

## Improving small animal products following dog and cat marketing

By: Dr George Collings

After being in nutrition businesses for over thirty years, it is very clear to me that there are three very distinct markets with appropriate products, processing and perspectives:

1. Human nutrition;
2. Pet nutrition (predominately dogs and cats); and
3. Animal nutrition.

Human nutrition products focus on taste, texture, nutrition, enjoyment, flavour, quality, et cetera. Animal nutrition focuses more on performance or producing milk, eggs and meat. This is in direct contrast with the pets being part of the family with a close love-bond. This is very different from the humanization trend with holistic pet foods. One thing I stress with clients is that the complexity of processes, ingredients and nutrition in pet nutrition foods is much closer to human nutrition foods than animal nutrition feeds. Products should be just as high a quality, stabilized from rancidity, nutritious, tasty, digestible and well-fortified as human food products. The big difference is dog and cat products are complete and balanced focusing on meeting all of the essential nutrients with bioavailable forms. There really is no end in sight as to the many potential dog and cat products.

### Small animal foods

What about other pets like ferrets, rabbits, guinea pigs and other pocket pets? Many of these pets are considered part of the family yet many of the products are made with

fairly limited processing types (pellets, blending, et cetera) similar to that found with production animal nutrition. Products are not as well stabilized from rancidity as dog and cat foods and use ingredients more similar to production animals. Nutritional guarantees are also fairly minimal as are nutritional claims. Several standards exist around the world for dog and cat nutritional profiles, but no recognized profiles exist for pocket pets.

Upon reviewing several websites, I found there were multiple, typical claims used: premium, balance, variety, mix, clean, fortified and blend. In comparison, the dog and cat food market uses terms like super-premium, ultra, holistic, natural, organic and fresh. Product forms are also much more diverse. Shown below in the rest

of this article are areas where small animal products could focus in the next few years to widen the offering of products while following the lead of dog and cat foods.

### *Natural or all-natural*

Use only natural ingredients that have not been processed and make the claim 'Natural with vitamins and minerals'. Use only natural flavours and eliminate flavours that do not improve palatability for the pet. Use only natural antioxidants like mixed tocopherols, rosemary extract and green tea extract to stabilize all ingredients and the finished food. Testing of shelf-life stability should become routine.

### *Fresh and unique*

As more refrigeration becomes available at pet food stores, develop products that are



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not made with just grain by-products and simple grains, but with fresher, tastier fruits and vegetables.

#### **High quality ingredients**

Eliminate ingredients like wheat middlings and soybean mill run which are used in farm animal feeds and are more 'fillers' and potentially negative to the intestinal tract.

#### **Move beyond 'blends'**

A great majority of pocket pet products are blends of pellets and seeds. Each mouthful of food is different and will not contain the same level of nutrition because of this. While these are well received by the pets and are novel blends, there are other ways of processing diversity and variety into products while offering a more uniform nutritional mix.

#### **Antioxidant formula**

Many products claim natural source vitamin E, but no guarantees or levels are listed. Sources and amounts of vitamin E, vitamin C, and vitamin A should be stressed. Focus on other antioxidant containing ingredients.

#### **Focus on nutrition**

This has the most upside in new products for pocket pets. More nutritional claims should be shown. Since the impact of omega 3 fatty acids is well known and universal across many animals, more omega 3s should be used and balanced with omega 6 fatty acids. Other nutrients like taurine and carnitine should be examined.

#### **Highly available ingredients**

Many products use sources of minerals that are poorly absorbed in many species. As examples, zinc oxide can be replaced with zinc sulphate and zinc chelates. Protected vitamin C started in pocket pet nutrition and fish well before it was used in dog and cat food products, yet many still do not use stabilized vitamin C.

#### **Fibres**

For years, the focus was alfalfa or alfalfa leaf, then a new marketing push occurred focusing on timothy hay. However, in all of this, the function of the fibre on overall digestion and intestinal health was rarely discussed. Other fibre sources are quite negative and several are very positive in health. Multiple sources of fibre from vegetables and fruits should expand.

#### **Probiotics and prebiotics**

Many products are advancing probiotics, but most are using bacillus based products because they can withstand pelleting and are spore-forming. Other lactic bacteria blends should be explored using encapsulation and other protection methods.

#### **Increase the product forms**

Since multiple processes are used in dog and cat foods, new products can be made that are baked, soft-moist, co-extruded, soft-dry, et cetera. All of these processing types will provide uniform nutritional bites of nutrition.

#### **Increase the packaging types**

Most products are bagged in simple form and fill packaging, while treats are packed in stand-up re-sealable packaging. The use of nitrogen flushed packaging would help overall shelf-life. The use of recyclable packaging materials would support a more green approach.

#### **Build acceptable 'nutritional profiles'**

An advantage of dog and cat foods for the consumer is that a reasonable set of nutritional profiles exist to ensure high quality foods in the market. These were established by expert panels to protect pets and consumers from poor quality foods. These should be developed for pocket pets as well.

#### **Follow the leader**

The dog and cat food market is growing rapidly around the world and following advancements in the human food and nutraceutical markets. It is time for the small animal nutrition market to follow the leader and expand the quality, nutrition, processing, claims and packaging found today in dog and cat foods. This will open new opportunities for success and set the standard for the next decade of product development. ■