

Consumers pattern their dry dog food choices after human food developments

By Sandy Robins

When it comes to dry dog food choices, pet owners are making more personalized decisions regarding what goes into their pet's food bowl and this in turn is challenging traditional nutritional profiles and thus driving new trends in the industry.

"Customers are saying 'my dog is this or that and, therefore, my dog needs this or that in his diet,'" said Doug Lang, president of Dad's Pet Care based in Meadville, Pa. "This is placing stronger emphasis on ingredients than ever before."

Lang said that this trend is being fueled by the fact that more dog owners are beginning to shop in more specialized stores for their pet's food and more information than ever before is available to them through this channel. Further, he said many smaller retailers are beginning to private label their own foods in an attempt to give their customers more options.

"Dog owners are definitely more savvy," said Kattya Breitenbach owner of Cheeko B Pet Boutique in San Francisco. "They are starting to ask questions about the benefits of antioxidants and probiotics in foods."

Simply put, despite a sagging economy, the pet food industry is currently being driven by a growth in super premium diets. And the new buzzword seems to be "grain-free."

Dogswell, the Los Angeles manufacturer of the new Nutrisca dry dog food, reported its formula is the only grain-free formula also made without potato or tapioca, both of which are high on the glycemic Index. Instead peas and chickpeas are used, as sources of protein and fiber.

Many dog food manufacturers see this grain-free trend as a spill over from the human food world and consider this a continuing trend rather than a direct shift in a particular direction.

"Food-related allergies are a popular diagnosis in the human world right now with many people claiming to have various allergies to gluten and other food ingredients," said Brent Mayabb DVM, manager of education development at Royal Canin in St. Charles Mo. "And while there's no question that some dogs have protein-based allergies, there are no studies that indicate that there's a particularly high incident of allergies to grains, wheat and corn."

Canadian pet food storeowner Carla Manno of Toronto agreed, adding that, "despite the fact that there is a lot of information available, a lot of dog owners are ultimately influenced by the nutritional information they are getting in the dog park," said Manno who owns two-franchised Global Pet Food stores, a popular chain in this country. "They see a dog with a great looking coat and ask about its diet. There's definitely a trend towards grain-free formulas but I think many people are switching for no particular reason other than they are taking advice from a friend whose own dog in turn may or may not actually have an allergy to grain."

With the surge in premium diets, comes a trend to simplify dry dog food recipes.



The pet food industry is currently being driven by a growth in super premium diets, according to various participants, and the hot trend for many is "grain-free."

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“We are concentrating on dry foods that are pure and simple with fewer ingredients,” said Kari Liu of Davis, Calif.-based Natura, which produces the California Natural brand. “This trend is true of the human food industry, too. Consumers want labels they can read and understand. With it comes a rising demand from consumers for diets free from grain.”

With these changes, pet food manufacturers are experimenting with alternative protein sources, including venison and lamb and even fish, such as salmon and herring, in an effort to combat real food allergies. But it raises the question whether consumers in turn are exploring these options for the right reasons or simply because they think their dog may be bored with chicken and beef?

“I think dogs do appreciate different flavors—it’s evident by the way they enjoy a meal,” said Liu. “But, ultimately, the reason for these other more exotic protein sources is to give dogs that are genuinely allergic to chicken or beef options.”

Accordingly, many foods sold primarily through veterinary offices and specialist pet food stores contain ingredients such as duck, rabbit and venison.

“The idea behind this is that if a dog has an allergy to chicken or beef protein in the food, it’s less likely to have been exposed to these protein sources,” Mayabb said.

However as more pet food manufacturers start focusing on these ingredients and making them more common on retailers’ shelves, Mayabb worries that veterinarians won’t have any choices left to solve genuine food allergy related issues down the line.

“In the ‘90s, lamb and rice worked well to solve dietary issues because so few dogs had been exposed to lamb,” he said. “But as it became a more common food flavoring ingredient, it’s started losing its effectiveness as an allergy problem solver. And if some of the more unique proteins start becoming more commonplace, it could pose huge problems down the line.”

On a more positive note, Mayabb said new science-based diets are going into food bags all the time and highlighted the on-going trend of age-related and breed-specific foods.

“For some now there’s been a trend among pet food companies to focus on age-related and breed specific formulas,” he said. “However, our latest research shows that all common breed-specific issues, such as obesity in Labradors, along with certain medical issues such as stiff joints and an itchy skin that manifest themselves later in the dog’s life, can in fact be addressed from puppyhood.”

Thus we have started to focus on breed-specific puppy diets to nutritionally address these issues literally from birth,” Mayabb continued. “Currently, we have puppy formulas for Labradors, German shepherds, Chihuahuas and Yorkshire terriers. This early-stage prevention is definitely a new area of specialization that is still in its infancy and I have no doubt that more individual breed puppy formulas will follow.”

Mayabb added that these new science is focused on the company’s retail line of products in an attempt to make the long-term benefits easily available to all dog owners. Ultimately, the company plans to revamp its entire dog age-related/growth formulas with what it claims is “some unique science” in the formulations. The first new products were originally scheduled to arrive on store shelves in November. However the date has now been reset to March 2011.