO of Pet Product Innovations in Des Plaines, Ill.

Norwalk, Conn.-based manufacturer Pure and Natural Pet uses ingredients that many people can find in their own kitchens. Its Plaque and Tartar Fighting Gel and Plaque and Tartar Fighting Spray are made with peppermint; grapefruit essential oils, which kill microbes and fungi; and grape seed oil, which helps reverse tooth decay, strengthen teeth and reduce inflammation, said Julie Creed, vice president of sales and marketing.

The company's new Organic Dental Solutions Bamboo Kits for dogs feature a sweet potato and cinnamon gel.

"Sweet potato is packed with vitamin A and helps digestion, while cinnamon is naturally antimicrobial, antibacterial and anti-inflammatory," Creed said.

Other ingredients in the gel include coconut oil to reduce bad breath and plaque, olive leaf extract to soothe gum inflammation, fennel extract to fight gingivitis, kelp extract to reduce plaque and tartar, and thyme leaf oil to help reduce tooth decay.



JINX presents **Pumpkin & Apple Biscuits**, made with only eight human-grade, nutrient-packed ingredients including real pumpkin and real apples. The biscuits feature vitamins A and C to support the immune system, digestion and heart health, and they contain chia seeds for omegas 3 and 6. The low-calorie biscuits have natural dietary fibers. The product is sourced and made in the USA. thinkjinx.com

TREATWORX DOG TREAT CO.'S

Treatworx Liver Bites are all-natural, single-ingredient dog treats. Freeze-dried liver is high in protein, low in fat and carbohydrates, and contains no additives or preservatives. These treats are great as training aids as they are easy to break into smaller pieces, and no dog can resist freeze-dried liver, the company states. treatworx.com



CONSUMER EDUCATION

EMPHASIZING NUTRITION AND PREVENTION

By the time many pet owners start paying attention to the dental health of their dog or cat, problems may have already set in.

"The first thing we notice in our pets is bad breath, but by then the dental disease has already started," said David Levy, executive vice president of Minneapolis-based Primal Health, maker of the Teef for Life brand, and founder and CEO of Pet Product Innovations in Des Plaines, Ill.

If left untreated, periodontal disease can affect the kidney, liver and heart, said James Brandly, trade and marketing communications specialist for Saint Peters, Mo.-based Cosmos Corp., maker of TropiClean Pet Products.

Dental health has its roots in nutrition and preventive care.

"We strongly encourage foods that don't put tartar on the teeth in the first place, like raw or gently cooked or better kibble without all the carbohydrates," said Pattie Zeller, owner of Animal Connection, a pet store in Charlottesville, Va.

Zeller said the marketing claim that crunchy kibble cleans teeth doesn't hold water. Raw bones and dental chews are better ways to maintain dogs' teeth. For cats, she recommends canned and raw foods.

"The ingredients used and the manipulation in production to make a big kibble that 'cleans teeth' really compromises the quality of ingredients, in the opinion of many holistic veterinarians we respect," she said.

Product samples can encourage customers to try new dental solutions, and kibble should be paired with digestive enzymes, raw bones, and chews for both dogs and cats, Zeller said. Stores can also offer teeth-brushing services to help reduce some damage to the teeth.

Just Dog People in Garner, N.C., finds creative ways to draw attention to dental hygiene. The store swaps out two of its tables monthly and features February's National Pet Dental Health Month as one of its themes. Owner Katie Ast recommends demoing water additives in a store water bowl or fountain, as well as positioning dental kits near pet food and at the checkout.

Because there are so many options to choose from even within the natural dental product subcategory, shoppers may feel overwhelmed, Brandly said. TropiClean's Fresh Breath line includes both brushing and brushless options, but for best results, the brand recommends a three-step process, consisting of the use of the company's water additive, along with the nightly application of the brushless oral gel and once weekly brushing.

Recommendations need to be tailored to each pet and pet owner's comfort and confidence levels, said Rachel Cloutier, field training manager of Wag N' Wash Woodmen, a groomer and pet store in Colorado Springs, Colo.

"A big key is understanding how much effort your guest is willing to put in to their pet's dental care," Cloutier said. "If you sell a toothbrush and toothpaste to a guest who struggles with actually doing it, no favors are being done for either the companion or the guest."

Retailers should also keep cats in mind when educating customers on preventive dental care.

"Dental health in cats is a request we don't often hear about until it is too late, and the pet parent is looking for soft food after a number of teeth had to be pulled," Cloutier said. "Dental health is just as important for your cats as it is for your dogs."



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Domestic Demand

Retailers and pet owners are on the hunt for non-food pet supplies that are made in the U.S.

BY ETHAN D. MIZER

Non-edible pet products that are manufactured in the USA are increasingly in demand among consumers, and carrying U.S.-made products is something many pet retailers take very seriously.

"This is a topic I'm passionate about," said Howard Feldman, owner of California Pet Center, a pet store in Woodland Hills, Calif. "We redid the store about 11 or 12 years ago. Formerly, the store carried pets for purchase, along with a variety of products. I switched the store over to completely high-end, American-made, quality products. I don't carry anything from China. The only products I carry are made in the USA, New Zealand and Canada."

Consumers increasingly seek out products that are manufactured in the United States, noted several industry insiders.

"Demand for products made in the USA is getting stronger every year," said Jerry Moffett, vice president of sales and marketing for Ruff Dawg, a manufacturer in Worcester, Mass. "We see no slowing down on that front. Retailers are better informed and more likely to pass on that information to their customers, so it's a win all around."

Ruff Dawg's toys are entirely made in the USA, from design to packaging and manufacturing.

Focusing on product offerings made domestically is considered beneficial for retailers' bottom lines.

"Products made in the USA have helped sales for a lot of retailers," said Dena Tucker, owner of Greenfeather Bird Supply, a manufacturer of bird and small-mammal toys in West Hartford, Conn. "I'm a big promoter of buying products made in the USA. ... My philosophy is: If I want someone to buy my product, I need to support other American-made businesses. Because if I'm not supporting them, they're not giving their employees an income to possibly buy my products."

Supporting other U.S.-based businesses is good for everyone involved in the pet industry, insiders confirmed.

"The trend towards buying products made in the USA will continue," said Dave Colella, co-founder of Earthdog, a manufacturer based in Brentwood, Tenn.

Earthdog has been hand-making hemp dog accessories, such as leashes, collars and harnesses, in the USA since 1997.

"The independent retailers we partner with rely on the unique nature of premium products from us and various other manufacturers to compete with their big-box counterparts, in terms of having offerings that are different and not mass-produced on the same scale," Colella said. "And these smaller, domestic manufacturers put investment back into local economies. The fact that we do all our production domestically lends real-world value to a retailer that they can pass on to their customers. By carrying us and other USA-made manufacturers, it shows they're walking the walk on these values."

Bob Marshall, owner of Naturally Dogs and Cats, a retailer in Hartford, Conn., is among those retailers who will attest to the value that comes from investing in a product assortment made up of largely domestically made goods—even in categories that make that aspiration difficult.

"Whether it's toys, treats or even leashes and stuff like that, we try to ensure that at least 75 percent of the products we carry are made in the USA, which limits us in the toy arena," Marshall said. "I try very hard to meet this goal. ... Initially, we were trying to source products made in New England. I try to concentrate on items that are manufactured locally. I'll buy from anywhere in the USA, but I do try to concentrate on products made in New England. We're a New England business."

Focusing on USA-made offerings forces retailers to be selective when curating their product assortments and to provide consumers with a more distinctive selection.

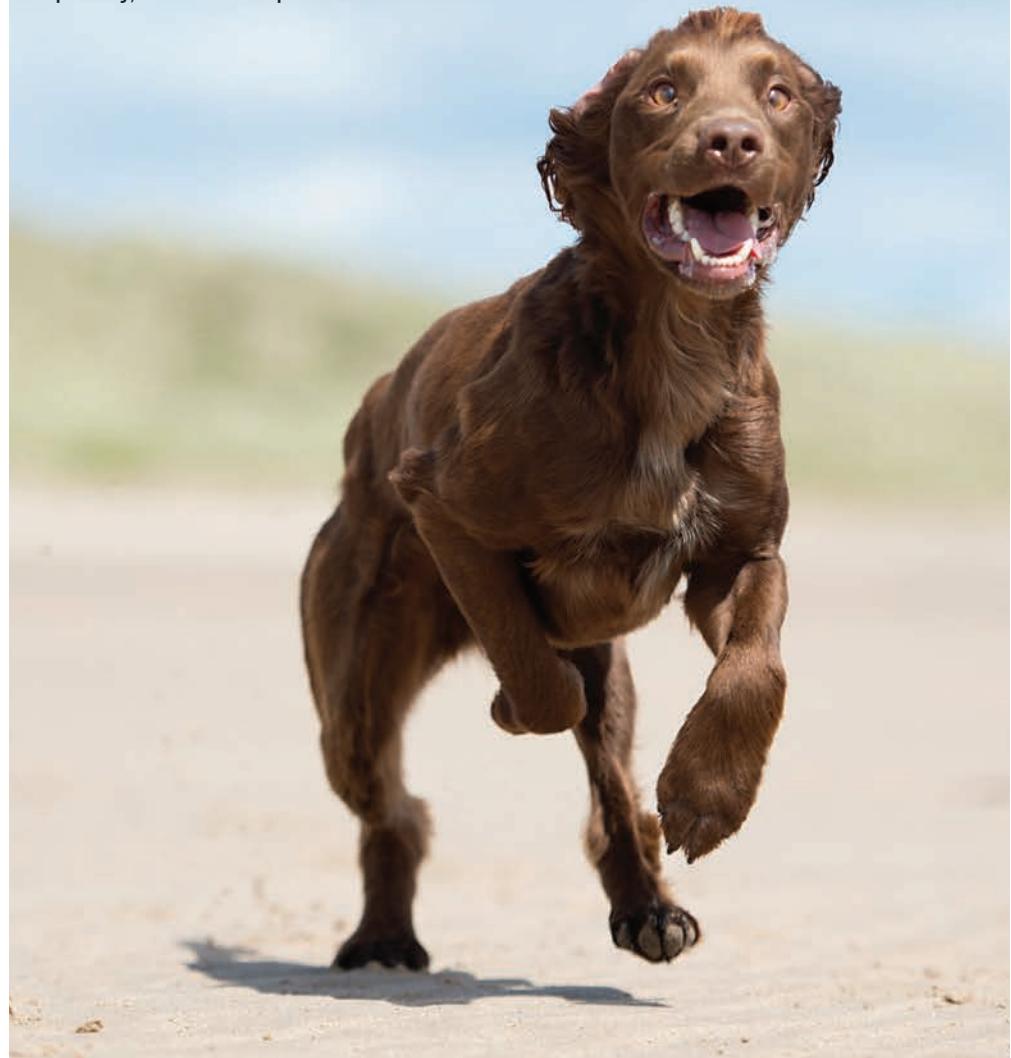
"It's a difficult category to fulfill with different and unique product," said Audree Berg-Farnsworth, co-owner of Augie's Pet Supplies in Fort Lauderdale, Fla. "I have a rule that I don't carry any toys that aren't made in the United States. It does two things. It really separates the wheat from the chaff. Toys are so much fun, but it's easy for me to dismiss 95 percent of the toys out there because they're not manufactured in the United States. In that way, it forces me to have to go out and find unique, smaller manufacturers."

PRICE PERCEPTIONS

Some consumers think of products that are made in the U.S. as being more expensive, and there is truth in this long-held assumption.

"The perception the products manufactured in the USA are more expensive is still prevalent," Marshall said, adding that "products made here in the U.S. are more expen-

U.S.-made non-edible pet products, and toys especially, are a hit with pet owners.



SHUTTERSTOCK

sive, but everybody knows the quality is better."

Yet the discrepancy in price between domestically produced and foreign-made products is not quite as great as it used to be.

"Prices have leveled out a little bit between those made in the USA and others," Feldman said. "However, when it comes to price point, we don't really have that much of a problem. Our customers aren't looking for the least expensive option or the best bargain. We're different from a lot of stores. We don't really have that in our conversation very often."

Pet owners also want U.S.-made products for peace of mind.

"Customers view it as a safety issue," Berg-Farnsworth said. "They're more comfortable with products that are manufactured in the United States, especially toys. They have a sense that these products are better in terms of safety. They know that there are no toxic elements that are incorporated into the construction of that toy."

Moffett agreed, saying that consumer safety is a key advantage when it comes to USA-made toys.

"The perception of USA-made toys is that they are both better quality and safer," he said. "We know pet parents are increasingly concerned with their pets' health from the huge up swell in popularity of premium, human-grade and fresh pet foods. We are very proud of the fact that we use only safe, FDA [U.S. Food & Drug Administration]-approved materials, so pet parents can feel secure that they chose the best, safest toys."

Another advantage to stocking goods that are manufactured in the U.S. is that while some segments within the pet industry have faced product availability issues in recent months, most USA-made items have not had this same issue.

"I haven't had a problem with [product availability]," Marshall said. "As a matter of fact, if anything, I would say that more stuff has been available. I have had companies reaching out to me. It's been more local companies that are able to ship independently of a big distributor."

Stocking U.S.-made products offers reassurance in that the products are generally more readily available and are often thought of as safer than other competing products.

"With all the craziness and uncertainty of the past year [due to the pandemic], availability is a major plus for distributors and retailers," Moffett added.

NEW PRODUCTS

U.S.-MADE TOYS AND ACCESSORIES

As demand for pet products manufactured in the U.S. increases, new offerings continually come to market to meet customer needs.

"I have at least a dozen or more new toys that I've released within the last six months," said Dena Tucker, owner of Greenfeather Bird Supply, a manufacturer of avian and small-mammal toys in West Hartford, Conn. "I use all sorts of different materials to make toys with. ... Sometimes it's little things that can create something different."

Tucker is in the process of releasing cardboard and paper toys called Flapjacks. While they're designed for birds, most of the Flapjack toys can also be adapted to be used by small mammals.

"The Flapjacks are excellent to stuff with fresh flowers/greens [and] dry or dried (like fruit) treats to forage," she said.

She also recently designed toys for bats in conjunction with a customer's donation to a local rescue.

"I'm also developing a series of toys called Zombie Toys," Tucker said. "They're going to be available in four different sizes: small, small-medium, medium and large. Zombie toys are put together at a specific price point. In other words, I use a bunch of leftover parts that I don't know what to do with, but there's enough to do a short run, around six to 15 toys. ... I'll do another run with different parts, but it will go out at the same price point. I want to offer toys so that stores can place their normal order, spend X amount of dollars, and these toys

are going to be different every time. That way, stores don't have to add another SKU to their UPC system. They can still bring in new toys without having to spend the time choosing new SKUs or updating their system every time they place an order."

Zombie Toys are currently available for birds, but Tucker might release Zombie Toys for small mammals in the future.

Domestically manufactured toys and other products for dogs are also a focus for many manufacturers and retailers.

Ruff Dawg, a manufacturer in Worcester, Mass., recently launched two new dog toys.

"Dawg-Cube and Dawg-Cube XL are the newest addition to our line of Lifetime Guaranteed indestructible toys," said Jerry Moffett, vice president of sales and marketing. "They're made of solid rubber and have a crazy-bounce action [designed to] activate a dog's natural instinct to chase and retrieve. Also, our brand-new noise-making toys are the Crinkit and Crinkit XL. These toys are made with a solid rubber shell enclosing an empty water bottle."

Both the Dawg-Cube and Crinkit toys come in high-visibility neon colors and are 100 percent made safe in the USA with U.S. Food & Drug Administration (FDA)-approved rubber, Moffett noted, adding that they are free of phthalates, latex and BPAs, and are completely recyclable.

Earthdog, a manufacturer in Brentwood, Tenn., offers lines of eco-friendly, hemp-based products for dogs, including collars and leashes.

"We'll be releasing smaller, three-quarter-inch-width [collar] options in four of our most popular patterns this spring," said Dave Colella, co-founder of the company. "We've always found it to be in our best interest and the best interest of our customers to maintain control of our process from production to fulfillment. As a result, we have been able to meet all our product demands with no interruption through this tricky time."

CONSUMER EDUCATION

TELLING A STORY

To get the word out that they carry U.S.-made products, some pet specialty retailers reported that they do not necessarily rely on signage indicating that products are manufactured in the U.S. Instead, they start a conversation with customers and personally relay the advantages of domestically produced products.

"I'm very open with customers about where different products are made and why I like them," said Bob Marshall, owner of Naturally Dogs and Cats, a retailer in Hartford, Conn. "Because we are so small, I talk about each product with customers and spend time with them to educate them. I go that extra mile to push that American-made product, and it usually sells very quickly. It's purely educational. I don't have any signage indicating products are made in the USA. My business's tagline is, 'Specializing in natural and locally sourced products.' ... I'm just happy that we stock products made in the USA, and I wish there [was] a push for more manufacturers to make products made in the USA more readily available to keep our American workers employed."

Sharing a manufacturer's story can help when conversing with shoppers.

"Stories are powerful, and every small manufacturer has a compelling story about why we're doing what we do and how we do it," said Dave Colella, co-founder of Earthdog, a manufacturer based in Brentwood, Tenn. "I think [those stories] can be a very helpful and motivating factor on sales. We are passionate about rescue dogs and have maintained a pack of 14 to 16 for the last 20 years. Ten percent of our proceeds go back into spay/neuter initiatives. For production, we use local stitchers and run our business at a shop on our property. I don't think there's any question that having some of this information ready to share with customers will help make a connection and bring meaning and added value to a potential purchase."

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Herp Diets Diversify

Despite challenges with supply and demand, retailers have seen sales of livestock and live food on the rise, in addition to customers seeking alternative options.

ETHAN D. MIZER

The herp industry has faced many shakeups in the past six months, with most pet specialty retailers and manufacturers reporting strong sales growth and increased interest in the reptile and amphibian hobbies. Local independent pet stores are selling more live herps, and with livestock sales up, retailers are seeing herp food sales also increase.

But toward the end of 2020, retailers reported difficulties in sourcing some live food options. As a result, many herp hobbyists diversified their pets' diets by adding both alternative live feeder options and pre-packaged diets.

"If customers went to their local pet store and something wasn't in stock, they may have gone with something that they normally wouldn't feed, and they've discovered that their animals like it," said Andy Pettit, sales manager for Timberline Live Pet Foods, a supplier of live food in Marion, Ill. "They're less hooked on one staple feeder. They've diversified. We tell that story all the time. Diversify the diet. You've got staple feeders, and you've got supplemental feeders. People were just stuck with what they were comfortable with, and then, due to scarcity, sometimes they had to try something new."

Availability issues persisted for some independents, while other retailers reported little or no impact from live food supply issues.

"We've had some problems with availability, but I have some long-term relationships with suppliers, and they've been pretty good about filling my orders," said Adam Zweig, owner of Adam's Pet Safari in Chester, N.J. "We've had people calling, sometimes five or six times a day, asking if we had crickets because they couldn't find any. We've never been out."

Some attributed the problems with availability to shipping issues related to the global pandemic.

"We've definitely had issues getting live foods in stock," said Gavin Logan, manager of Custom Creatures Pet Shop in Phoenix. "Shipping problems caused by the coronavirus have definitely affected our ability to stock a lot of our different items."

Other industry experts suggested the shortages might be due to restrictions in supply.

"There's a shortage," said Chris Giacoletti, owner of Reptile Island, which has three locations in Southern California. "I can't get the amount of crickets that I need. It started with superworms. I used to get 30,000 to 40,000 a week per store. In total, I was going through 90,000 to 120,000 superworms a week. Right now, my suppliers are limiting me to only 5,000 per store."

In some cases, crickets—universally considered the staple live food for herps with the highest sales volume, by far—were readily available, while other species were in short supply. However, now, supply shortages are starting to clear up.

"Crickets were never the problem," said Alison Pelletier,



Sources report that pandemic-related supply issues are starting to clear up for live feeders.

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co-owner of Curious Creatures, a reptile store in Chicago. "It was everything else. Dubia roaches, calcium worms, hornworms and silkworms were hard to find. All of the other staples feeder items that people like to have are finally available after months of not being able to get them in. We're finally getting them [in] weekly now. But we'll order thousands or more, and they're gone within three or four days."

While supply is starting to catch up, demand continues to be high for live foods.

"Some of the live feeders have very recently become available again," Logan said. "Demand for dubia roaches is very high. I can't ever keep them in stock."

With retailers reporting very high sales of herps, live food sales have remained strong, and as supply issues slowly resolve, retailers have demonstrated the ability to deal with difficult conditions and grow business.

"Availability has been an issue mostly due to labor," Pettit said. "Obviously, ridiculous growth has been difficult to keep up with for all live animals and feeders. ... It's just a little bit less difficult for a reptile shop that focuses solely on reptiles [to adjust] ... where the systems that are in place at the larger stores don't allow for that level of flexibility. Of all the retailers we deal with, some are more nimble than others. But retailers overall have been impressively nimble. There may have been a touch of a lag, but I think people realize very quickly how critical our inventory is to their overall foot traffic and total transactions."

WHAT'S SELLING

A DIVERSE MIX

Live foods are still the dominant dietary option for most herps, industry experts reported. However, in some cases, prepackaged dietary offerings are selling better than they have in the past.

"Live food is still the king," said Chris Giacoletti, owner of Reptile Island, which has three locations in Southern California. "I don't ever see that changing, especially because pre-packaged foods are 200 to 300 percent more than what live foods cost. ... As far as canned and alternative foods, I've probably started to sell more of that recently, but a lot of that's because we're pushing it because we are short on live food."

Less mainstream options are more popular, as customers increasingly purchase foods in different formats.

"Black soldier fly larvae recently became more popular," said Gavin Logan, manager of Custom Creatures Pet Shop in Phoenix. "We've had the canned soldier fly larvae, but live sales picked up recently."

Alternative dietary supplements, such as live isopods, are growing in popularity among hobbyists as a supplementary food source and enclosure cleanup option.

"Isopods are a great seller," said Stacy M. Davis, purchasing director for That Fish Place/That Pet Place, a pet store in Lancaster, Pa. "At any given time we are offering eight different varieties for sale. These make a great snack [for herps], but,

more importantly, they work as the cleanup crew in the tanks. Dubia roaches are the next best-sellers, followed by our four types of fruit flies. Crickets remain a staple, although we do try to encourage our customers to feed a variety to

their herps, as a well-rounded varied diet is the healthiest you can offer."

The combination of supply shortages and retailer efforts to encourage healthful feeding has led to an increase in the number of hobbyists expanding the variety of foods they offer their herb pets.

"Customers are sometimes interested in the nutritional value of feeders," Davis said. "We do have that information listed on our informative cards too. Most customers are just looking to offer a variety in order to cover all of the basics in nutritional needs."

Interest in herb nutrition continues to grow, and retailers are supporting this trend for the good of the pets they sell.

"There are definitely more people that are looking for stuff with better nutritional content," Giacoletti said. "That's especially true for customers who are researching online.

... I definitely think that's driving interest in dubia roaches. Nutritionally, they are superior to crickets."

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LIVE FOOD ADVANTAGE

TURN UP THE VOLUME

The number of pets retailers sell is tied to the volume of food sales, retailers reported. As sales of herps have trended higher, customers are purchasing live foods in greater volume.

"[We] definitely sold more reptiles and amphibians [last] year," said Alison Pelletier, co-owner of Curious Creatures, a reptile store in Chicago. "We've definitely seen an increase in volume [food sales]. Before the pandemic started, we would maybe order roaches once a month. Now we have to do this weekly. Even then, within two or three days they're gone. Customers come in, they pick up their limited amount, and we're out again. This is something we have to keep ordering every single week."

Independent pet retailers are uniquely situated to meet demand for both live pets and live foods, meaning that local shops stand to continue to gain more business and a reliable customer base, as few other sources for these dietary products offer the same benefits to customers.

"We don't really see customers buying [live foods] online, because the cost of shipping live feeders is ridiculous," Pelletier said. "Unless they're bulk buying—which, depending on the feeder insects purchased, they'll just die—people don't want to have to deal with shipping live insects or buying so many at one time. A lot of people are still coming to us a little bit more frequently than they would like, but they know that they can get their feeder insects here."

Some customers are buying in bulk online, though this is usually limited to those who are breeding herps, which is typically a small portion of any given store's customer base, retailers reported.

"I'm still going through the same numbers [of live food sales], but you have to keep in mind that I'm getting new customers," said Chris Giacoletti, owner of Reptile Island, which has three locations in Southern California. "Some people definitely are [buying live foods online]. Honestly, the only benefit of ordering online is ordering in bulk. A lot of the people who are breeders have always been buying online. I don't sell as much bulk buying as I used to."

For most customers, however, storing and caring for live feeders is too much trouble, and brick-and-mortar retailers have a distinct advantage when it comes to herb dietary sales because of this.

"Retailers recognize the value of [live feeders] a little bit more," said Andy Pettit, sales manager for Timberline Live Pet Foods, a live food supplier in Marion, Ill. "Even through the worst of the shutdowns, we kept a lot of foot traffic coming into stores. Primarily it's because people can't really stock their pantries with our products. You have to buy what you need when you need it. You can't go and get four weeks of live food and bring it home and hope for success."



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CUSTOMER SERVICE & EDUCATION

PREMIUM PERCEPTION

Customers often associate independent pet stores with quality when it comes to live foods, industry experts reported. This isn't necessarily due to the quality of the feeders on offer, but rather the attention to in-store care that more nimble local pet stores are able to provide.

"You can find really high-quality bugs at both independent pet stores and big-box stores," said Andy Pettit, sales manager for Timberline Live Pet Foods, a live food supplier in Marion, Ill. "It's all about the source. It depends on where retailers are getting their live foods from. That said, in-store level of care matters. Care is very important. But if you start with a high-quality product, the likelihood that the end user customer is going to receive a high-quality product is much better."

Some local pet retailers also have the advantage of moving a higher volume of live feeders through their doors, on average, which helps ensure foods are well taken care of and haven't been sitting in stock for too long.

"We're getting [live feeders] all from the same people, but if they have their crickets in-store for so long, and they're not gut-loading into stuff, customers end up feeding a hollow exoskeleton to their pets," said Chris Giacoletti, owner of Reptile Island, which has three locations in Southern California. "Because we go through crickets so fast, customers are getting a nice, healthy cricket."

This often leads customers to think of local independent stores as sources of premium live feeders.

"Just from what I've heard from our customers, yes, they think of our feeders as definitely on a different level than ... some of the [other retailers] in our area," said Alison Pelletier, co-owner of Curious Creatures in Chicago. "People always say that our insects are just lively and healthier-looking than they've seen at other places."

Offering superior communication and education is another reason customers often prefer to purchase herp dietary products from local independent pet retailers.

"We offer a lot of education about the importance of offering a variety, showing customers that some of the herbs will accept the commercial canned and packaged foods as well as the live feeders," said Stacy M. Davis, purchasing director for That Fish Place/That Pet Place, a pet store in Lancaster, Pa. "We also merchandise some of our feeder foods, dubia food, cricket diets and hornworm foods alongside our live feeders, as most of our customers understand the importance of keeping the feeders gut-loaded and alive."

The category is seeing growth, both in terms of live animal sales and related dietary sales. Independent pet retailers have stepped up to offer superior service and supply customers with the foods they need to keep their herbs successfully.

"Overall, the reptile category is very healthy," Pettit said. "There are a lot of really good people out there who've done a lot of really good things and overcome some insane challenges to keep it going. Unfortunately, some [retailers] didn't make it, and others stepped up to occupy that space. It shows how our category is so resilient. Even in the grander scheme of things, we're a smaller sliver of the pie, but we're just as robust and nimble to be able to meet our customers' demands, even in the worst of times."

INDUSTRY VOICES

If things open up, I expect business to grow even bigger. It's insane right now. If you would've told me 12 months ago that we'd be where we are right now, I'd tell you you're insane. If you had told me we [would] be able to pull off what we pulled off in 2020, with all the circumstances in play and the challenges we faced, I probably would have responded with skepticism.

... One thing that has been

What challenges and opportunities do you see coming for the herp category and dietary product sales this spring?

completely missing are the reptile shows. There are some out there, but even for the reptile shows that did occur, the amount of animals they had to sell was not very high. Now that we have all these new people enter the hobby, once they discover the reptile shows in 2021, if everybody's able to get their inventory back up to normal levels, the hobby is going to grow even more."

—Andy Pettit,
sales manager for Timberline Live Pet Foods in Marion, Ill.

"I'm anticipating that business is going to continue to grow, or possibly stay the same. Now that everybody has these animals, they still have to care for them. So people are still going to come in and get the same amount of feeder insects. I don't think sales will skyrocket as much as they did when the pandemic started, but I could be wrong. I've been proven wrong before. ... Customers may not be buying a new pet, but they'll still be coming in for the care and the products needed to continue to care for the animals they already have."

—Alison Pelletier,
co-owner of Curious Creatures in Chicago

"I'm looking forward to being able to open my shops all the way so people can come in and shop instead of having to socially distance. A lot of people like to buy stuff that they see. I know I've lost sales because customers can't come in and look. Hopefully, with the vaccine coming out, it's going to get better. Personally, I think that the economy is going to go down a little bit. It already has started. ... Overall, though, I think business is going to hold strong. A lot of people that don't really know about reptiles, their friends started getting it, and they want to get into it too. I don't see [the overall economy] crippling us at all. I think it will go down a little bit, but I think it's still going to be strong."

—Chris Giacoletti,
owner of Reptile Island, which has three locations
in Southern California

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Illuminating Sales

Demand for fixtures is up in all aquarium categories as business slowly returns to normal.

BY ETHAN D. MIZER

Keeping dry goods in stock continued to present a problem for pet specialty retailers through the end of 2020, but both livestock and equipment sales showed strength leading into 2021. Now, in the first quarter of the new year, retailers report that they expect sales to grow as business conditions slowly return to normal.

Over the past few months, retailers reported struggling to keep lighting products in stock.

"From my understanding, it's really the smaller stores that have suffered from the stock issues with lighting," said Kevin Knudsen, manager of Aquatic Design & Development Group, a pond design and construction developer and provider in Ocala, Fla. "For example, with Radion and AI, Bulk Reef Supply and these other large online retailers, they put in massive orders. And that is why a lot of these lights were back ordered. So if I tried to order an AI light from the actual manufacturer, I'm on hold for three months, but if I order one through Reef Supply and pay a little bit more, I can get it almost immediately."

This is exactly what Knudsen and other retailers reported doing, just to make sure they could meet rising demand for aquarium lights.

"We've had to do it just to try and please our customers," Knudsen added.

New customers, as well as those expanding upon their existing aquarium hobby, are creating demand.

"Most of our sales on lighting seem to be coming from [aquarists who are] expanding their tanks or just starting out," said Stacy M. Davis, purchasing director for That Fish Place/That Pet Place, a pet store in Lancaster, Pa. "We're not seeing as much demand in the way of those with existing lights upgrading their setups."

Retailers also noted that more hobbyists prefer higher-end lighting setups and equipment, both for reef applications and planted tank systems.

"Everybody's leaning towards getting into higher-end lighting as opposed to running basic setups," said Wayne Sylvia, sales associate at Aquatic Treasures, a tropical fish store in Las Vegas. "A lot of customers are favoring lights with more blue-spectrum output more than full-spectrum output. ... Re却ers want to be able to adjust and tweak and change stuff up a little bit. That's what's nice with the higher-end lighting. You have that control."

Reef-focused retailers are reporting that, in some areas, they are seeing demand for lighting products and other dry goods from more advanced planted tank aquarists. For a few, this has led to an expanded business focus.

"We are primarily reef," said Jeff McCarty, manager for Barrier Reef Aquariums in Renton, Wash. "However, we do have a lot of people coming in asking for freshwater planted stuff, which is why starting [this year], I will be bringing freshwater planted products and species into the store."

Planted tank lighting may not represent the same value proposition to retailers, but



SHUTTERSTOCK

with more aquarists entering that segment of the hobby, and fewer full-line stores catering to advanced freshwater, there may be a niche for marine-centric retailers to serve.

"Marine hobbyists strive for high-end options and the latest technology with special features more so than freshwater hobbyists," said Claus Frenken, sales manager for Sera North America, a Montgomeryville, Pa.-based manufacturer of aquatic products. "Marine hobbyists typically spend more money on new lighting than freshwater hobbyists. Freshwater hobbyists may even tend to buy budget options or at least options with fewer special features, whereas marine hobbyists look for high-end products."

Still, demand is up in all aquarium lighting categories, and as both manufacturers and retailers figure out how to cope with the aftereffects of 2020, growth in equipment sales appears likely to continue accelerating higher.

"Pretty much everything has increased," said Jay Sperandio, sales director for Eco-Tech Marine, a manufacturer of aquarium equipment in Allentown, Pa. "All aquarium product sales—not just one category—are up. ... We've seen a significant increase in hobbyist interest, and that combined with the periodic difficulties associated with shipping everything else related to our industry and every other industry means we're having to balance that increase in demand with the slightly more difficult supply situation. We've been fighting that pretty much since the beginning of the pandemic just to try to maintain our product availability in the marketplace at the levels required to meet demand."

MERCHANDISING

LIGHTING UP LIVESTOCK

Aquatic livestock helps sell lighting in brick-and-mortar pet specialty retail stores, and lighting helps sell livestock, retailers reported.

"We have a display tank with about \$30,000 worth of coral in it, which has two Kessil lights on it," said Kevin Knudsen, manager of Aquatic Design & Development Group, a pond design and construction developer and provider in Ocala, Fla. "All of our frag tanks have AI 32s on them. Then we have another set of frag anemone tanks with Noopsyche lights on them. We try to show as much as we can. ... We actually have every one of the lights

we carry on display. So people have the option to go through and pick and choose what they may or may not like as far as coloration, size or spread."

Setting up lights to emphasize the colors they can produce, and the visual appeal they bring out in livestock, is a fundamental selling tactic.

"I see the pop of color output to be one of the most-sought-after lighting features," said Stacy M. Davis, purchasing director for That Fish Place/That Pet Place, a pet store in Lancaster, Pa. "This is not to say that customers do not like the ability to program and control lights remotely. They do like those options, but they also want the light to produce what they need to keep

their tank inhabitants happy and healthy."

With attractive display aquariums set up, light fixtures end up driving sales almost by themselves.

"Basically, it comes down to having products in stock, and having a nice display set up," Knudsen said. "When customers walk in to our store and see a really impressive reef aquarium lit with a Red Sea fixture, and it's just absolutely packed with everything from softies [soft corals] to small polyp stony corals, it will stop them in their tracks. Customers stop and take a look at it when they walk in, and they end up asking what lights we're running on that tank. That's how these lights sell themselves. The results we have with our livestock sell them every time."

"ILLUMINATING SALES" CONTINUED ON PAGE 95

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Pond Installations Booming

The water garden industry is seeing a surge of interest that is driving new business for installers, maintenance providers and pond product retailers.



BY ETHAN D. MIZER

The pond and water garden industry is enjoying a surge in sales, with water feature installations and maintenance services both increasing, retailers reported. Dry goods, livestock and almost anything pond or water feature-related is doing well, and industry experts expect the trend to continue into the spring of 2021.

There was a notable increase in pond installations last year, according to retailers, though foot traffic in pond stores also showed growth.

"Business has been in an uptick since 2020," said David Gute, manager of Barracuda Watergardens, a water garden and pond store in Auburn, Calif. "Installs were up last year. The retail store also saw an uptick in traffic, too."

Though other segments of the pet industry experienced dry goods shortages and problems with delivery in 2020, the pond industry was not as impacted by these trends, retailers reported.

"Early on, there were some suppliers that were experiencing some lag processing orders," Gute said. "But I think that was just from the uptick in the demand coming unexpectedly."

With more people staying home, they have had more time—and more disposable income—to invest in the pond hobby.

"We were up quite a bit last year, but I attribute that to COVID more than anything," said Mike Lucas, owner of Garden Ponds and Aquariums Unlimited, a store in Moore, Okla. "People are at home. They're messing with their gardens. If they're not jet-setting off to Europe, there's an extra \$20,000 to spend on ponds."

Those in the pond industry are also more accustomed to cyclicalities, as so much of the hobby depends on seasonal trends and limited availability. This has likely helped pond installers and retailers weather difficult business conditions that have affected

others in the pet industry more acutely.

"There's an ebb and flow [in this industry]," said Zachary Krohne, owner of Krohne Tanks and Ponds in Atlanta. "Things come and go in terms of availability. ... Things will run thin, and then all of a sudden they'll get caught back up. We've had to find other brands that we have to use, or settle for brands that we don't particularly like. Sometimes, we have had to order something off Amazon to keep the fish alive."

Many retailers noted that they were already situated to deal with shortages, and some did not even notice shortages until later in 2020.

"We've had some back orders, but nothing too crazy," Lucas said. "We've been pretty lucky. We buy most of our stuff early and get it at the very beginning of spring. So we try and get about 80 percent of what we would sell all at once."

Ponds and water features are also increasingly accessible, as set-ups designed to accommodate a variety of budgets are available.

"There truly are water features for every budget," said Brian Helfrich, vice president of construction for Aquascape, a manufacturer of water features and pond products based in St. Charles, Ill. "Small fountain kits and mini ponds serve as entry-level options for the hobby. Once people are exposed to water features, they typically want to expand their options and desire something larger. Even people who start with a pond end up expanding it or customizing it over the years."

CONSTRUCTION TRENDS

The lockdowns early in 2020 coincided with the usual pond installation season, which helped drive demand.

"We are seeing more people entering the pond hobby as they engage in home improvement projects," said Catherine Langford, senior brand marketing manager for Tetra, a brand of Blacksburg,

"As people spend more time at home, their backyards are getting facelifts, and ponds or water features with fish are a part of those improvements."

—Chris Clevers of Hikari Sales USA

Va.-based Spectrum Brands Pet. "New ponds are typically constructed in the spring, so the lockdowns certainly encouraged new pond builds in 2020, especially with DIY [do it yourself] container ponds."

More people are putting in ponds, and those with existing ponds are upgrading them and adding to their volume. Also, ponds intended to house aquatic species are increasingly popular.

"Based on what we are hearing from consumers who contact our customer support team, it appears there has been a nice increase in new ponds and also pond enhancements or size upgrades," said Chris Clevers, president of Hikari Sales USA, a Hayward, Calif.-based manufacturer of aquatic diets. "As people spend more time at home, their backyards are getting facelifts, and ponds or water features with fish are a part of those improvements."

Installs have been larger on average, industry insiders reported. Conversions are also trending more than in typical years past.

"We're doing larger ponds overall," Lucas said. "Also, we've converted more pools to ponds. We'll typically do one a year, if we're lucky. In 2020, we probably did five where we've converted swimming pools into ponds."

Most installers still use pond liners, when they are not designing or installing another type of water feature.

"We exclusively install ponds with liners," Gute said. "It's an issue of price and ease of use."

Novel pond designs are appearing in some areas, insiders reported, though most installers deal only with liner setups.

"There is a movement toward blending a bit of formal details with a natural-looking, informal water feature," Helfrich said. "For example, a pond might incorporate straight edging on the patio side of a pond, while the rest of the pond uses boulders and rock for edging."

POND NUTRITION

Koi ponds are increasingly popular, insiders reported, and with the inclusion of livestock, pond keepers have to pay attention to providing the proper dietary profile to their fish.

"We are making a big push in sustainability utilizing black soldier fly larva," said Johnathan Hester, aquatics brand manager for Mansfield, Mass.-based the Hagen Group, which manufactures the Laguna brand. "It is beneficial to the environment, and fish absolutely love them."

Hagen's focus on sustainability led it to develop its Pond Bites, a koi and goldfish floating fish food with sustainably harvested black soldier fly larvae, Hester added. The larvae are gut-loaded with fruits and vegetables that would have otherwise been thrown away and that are sourced from local grocery stores, he noted, and the diet is formulated to be closer to what black soldier fly larvae eat in nature.

Other manufacturers are changing their formulations to ensure better fish health.

"The company Sera has removed all the artificial additives and colors in its foods," Krohne said. "They're making their food all one color, which is risky from

a marketing standpoint, but it's better for the animals. Half of the sales pitch behind fish food is its coloration. They're really taking the chance of making their foods less visually appealing. I've already received some of my first orders, and I've had to tell customers that it's the same food."

Probiotics-based products are becoming more common in the industry, though customers will likely require guidance to find something that works for them.

"Given Hikari was the first in the industry to offer these products more than a decade ago, we see people still very interested in using them for their fish," Clevers said. "Retailers have to be careful they are offering products with probiotics that actually have some longer-term benefits for the fish."

Establishing rapport with customers and tailoring nutritional information to their setup based on various parameters, including seasonal considerations, is essential.

"A good nutritional regimen is imperative for new consumers to understand, and information about what to feed and when, depending on the water temperature, is typically printed on most pond food labels," Langford said. "Since the air and water temperature, the time of year and where you live all affect how, what, and when you feed your pets, retailers are best suited to provide regional information to their consumers and provide advice on what to feed."

PODLESS WATER FEATURES

Certain types of water features, such as pondless waterfalls and mini pond setups, are becoming more sought after in the industry.

"Pondless waterfalls are still trending higher in popularity," Gute said. "That's been the biggest trend we've seen."

Other novel configurations are also increasingly in demand.

"I've been seeing a lot of buzz around mini ponds, which would consist of ponds under 1,000 gallons," Hester said. "These come in a wide variety of builds including concrete, preformed, liner and smaller, all in one self-contained kit."

Not everyone is seeing demand for novel configurations increase, however, and there may be a move back toward traditional ponds.

"For several years, pondless waterfalls were trending in the water gardening industry," Helfrich said. "Today, we're seeing the trend move back toward ponds."

Aquascape has several products slated for release in 2021, including expansions to its line of Smart Control Products, such as a new Smart Pond Thermometer. Products in the line are designed to use Wi-Fi connectivity to allow users to adjust lights, pumps and other outdoor features remotely, Helfrich added.

Aquascape is adding to its line of Fire and Water products as well as introducing other decorative water features in 2021. Additionally, the company is introducing a Koi Sock Net and the SLD 2000-5000 Adjustable Flow Pump.

"Adding urns and fountains to an existing water feature is also growing in popularity," Helfrich said. "Those with a pond or waterfall are looking to upgrade their water feature. An overflowing urn or bowl can easily be incorporated for a unique, custom look."

INDUSTRY VOICES



"It's really hard to read. I'd have to assume that business is probably going to continue as it did in 2020. The once-in-a-generation pandemic changed a lot of people's habits, so I see that trend continuing."

—David Gute,
manager of Barracuda Watergardens
in Auburn, Calif.

"I hope business will stay strong, but with a vaccine out, I think fewer people will stay at home. ... I anticipate it to be a strong spring, but we'll probably finish off the year flat."

—Mike Lucas,
owner of Garden Ponds and Aquariums
Unlimited in Moore, Okla.

"I am wondering if the supply of pond fish will make it over here [to the U.S.] this year. ... I also wonder if people have spent so much time at home that, when lockdowns become a thing of the past, are people going to cool off for a year or two? People have shown a lot of interest in their ponds right now. They all look great because everybody's at home and everybody's concerned, but we'll see if the interest holds through the spring. I do wonder if there will be a cooling off period where everybody's traveling or nobody wants to spend money on it because they spent so much money in 2020."

—Zachary Krohne,

owner of Krohne Tanks and Ponds in Atlanta

► INTERNATIONAL WATERS

Australian Corals Under Scrutiny

The import of wild-harvested large polyp specimens faces restrictions or a ban pending decision from the EU.

BY JOHN DAWES

As if there weren't enough problems facing the global coral sector following the ongoing crises regarding Fijian and Indonesian corals, the CITES (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) Scientific Review Group (SRG) has now turned its attention to Australian corals.

It is considering if trade in several LPS (large polyp species) is detrimental to their continued survival in the wild. Currently, three species of *Euphyllia*, *E. glabrescens*, *E. ancora* and *E. paraancora*, along with species from two other genera, *Duncanopsammia* (*D. axifuga*) and *Catalaphyllia* (*C. jardinei*), are under the microscope. If the EU SRG concludes that trade in wild-harvested specimens of these species is not sustainable, it could restrict their import into Europe or even ban it.

The decision regarding which way to go will rest with the individual member states and, although the U.K. is no longer a member of the EU, it will follow any European decision taken. The final outcome, though, will probably not be known until the next CITES Conference of the Parties (CoP), the date of which is to be confirmed. As I write, discussions are underway, and the SRG decision will probably be announced in March.

In the meantime, the SRG has requested that the Australian authorities submit data showing that collection of the species in question is not detrimental to their ongoing survival in the wild. Should the group conclude that the data submitted indicate that collection is not sustainable and decide to restrict or close down harvesting and export, this will, obviously, have disastrous consequences for the Australian coral export trade as well as for all those EU importers for whom Australian corals form an important part of their business. It will also deprive hobbyists around the world from being able to obtain specimens of these popular and striking species for their aquaria.

If we were talking of SPS (small polyp species) corals, like the many *Acropora* species that adorn our aquaria, the situation would be quite different, as SPS corals can be easily propagated by micro or macro fragmentation. Therefore, producing significant quantities of maricultured SPS corals is not a problem. Indeed, many of today's aquarium SPS corals are cultured rather than harvested from the wild.

On the other hand, large-polyp species are difficult to fragment, as a result of which, their mariculture is much more challenging, so much so that some form of mechanism consisting of trained personnel or officials would need to be set up within the EU to ascertain whether LPS corals being imported are maricultured or collected from the wild. Presumably, such personnel would be based at border inspection posts (BIPs), but this point has not, as far as I can ascertain, been considered yet. Nonetheless, it is believed that, should such a mechanism be established, any coral whose origin as a cultured specimen cannot be proven via appropriate certification would be



JOHN DAWES

► Three species of *Euphyllia*, plus two others from other genera, are currently under the EU SRG spotlight.

deemed to be wild harvested and would then be subjected to the restrictions or bans imposed by the EU member state through which the import is being made.

Quite naturally, Ornamental Fish International (OFI) is in consultation with the CITES authorities in Australia as well as several Australian exporters regarding this vitally important matter. So far, we know little about the outcome of these discussions but can say that, as of today, no conclusive decision has been taken and, thus, exports can continue as normal, pending both the overall EU CITES decision as well as that of the individual EU member states with whom the final say regarding whether or not to issue import permits rests (should findings lead the SRG to conclude that trade is unsustainable).

The U.K.'s Ornamental Aquatic Trade Association (OATA) is also involved in the ongoing discussions. The online reef website Reef Builders (reefbuilders.com) quotes Dominic Whitmee, the organization's chief executive, thus: "Ornamental Fish International (OFI) has been coordinating information on this. OATA has offered assistance and is working with the EPO [European Pet Organisation] to get a better understanding of the issues. At the moment we have insufficient information to make a judgment on the status of these species. The UK's Department for the Environment and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) is no longer engaged with the EU decision-making process but have stated they will follow SRG decisions, for the time being at least."

So, as things stand, we are in a bit of a limbo, awaiting submissions and decisions from the various parties. Although, as mentioned above, it is hoped that a decision will be arrived at by the SRG this month, my feeling is that it will take considerably longer than this, not just for the information requested by the SRG to be submitted, but for it to be assessed and decided upon.

WHAT IS CITES?

CITES (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) is an international agreement between governments. Its aim is to ensure that international trade in specimens of wild animals and plants does not threaten their survival.

John Dawes is an international ornamental aquatic industry consultant. He has written and/or edited more than 50 books and has contributed more than 4,000 articles to hobby, trade and academic publications. He is the editor of the OFI Journal and a consultant to AquaRealm, the trade show that took place June 2017 in Singapore.

Pamper and Problem Solve

Pet owners look for grooming products that indulge pets while helping to solve their skin and coat issues.

THIS ARTICLE IS BROUGHT
TO YOU IN PART BY
**GLO-MARR
PRODUCTS**



SHUTTERSTOCK

BY LINDSEY GETZ

With consumers so focused on their pets' well-being, skin issues are a hot topic in grooming.

"The biggest trend in spa products right now is skin care," said Dawn Leoso Duncan, vice president of Glo-Marr Products, a manufacturer in Lawrenceburg, Ky. "Consumers want their pets to look and feel good."

In her store, Katie Ast, co-owner of Just Dog People in Garner, N.C., said that skin care conversations happen quite frequently.

"The most common concern pet parents voice about skin care is itching," she said. "They are looking to help soothe their dog from constant scratching and chewing. Often pet parents don't know where to start because they are not sure of the root of the problem. Is it diet, environmental, a combination of both, or just boredom, a habit or a self-soothing process?"

Ast said that they help customers attempt to get to the bottom of the problem by matching them with the right product.

"Most are interested in a personal reference for a product or a recommendation," she said. "Too much choice can overwhelm the customer—and all products look good in pretty packaging with fancy words touting their attributes. But pet parents would rather have a personal reference of how the product actually works."

Interest in spa products that can both pamper and soothe is rising.

Eric Bittman, owner of Warren London Dog Spa & Grooming Products, a manufacturer in New City, N.Y., said that the trends are focused on pampering and improved health. Being able to combine these two areas is a win-win.

"When it comes to how to pamper our pets these days, we always want to treat them well and give them a spa day while

also solving some of the issues they face," Bittman said. "For example, we sell a relaxing paw soak that will fizz for five minutes. [It is] not only relaxing for the pup, but will also help to fight any fungus, bacteria or yeast which can cause itching. Another example would be our milk bath, which is a powder you pour in the bathtub. This product smells amazing and has many aromatherapeutic characteristics while also [being] soothing. It does amazing work on a dog's skin and coat."

Dallas Van Kempen, president of EQyss Grooming Products, a manufacturer in Vista, Calif., added that pet owners are looking for products that mimic products they're using themselves.

"Pet parents who are shopping for spa products for their pets want quality products that smell good, rinse clean, or are leave-on or leave-in," he said. "They want these products to be close to something they would use on themselves."

INGREDIENTS MATTER

Retailers and manufacturers report that pet owners are asking about what's in the products they're using.

Leoso Duncan said that many pet owners are educating themselves when they can and turning to retailers for more information.

"Pet parents are smarter than ever," she added. "They look for products that are safe to use and won't penetrate the skin. Along with that, 'made in the USA' is always important to pet parents."

Ingredients also come into play in terms of trends. Van Kempen said that one of the biggest trends he's noticing is an interest in calming products, adding that with pets experiencing more anxiety and stress-related issues than ever before, offering these types of grooming products is crucial.

"Popular ingredients are cucumber and lavender because of their soothing and calming properties," Van Kempen added.



ASSORTMENT OPTIMIZATION

MEETING CUSTOMERS' NEEDS

For pet specialty retailers, having a varied mix of skin and coat products on the shelves is key to helping shoppers find the right option for their pets.

"Pets are just like people in that they all are different—so one product won't work for everyone," said Dawn Leoso Duncan, vice president of Glo-Marr Products, a manufacturer in Lawrenceburg, Ky. "You need a variety of products to offer—shampoos, sprays, creams and more. Retailers should also be sure to stock a dry skin product, a greasy-oily skin product and, of course, a deodorizing product to ensure they're covering all of the bases."

Creating an optimal assortment of products also comes back to meeting customer needs, said Rob Flanagan, president and "pack leader" of Wag N' Wash Natural Pet Food & Grooming, a retail and grooming chain with headquarters in Denver.

"We focus on solutions," he said. "We need to have products that cover all of the different needs including dry and itchy skin, dull coat, flea and ticks, skunk or foul odor and sensitive skin. We also include products that prolong maintenance. These vary from waterless shampoo, leave-in conditioners and colognes. We make sure that all of the products selected fit our values of being natural and having no harsh chemicals while also being pH balanced."

Eric Bittman, owner of Warren London Dog Spa & Grooming Products, a manufacturer in New City, N.Y., agreed that focusing on problems and solutions is a great way to ensure that retailers are stocking the products their customers might be seeking.

"Pets face many issues, and an ideal assortment would solve most of these issues," he said. "At Warren London, we are very aware of the most common issues dogs face, and we not only want to have a product for those issues, but we want to have the best product to solve those

issues using the most effective ingredients we can find."

Sherry Redwine, co-owner of Odyssey Pets, a pet store in Dallas, also said curating a grooming product assortment comes down to thinking about the customer base. In each category, there are going to be multiple wants and needs. For example, different shampoos will be important for different reasons, she said.

"You should always have a 'hypo' shampoo, a puppy shampoo, an oatmeal shampoo and then some that just have fun scents," she said. "We listen to what our customers are requesting and adjust our assortment as needed. I love to carry products that are local, and we only carry spa products that are all natural."

Kim McCahan, chief happiness officer for Bend Pet Express, which has stores in Bend, Ore., agreed that variety in shampoos, in particular, is important—and that it's key for retailers to stay on top of labels, too.

"We try to have as much variety in shampoo as possible, but still in line with our values," she said. "We actually had a realization moment recently that the 'oatmeal' shampoo we carried didn't have oatmeal in it anymore. The company changed the formulation, didn't tell us, and after awhile [we] noticed it. We had to really seek out a company whose 'oatmeal' shampoo truly had oatmeal in it! We wanted customers to be able to read the ingredient list and see oatmeal in their oatmeal shampoo."

Katie Ast, co-owner of Just Dog People, a pet store in Garner, N.C., said that when selecting an assortment of products for her store, she's looking at four categories—filling a need for the store (product category); providing a solution to a common problem; selecting a product that has been proven through testing, reputation, etc.; and selecting a product that meets the store's standards after it has been personally tested.

"Pets are just like people in that they all are different—so one product won't work for everyone. You need a variety of products to offer—shampoos, sprays, creams and more."

—Dawn Leoso Duncan of Glo-Marr Products

INDUSTRY VOICES

How can retailers increase pet grooming product sales?

"Displays initially draw customers in. We display our spa products in a wooden bookshelf with rubber duckies scattered around. The wooden bookshelf gives the area a warmer feel."

—Sherry Redwine,
co-owner of Odyssey Pets in Dallas

"Nothing beats trying before you buy. We don't have a special display, but we try to have as much product on the sales floor match what you can use in the dog wash. This way, especially with combs and brushes, we suggest the customers bring their pup in for a bath and try out all the items and see which one works for them. This is unique and super helpful with products we can't take back due to them being a grooming product. Customers can test out these brushes in the dog wash and buy what they want, [and] then the dog wash disinfects the brushes before putting them back into rotation for customers to use."

—Kim McCahan,
chief happiness officer for Bend Pet Express, which has stores in Bend, Ore.

"I have always encouraged our customers to place sprays by their complementary shampoos—that way you can sell more. If their pet needs a medicated bath, they are going to need a spray or cream."

—Dawn Leoso Duncan,
vice president of Glo-Marr Products in Lawrenceburg, Ky.



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petplay.com



WOLFGANG MAN & BEAST presents the **Nightowl Series**, which features a classic black print with subtle design elements. The line includes a 4-ft. and 6-ft. leash; a small, medium and large standard collar; martingale training-style dog collars for small and extra large pups; and comfort harnesses ranging in sizes from small to extra large. The products are made in the USA. wolfgangusa.com



ZOO SNOODS presents the **Zoo Dog Sweater**, designed to be a perfect complement for the Zoo Snood and featuring the same yarn and knitting pattern. The sweater features stretchy yarn for increased comfort. The sweater can be washed by hand or in a machine. zoosnoods.com



SHAMELESS PETS offers **Calming Chews**, which are made from sustainably upcycled ingredients. We Be Salmon Calming Chews contain hemp and offer skin and coat support. The chews are made with almond skins saved after almond milk and flour production. Turk It Easy Calming Chews contain hemp and provide digestive support. They use perfectly nutritious sweet potatoes that were a bit too big or small to make it into grocery stores. Both varieties of treats are grain free, contain no corn, soy, wheat or artificial flavors and are made in the USA. shamelesspets.com



MIRACLECORP presents the **Hamilton Rainbow with Neoprene Padding line**, a colorful collection of leashes and collars. The leashes have neoprene-padded handles and matte black swivel leash clips, and the vibrant color combo is visible on both sides. Collars are adjustable and neoprene padded. Both are available in two sizes, small/medium ($\frac{5}{8}$ in.) and large (1 in.). miraclecorp.com



WHITEBRIDGE PET BRANDS offers **Dogswell Energy Extended Activity Fuel**, a high-protein treat formulated to energize and hydrate dogs during long runs, hikes and other periods of extended activity. It is made with chicken as the No. 1 ingredient, blended with healthy fats from MCT-rich coconut oil, for a treat that is high in calories and provides long-lasting energy. The recipe also includes pumpkin, an excellent source of fiber, to improve stool quality and egg protein, which is easily digested. The performance treat, which comes in a velvety mousse format, is also rich in moisture, offering quick and easy hydration to dogs during physical activities. dogswell.com





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Practical or Pretty?

Owners often expect collars, leashes and harnesses to express their pet's personality, but they also seek products that match their own lifestyle and provide functionality.

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USA**



SHUTTERSTOCK

BY MARISSA HEFLIN

Collars, leashes and harnesses are considered necessities for almost all dog owners. As they are going to purchase one or more of these products anyway, why not put a little flair into them? That's what industry insiders are finding.

"Based on our product portfolio, we are seeing interest in premium, quality products, especially leather collars and leashes available in colors other than the traditional black or brown," said Tom Glessner, chief commercial officer for MyFamily USA, a manufacturer in Orlando, Fla.

Glessner pointed to MyFamily's Tucson collection of Italian-made crocodile-textured leather collars and leads that come in a "rich" red and "vibrant" blue.

"MyFamily's collars and leashes are for those who want the finer things for their four-legged friends as our products are hand-crafted in Italy with the finest materials, unique hardware and features such as our Always Ready D-Ring that stands at attention, making it easier to anchor a leash," Glessner said.

Katie Ast, owner of Just Dog People, a pet store in Garner, N.C., has noticed that more people are looking for unique and personalized collars.

"UpCountry collars are very popular at [Just Dog People]," Ast said. "With all of their colorful designs, pet parents enjoy finding a 'theme' that fits their dog's personality. And the quality of the collars is top-notch."

As for harness choices, Ast said that it largely depends upon whether the dog is a puppy or an adult.

"We have a wide variety of harnesses in our store, and by far, moms and dads that are looking for a harness for their puppy want

something much more affordable, as they know their dog is going to grow out of the harness quickly," Ast said. "Once the puppy reaches full size, we often see the parents back in the store looking for their 'big-girl/boy' harness. Pet parents are much more likely to spend more dollars on a harness once their dog isn't growing a pound per week."

Functionality is a key consideration for shoppers.

"I think functionality is the driving factor for this category," said Tara Belzer, owner of Pet in the City, a pet store in Charlotte, N.C. "Whether looking for training, no-pull solutions to waterproof collars/ harnesses for dogs that hike, I believe that [purchases are driven by] what the product can do for both the owner and pet. Comfort, ease and functionality."

Lifestyle, particularly where a person lives, also influences purchasing decisions, according to Kevin Manning, chief marketing officer for Doggie Design, a manufacturer in Centennial, Colo.

"People with a more active, outdoor lifestyle want collars, leashes and harnesses that are more rugged, easy to wash, and can handle wear and tear," Manning said. "Urban consumers have different needs. While fashion does play a bigger role in what they're looking for in a collar or harness, functionality is still important. Urban settings require more reflective elements so pets are easily visible in low light."

Whatever pet owners are looking for, manufacturers are doing a great job in meeting those needs, according to Ast.

"The pet industry is bringing innovative products to the market, and pet parents are getting 'hip' to the idea that not all products are meant for all dogs," Ast said. "The industry is doing a great job innovating, and customers are rewarding us with their hard-earned dollars."



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Pet Product News

MERCHANDISING

A SPRINGTIME BOOST

With the promise of warmer weather around the corner, pet owners will be looking to spend more time outdoors with their pets. With this in mind, it's important for retailers to expose shoppers to the products they will need, according to Tom Glessner, chief commercial officer for MyFamily USA, a manufacturer in Orlando, Fla.

"Creating an endcap or space within the store where you can cross-merchandise products like toys to play fetch, travel bowls and feeders, clothes and jackets, visible identification as well as collars and leashes will give them the ideas needed to get them ready," Glessner said.

Showcasing your products is vital, said Katie Ast, owner of Just Dog People, a pet supply

store in Garner, N.C.

"We change our store tables monthly, and always with a theme or concept in mind," Ast said. "We use some wonderful stuffed dogs to show off collars, harnesses, leashes, etc. Maybe use a dummy and a stuffed dog to connect 'pet parent' to 'pet' via leash and collar combo.... We've created small-scale farm fencing and wrapped collars around the posts to create an interactive-type display."

A fresh perspective always comes in handy.

"Treat 2021 like the reset it is," said Kevin Manning, chief marketing officer for Doggie Design, a manufacturer in Centennial, Colo. "Encourage customers to treat themselves and their pup to a new collar, a new leash and a new outlook on life."

NEW PRODUCTS

BRIGHT TECHNOLOGY

There are several new options available to offer customers in the collars, leashes and harnesses category.

MyFamily USA plans to launch its Memopet collection in the first quarter of 2021. Tom Glessner, chief commercial officer of the Orlando, Fla.-based company, described the line of nylon collars, leashes and harnesses as "bright" and "attention getting." But it's the technology that the company hopes will grab the attention of pet owners.

In every collar, harness and leash, there is an encased near field communication (NFC) microchip that essentially

allows the product to become a virtual database. It can hold a pet's health and wellness information along with microchip registration numbers, according to Glessner. Information is accessed via a smartphone.

"When used with the MemopetID App, [the collars and harnesses] will keep track of veterinarian visits and grooming appointments, while the leashes will track walks and adventures you have with your best friend," Glessner said.

Just hitting the market is Doggie Design's spring line. To go with its American River ombre harnesses, the company has added five new ombre leashes with a comfort grip: Raspberry Sundae, Raspberry Pink & Orange, Aruba Blue, Cosmic Splash

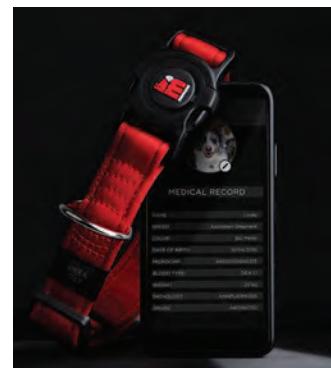
and Lemonberry Ice.

"Now your pup can have the complete American River ombre look," said Kevin Manning, chief marketing officer with Doggie Design in Centennial, Colo. "We're also offering two new American River camouflage colors as well as three new American River polka dot options."

2 Hounds Design in Indian Trail, N.C., recently launched four patterns in its Earthstyle collection: ROY G BIV (rainbow polka dots), Electric Glow (blue/green plaid), Twilight Glow (turquoise/purple plaid) and Neon Sunrise (fuchsia/purple plaid). The Earthstyle collection combines colorful, upbeat designs with recycled webbing, according to the company.



2 Hounds Design recently launched new patterns in its Earthstyle collection.



► MyFamily USA has encased a near field communication (NFC) microchip in every Memopet collar, harness and leash, and they can be connected to a smartphone by simply approaching them.



MYFAMILY USA



DOGGIE DESIGN

► To go with its American River ombre harnesses, Doggie Design has introduced ombre leashes.

ASSORTMENT OPTIMIZATION

UNDERSTANDING A CUSTOMER'S WANTS AND NEEDS

Industry insiders recommend retailers take time to think about what will best suit their customers when considering their collars, leashes and harnesses assortment.

"Each retailer must understand their customers' wants and needs when deciding on collars and leash product selection, but we recommend diversity when it comes to the category," said Tom Glessner, chief commercial officer for MyFamily USA, a manufacturer in Orlando, Fla. "While MyFamily only offers premium products, our collections provide retailers the ability to offer different price points, materials and finishes that allow them to address their customer needs from price point, activity and quality perspectives."

It's also important to consider your store's image, noted Kevin Manning, chief marketing officer for Doggie Design, a manufacturer in Centennial, Colo.

"For example, there are thousands of ribbon collar options available—holiday themed, sports themed, occasion themed, hobby themed, etc.," Manning said. "If your budget can bear it, offering 'a little bit of everything' is sure to appeal to most people. However, if you need to be more restrained, focus on the image you want for your store. Do you want to bring in hikers and campers? Offer

collars and harnesses that are durable and no nonsense. Are you a high-end boutique that is very niche? Pick a color—or color scheme—and lean into that."

Using customer feedback can also help find what will and won't sell best for you, Manning said.

To help boost the appeal—and sales—of harnesses, Just Dog People has a custom harness-fitting section.

"We stock almost 15 different dog harnesses in the harness-fitting section at all times," said Katie Ast, owner of Just Dog People, a pet store in Garner, N.C. "We created a sign that hangs in the harness section that helps dog parents understand which harnesses may be most appropriate for their dog."

Just Dog People staff members are also available to help choose, size and fit a harness for customers.

The harness-fitting section is popular with shoppers, Ast reported.

"Customers love that we help them with their harness selection and fitting," Ast said. "We also help customers re-size harnesses when their dogs gain/lose weight, and we've been known to size and fit harnesses from outside of our store as well. Obviously, this requires a high level of customer service and employee training, but customers appreciate the service we provide."

COVERING THE CAT CUSTOMER

Though much of the collars, leashes and harnesses category is devoted to dogs, retailers can encourage cat owners to buy these products, too.

"While dog owners clearly have a need for collars, leashes and harnesses, cat owners do not seem to believe or understand that they do, so it is important for retailers to make products displays visible while trying to educate customers that collars are something for felines too," said Tom Glessner, chief commercial officer for MyFamily USA, a manufacturer in Orlando, Fla.

A collar signifies that a cat, whether it be an outdoor or an "escaped" cat, belongs to someone, Glessner said. Plus, collars with a visible identification tag can greatly increase the

chance of the cat being returned home if lost, Glessner noted.

"There is also an increase in the number of cat parents who take them for walks outdoors, so showing a harness and lead on a cat mannequin might spark new ideas for those who have felines at home," Glessner said.

When a cat owner is perusing the store shelf, they are less likely to go for wide, bulky collars or overly complicated harnesses, according to Kevin Manning, chief marketing officer for Doggie Design, a manufacturer in Centennial, Colo.

"Thinner collars and basic, step-in harnesses that come in smaller sizes are the way to go for cats and even ferrets," Manning said. "Don't discount other types of pets, either. Our American River harnesses even work for potbellied pigs!"



For this month's events and an extended listing, visit
PETPRODUCTNEWS.COM/CALENDAR

EVENTS

INDUSTRY TRADE

March 24-26

Global Pet Expo
Digital Access
globalpetexpo.org

April 25-26

National Pet Industry Show—Virtual Edition
pijaccanada.com

June 5-9, Orlando, Fla.

VMX: Veterinary Meeting & Expo

Orange County Convention Center
navc.com

Aug. 16-19 Las Vegas

SuperZoo
Mandalay Bay
superzoo.org

Sept. 22-24 Kansas City, Mo.

Petfood Forum
Kansas City Convention Center
events@wattglobal.com;
petfoodforumevents.com

GROOMING & PET SERVICES

March 2-4

Co-Sheltering Conference (Virtual Event)
mydogismyhome.org/2021-co-sheltering-conference

March 10

2021 Focus: PSI's One-Day Online Summit for Pet Sitters & Dog Walkers
petsit.com/conference



SHUTTERSTOCK

June 24-27 College Park, Ga.

Atlanta Pet Fair & Conference

Georgia International Convention Center
atlantapetfair.org

July 22-25 Pasadena, Calif.

Groom Expo West

Pasadena Convention Center
groomexpowest.com

INTERNATIONAL

March 11-14 Beijing

China Pet Expo

China International Exhibition Center
cpse-expo.com

May 14-16 Guangzhou, China
China (Guangzhou) International Pet Fair

Poly World Trade Center
Expo

chinapetfair.com

June 1-4

Interzoo Digital
interzoo.com

CONSUMER

May 1-2 Timonium, Md.

World of Pets Expo and Educational Experience

Maryland State Fairgrounds
410-374-5964
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worldofpets.org

May 8-9 Gonzales, La.

Repticon

Lamar Dixon Exposition Center
863-268-4273
info@repticon.com;

repticon.com

May 15-16 Miami

Repticon
Fair Expo Center
863-268-4273
info@repticon.com;
repticon.com

June 26-27 Tinley Park, Ill.

North American Reptile Breeders Conference

Tinley Park Convention Center
708-932-8044
narbc.com

July 10 Havre de Grace, Md.

All Maryland Reptile Show

Havre de Grace Community Center
mdreptilefarm.com

MARCH 2021

- **ADOPT A RESCUED GUINEA PIG MONTH**
- 1 National Pig Day
- 3 If Pets Had Thumbs Day
- 7-13 Professional Pet Sitters Week
- 13 National K-9 Veterans Day
- 21-27 National Poison Prevention Week
- 23 National Puppy Day
- 28 Respect Your Cat Day
- 30 Take a Walk in the Park Day

APRIL 2021

- **PREVENT LYME DISEASE IN DOGS MONTH**
- **PREVENTION OF CRUELTY TO ANIMALS MONTH**
- 6 National Siamese Cat Day
- 8 National Dog Fighting Awareness Day
- 11 National Pet Day
- 21 Bulldogs Are Beautiful Day
- 26 National Kids and Pets Day
- 30 National Adopt a Shelter Pet Day

MAY 2021

- **LYME DISEASE AWARENESS MONTH**
- **NATIONAL PET MONTH**
- **NATIONAL CHIP YOUR PET MONTH**
- **RESPONSIBLE ANIMAL GUARDIAN MONTH**
- 1 National Purebred Dog Day
- 3 National Specially-abled Pets Day
- 14 International Chihuahua Appreciation Day
- 20 National Rescue Dog Day
- 23 World Turtle Day



SHUTTERSTOCK

NOTE:

Check with event organizers for up-to-date information on possible cancellations or postponements.

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"ILLUMINATING SALES" CONTINUED FROM PAGE 81

ON THE MARKET

Fixture Features

Opportunities for aquatic product launches were muted in 2020, and issues with supply held pet specialty retailers back somewhat, but new aquatic lighting products nevertheless have gained hobbyist attention.

EcoTech's introduction of the Generation 5 (Gen5) Radions featured a new lens design, an active cooling design to operate quietly and integrated control through the company's Mobius app, said Jay Sperandio, sales director for the Allentown, Pa.-based manufacturer.

Controller features built into lighting fixtures are very popular, and manufacturers are seeking to further integrate and streamline their functionality. For example, Fluval LEDs now all come with a relatively new feature called Pro Mode.

"This new feature allows for 10 time point settings, which provide additional controllability of the color spectrum and light intensity throughout the 24-hour programmable cycle," said Johnathan Hester, aquatics brand manager for Mansfield, Mass.-based Hagen Group, which manufactures the Fluval

brand. "We are always looking to add additional features and ways to improve the overall user experience of the FluvalSmart app."

Red Sea's new lights have also gained retailer attention, with several retailers noting that they are selling well, along with EcoTech, Fluval, AI and Kessil fixtures.

"Red Sea came out with the ReefLED 160S, which is basically a souped-up version of their 90," said Jeff McCarty, manager for Barrier Reef Aquariums, a tropical fish store in Renton, Wash. "They are really good lights. We've opened up a couple of them. I have a whole bunch of small polyp stony corals growing under them, and the corals are doing awesome. They came in and colored up instantly. We carry Red Sea, EcoTech, Aqua Illumination, Kessil and Tunze fixtures. Our best-sellers are the Kessils, Red Sea, EcoTech and AI lights."

Though some retailers reported that older lighting formats, such as T5s and metal halide bulbs, still have a small niche in the hobby, nearly all aquarists have turned to LED fixtures.

"We can't even sell T5s anymore," said Kevin Knudsen, manager of Aquatic Design & Development Group, a pond design and construction developer and provider in Ocala, Fla.

"We just don't have a market for them. Everybody's going to LEDs. You really can't compare them, in terms of longevity and price point."

The shift to LED lighting is no longer a trend in the hobby, but the industry standard.

"I've seen a very small amount of brand-new hobbyists that are purchasing anything that they can get their hands on," McCarty said. "I've had a small amount of people that are actually setting up halides again. At one time, halides were definitely the best. I think that there are a lot of other things now that have surpassed halide setups. Those fixtures obviously have a lot of drawbacks that makes them less attractive compared to energy-efficient, cool-running LEDs."

Fewer alternatives to LEDs are even available on the market, and manufacturers have almost switched completely to the newer format.

"LEDs are absolutely the industry standard and will continue to make up the bulk of sales in this segment," Hester said. "Fluorescent and incandescent lamps are fading from existence now that pretty much every aquarium kit comes with LEDs. The demand continues to decline each year."

BLUETOOTH OR WI-FI?

Most new aquatic light fixtures feature the ability to interact with and control the lamps remotely, either via Wi-Fi or Bluetooth.

"Bluetooth and Wi-Fi-capable products are currently driving the majority of the aquatic lighting market," said Johnathan Hester, aquatics brand manager for Mansfield, Mass.-based the Hagen Group, which manufactures the Fluval brand. "Consumers are looking for products with app integration that allow for customization in output as well as color spectrum."

One or two product generations ago, Wi-Fi connectivity was more common in lighting controller systems. Now, however, more manufacturers are integrating or outright switching to Bluetooth connectivity for their systems.

"In my experience, Bluetooth has been much easier to connect with, as opposed to the Wi-Fi configurations," said Kevin Knudsen, manager of Aquatic Design & Development Group, a pond design and construction developer and provider in Ocala, Fla. "Based on the way the technology has developed, I would have thought that Wi-Fi is an easier method to connect through. So it's interesting that all these [manufacturers] are switching over to Bluetooth. For example, the AI light. We just got a whole bunch of them, and it's almost instantaneously that you can log in to it and program it compared to the Wi-Fi ones. It's always an ordeal trying to connect with Wi-Fi and everything along those lines. ... The AI fixtures have been really good as far as connectivity."

The same is true with the Radions."

Different types of connectivity still have a place in the hobby, however.

"Our focus is largely on integration," said Jay Sperandio, sales director for EcoTech Marine, a manufacturer of aquarium equipment in Allentown, Pa. "We continue to develop more products and build our control platform. We launched our new control platform this year, which moved from what was previously our proprietary setup with a Wi-Fi bridge to now RF [radio frequency] Wi-Fi, which we're about to enable shortly, and Bluetooth, which is already enabled on the devices themselves. That offers a higher level and greater flexibility and control in terms of seamless user connectivity and reliability over the long run for on- and off-site connection. ... We're aiming for less direct controller input—a controller being a separate computer unit. ... Each platform has its pros and cons, and each communication medium has its pros and cons, which is why we use all three at this point."

Although app-based lighting control is popular, some believe aquarists miss the inclusion of a more analog method of interacting with their fixtures.

"I feel like a lot of manufacturers have gone to fully app-controlled setups, and few fixtures have manual controls anymore," said Jeff McCarty, manager for Barrier Reef Aquariums, a tropical fish store in Renton, Wash. "There are actually a lot of customers out there that would appreciate having a manual control along with app control."



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Shopkeeper SPOTLIGHT

Focused On Fresh

The owners of The K9 Shop have made it their mission to educate consumers and provide them with the very best raw diets for their pets.

Anya Tucker, co-owner with husband Robert of The K9 Shop in Bohemia, N.Y., and Massapequa, N.Y.

In business since: January 2017

Type of business: primarily brick-and-mortar

Services offered: personalized meal plans for dogs and cats and an in-depth transition plan for those moving from kibble to raw



PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE K9 SHOP

The Tuckers opened The K9 Shop because they wanted to give other pet owners the opportunity to get high-quality raw food at an economical price, and they provide shoppers with personalized meal plans for their pets.



Pet Product News: What is The K9 Shop best known for?

Anya Tucker: We are strictly a raw and natural store. You will not find kibble brands like you find in other stores. We focus on providing the very best raw food for our clients. We do the research and homework on products before we ever put them on the shelves. The K9 Shop is known for carrying only the best and never, ever cutting corners or giving in to carry items that do not fit our model.

PPN: What are the top-selling products in your store right now?

Tucker: It is hard to say what the top-selling brands are because things change on a weekly basis. Our brands are unique and meet all the criteria of a raw feeder, so customers are always moving around. Some of the more popular brands include K-9 Kraving, Answers, Top Quality, Adored Beast, Tickled Pet and so many more.

PPN: What are your favorite products right now?

Tucker: All of our products are handpicked due to

their quality, uniqueness and benefits for the raw feeder. Since they are all handpicked, *all* of our products are our favorite and it is impossible to pick out just a few. Every brand we carry is a top-tier brand and fits perfectly in The K9 Shop model.

PPN: What industry trends have you been keeping your eye on most closely?

Tucker: People are finally realizing that they have been misled by the big kibble companies. Revenue has taken over, and quality has suffered in the kibble industry. They are constantly looking for shortcuts, and the food is getting worse and worse. We keep an eye on the kibble industry so we can always educate our customers on the misconceptions and myths of the industry. We also keep a close eye on the raw industry with any new companies that are popping up. The entire pet food industry is volatile and ever changing. Things change overnight, and we have to be prepared to answer those questions.

PPN: What business challenge are you currently in the

process of tackling, and how do you plan to do so?

Tucker: The biggest challenge is education. Big Kibble has deep pockets with heavy advertising budgets. We have to be able to educate clients on the benefits of raw and how this is what dogs and cats were meant to consume. Dogs and cats were not meant to eat processed foods full of additives, preservatives, dyes, chemicals, grains, etc. This is equivalent to us having processed foods like McDonald's every day of our lives. This isn't a healthy way to live and is not what dogs and cats were meant to eat. Education is the biggest challenge we face and also overcoming the [misinformation] of the kibble companies.

PPN: What is your best tip for connecting with customers?

Tucker: We connect with our customers by being brutally honest and letting them know the facts. We make sure we have the top brands and do all the research for them. These two things are what keep customers coming back. They know we always have their pets' best interest at heart.



at the **STOREFRONT**

B.C. HENSCHEN OFFERS A MICRO-INDEPENDENT RETAILER'S VIEW OF THE PET INDUSTRY.

A Source of Concern

When manufacturing for a dog food brand that's popular in the micro-indie pet store channel comes stateside, should retailers be worried?

BY B.C. HENSCHEN

My phone started blowing up with messages along the lines of "Did you see the press release? They are going to ruin our food!" I quickly checked some of the websites for our industry magazines and discovered that one of the pet foods loved by many micro independent stores is building a new facility in the United States. The brand is currently made overseas, and I'm sure the company thought the press release would be looked at favorably. The creation of jobs, distribution flow and access to the brand are all great news for any company.

However, this brand has spent years promoting the idea that everything is better in the country of origin for this food. Ingredients are better, their food is GMO free because in that country GMOs are not as prominent as they are in the United States and the facility is state of the art, unlike anything found in the U.S.

The fear many micro independents have is that the brand may sacrifice quality when manufacturing in the U.S., taking away the unique selling points of the food. How many other pet foods are made in the USA? Having a brand made overseas immediately gives a talking point that many other brands do not have. GMOs are a big thing with many of my clients. What I have learned with those clients is that they do not believe food made in the United States can be truly GMO free. They fear the food may contain GMOs because the animals used as ingredients were fed diets comprising GMO grains or because of cross contamination. This brand has spent a lot of time marketing its non-GMO ingredients. Will it continue that philosophy when being made in the U.S., and will consumers believe it?

Customers who are spending around \$100 a bag love the term "made in the USA" for their hard goods, but not necessarily for their dog's diet. What they do love to see on their pet food packaging is that the product is *not* made in China, although it's a hard slogan to print on a hat.

Ultimately, it's all about perception. It's easy to justify a bag's cost when it is an imported product that is made using the best ingredients from its origin country—ingredients associated with that particular country and that are commonly believed to be of higher quality than the same ingredients sourced in the U.S.

Removing the GMO conversation, do I believe an ingredient from the European Union (EU) is better than an ingredient from the U.S.? I do not. I believe the same quality of ingredients can be found in either location; it comes down to sourcing and pricing.

Do I believe a pet food coming from overseas is a better product than one made in the USA? Not necessarily. I believe a pet food manufacturer can specify high-quality ingredients made in a high-quality facility no matter where it is made.

Many of the pet foods coming out of the EU, Canada or Spain are manufactured by relatively small companies. I believe it is often easier for these smaller companies to obtain higher-quality ingredients than it is for some larger U.S. pet food manufacturers that are producing a higher volume of product. For example, it's easy for me to source nest-laid, cage-free, organic eggs for my family because I can own just enough chickens to supply my needs. It is much more difficult for this same quality of egg to be produced in quantities to feed students at my local high school.

I don't believe we should speculate about the quality of this food going downhill just because it's going to be manufactured in the United States. We should continue to monitor the product, as we should all our products, and if we see changes contrary to our beliefs, then we can make a decision.

This also reinforces the idea of having customers rotate not only protein sources, but also manufacturers. If your customer is used to switching from brand to brand, it really won't be a huge deal if a brand is discontinued from your store and another added. In the meantime, I'll be on the lookout for another non-GMO food offering to be put into my customer's rotation as to avoid putting all my non-GMO eggs in one basket.

Pet diet ingredients like New Zealand lamb are often lauded for their quality, but when it comes to quality, there are several factors your customers might want to consider.



SHUTTERSTOCK

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B.C. HENSCHEN is a well-known champion for pet owners who want the best in their pet's food. He is the Association for Truth in Pet Food (ATPF) consumer advocate, and is a past director with the World Pet Association (WPA). Henschlen is a popular speaker at industry events and meetings. A certified pet care technician and an accredited pet trainer, he is a partner in Platinum Paws, a full-service pet salon and premium pet food store in Carmel, Ind. His knowledge of the pet food industry makes Platinum Paws the go-to store for pet owners who want more for their pet than a bag off a shelf.