

Some Loving From the Oven

Natural dog treats are a way for pet specialty retailers to help preserve the health of their customers' pooches and sweeten their own bottom lines.

There's somewhat of an unwritten rule when it comes to creating a healthy diet, which is to stay far away from any consumables that list ingredients found in an advanced chemistry lab. An increasing number of people are more aware of the detrimental health effects of synthetic snacks and have completely overhauled their diets to include more wholesome products. It is, therefore, no wonder why the market for natural pet treats has become extremely lucrative.

The humanization of household pets is what that natural treat industry thrives on. If an owner wouldn't want to eat something that is bad for their health, why would they want to feed it to their darling pet? Of course, consumers are still only human; they still eat doughnuts and potato chips, and that's where retailers come in. Pet stores must be able to entice customers to buy a natural alternative treats for their pets by appropriately marketing, merchandising and promoting them.

"The best way to market these types of treats is to highlight the benefits and natural ingredients," says Lucy Postins from the San Diego-based Honest Kitchen. "Obesity, just as in the human population, is a growing concern and health condition that many animals, especially dogs, are facing. This problem is one of the key reasons for the increase in popularity of healthy pet treats. Many of the natural ingredients in these treats keep the fat intake at a minimum while the animal is snacking."

Breann Shook, co-founder of the Lake Forest, Calif.-operated Grandma

Lucy's says, "You would be surprised by how many disgusting byproducts go into normal animal treats, including hooves and animal hair. Healthy treats include quality lean meat and vegetables that humans would eat."

PROMPTING TRIAL

No one disputes that natural, low-fat treats are good for dogs, just as few consumers would argue the health benefits of natural, low-fat snacks for humans. The problem has been getting the human consumer to try these treats, both the human and the canine varieties. Since dogs will readily devour healthy treats, the crucial ingredient in boosting sales is convincing the owner to try something new. Once the dog readily accepts the treat, the chances of repeat sales are high.

According to Margot Kenly from Seattle-based Blue Dog Bakery, in-store merchandising is extremely important. Skillful in-store merchandising will most likely give customers more of an incentive to spend a few more dollars for natural treats, as opposed to the treats they have always been buying. "Using bright and clear signs in the aisles to help customers understand the treats, and showing the different products for various size dogs are great techniques to turn heads," she



explains.

Postins suggests playing up the all-natural element of the treats. "Use natural wood and earth-tone colors to give displays a more organic feel and make them look truly different from the rest."

Shook even recommends displaying the ingredients and seeing if the pet owner would eat them—it's more than likely that they would.

SAMPLING PROGRAMS

Probably the most effective means of encouraging trial is through a structured sampling program. The adage that, "If they try them, they will buy them," really holds true for natural treats. There are two ways that a sampling program can be approached. The more formal way is to have sample packages at the checkout, ready to be given to each customer that purchases a dog product. This approach is good because it involves every dog owner that patronizes the store during the sampling period. The sample packages can also house educational materials and nutritional information, as well as coupons. This approach does require the participation of the product manufacturer, which usually supplies the packages.

A more informal approach is one that the retailer can develop with or

without the manufacturers' assistance. In this method, the checkout counter has a display of the treats in a bowl with signage or a sample package. The store associate at the register simply offers a sample of the treat, which could even be a small piece of a larger treat, to any dog that comes up to the register with its owner. This is a fun promotion that is enjoyed both by the pooch and its owner, as well as the associate. The drawbacks are that it is only appropriate for stores that allow pets, and it only delivers a sample to those dog owners who have actually brought their pets shopping with them. On the positive side, there is no better sales incentive than a happy dog enjoying the snack.

DISCOUNTS, ADVERTISING & EVENTS

Making treats available at a discounted price is also an effective technique for generating new trials. Retailers should work with manufacturers to develop such incentives whenever a new natural treat product is brought into the store. The promotion can be advertised in the store's flyers and other advertisements.

Promotion, even without a special price, is a great tool to get the word out on natural treats, their popularity and benefits. Postins suggests promoting treats in local newspapers or magazines. This will give the store enough room to state nutritional information.

Holding in-store educational seminars that will explain the products and their purpose is another strong promotional strategy. Information and education goes a long way in helping shoppers understand these products and aiding them in making informed decisions. Often, the manufacturer or its representatives will help organize and present these events. The benefit of providing this type of helpful information goes beyond the sale of a few packages of treats; owners will remember retailers that go out of their way to provide information, and they will be loyal to that particular store.

Natural treats for dogs are a grow-

ing part the industry as pets become more integrated into families. Pet owners might as well make room on the couch and in front of the TV because pets can snack just as well as any humans now. **PB**