

Knowledge Counts

Retailers who offer specialty cat foods have a common strategy for successfully boosting sales and their profits: education.

By Sandy Robins

"It's a simple equation," said Dave Ratner, owner and operator of Dave's Soda & Pet City with four independent pet stores in Massachusetts. "Well-informed employees plus customers seriously seeking nutritional advice equals the establishment of a platform of trust and loyalty, resulting in return business. The added bonus is that such an arrangement is likely to boost free word-of-mouth advertising, bringing new customers in-store.



"And, if you keep this formula going, it compounds sales figures and thus increases profits," he added.

Ratner, who has been in the pet retail industry for 35 years, is a popular lecturer at trade shows such as SuperZoo. He has been manufacturing holistic cat and dog food under the label Dave's Pet Foods for two decades.

"I believe that staff members need to feel empowered to confidently ask customers the right leading questions," he said, "such as 'Is your cat overweight?' 'Does your vet say the cat needs more liquid?' or 'Is your cat prone to urinary infections?' This is key to establishing the image of a store as one that is able to offer expert advice to cat owners."

Ratner provides an ongoing in-house education program. He organizes staff workshops with cat food manufacturers and pays his employees to attend.

"I have discovered that dedicated staff members love to learn," he said. "We also use the excellent training manual published by NexPet as a go-to source of information."

The manual is available to more than 600 retailers that are members of the pet store association, according to Barry Berman, NexPet's founder.

Cats have a reputation for being finicky eaters, so a well-educated employee is an important building block in creating loyalty among their owners.

"One of the best ways to back your knowledge about a particular food is to offer samples," said Andrew Kim, who owns two Healthy Spot stores in the Los Angeles area. "By arming them with enough samples to ensure a smooth transition to a new and improved diet, it makes the whole process less stressful for the cat owner, and they are more likely to stay the course and achieve the end goal: a more beneficial diet for their pet. And thus continue to shop at the store."

Kim stocks a variety of premium dry and wet cat foods as well as raw products and alternatives such as freeze-fried and dehydrated diets. He also coordinates promotions with vendors so he can offer "buy two, get one free" deals to customers.

"Discount programs are also very beneficial," Kim said. "By giving customers a 5 percent discount you are also able to obtain vital customer mailing information and track their purchases. Such schemes drive the volume of sales, and customers enjoy the value offered."

On the other hand, Michael Levy, president and founder of Petfood Express, a chain of 35 stores in the San Francisco Bay area, doesn't subscribe to customer loyalty programs.

"I believe that such programs present a perceived value to the customer," he said. "When it comes to a pet's health, customers are often more focused on the long-term benefits for their pet than the cost. Thus we're back to talking about well-educated employees, who in turn can pass beneficial knowledge on to the customer. In this age of customization, customers are looking for customized advice, too."

Where a particular food is positioned in the store can drive sales of that product.

"I believe in moving products outside of their regular display location to catch customer attention," said Patti Storms, owner of Well Bred in Chester, N.J. "For example, I wouldn't hesitate to place cat foods in the middle of a clothing section.

"It's going to create a buzz and customers are going to query this, thus opening the door to a discussion on nutrition," she added.

Storms said special offers from manufacturers or distributors are particularly beneficial when introducing a new item.

"I don't consider such special offers as a 'loss leader' but a tactic to draw attention to a particular product," she said.

David Everson, Natura brand manager with the P&G Pet Care Division, endorsed the idea of special product displays and sample packs from a manufacturer's standpoint.

"We consider a sample to be the amount sufficient for a couple of meals," he said.

Apart from investing time in educating retailers, Natura hosts in-store meet-and-greet sessions that allow consumers direct access to a company representative, Everson reported.

"Part of our educational strategy is having a lot of information online for consumers," he said. "This allows them to read up on products at their leisure and be better informed when they come into a store. It ultimately paves the way to brand loyalty and increased profits."

Ratner hasn't brought manufacturer reps into his store to interact with cat owners, but he said the concept has worked well with dog owners.

"When we last did a canine promotion, we combined it with a TV, radio and print campaign targeting the area in which our stores are located," he said. "It was a huge success. It brought people into the store that didn't really care about what type of food we sold; we learned they came in because they had a problem and we were offering a solution.

"Once again, the driving force was the educational angle," he continued. "I would certainly consider this as a way to promote specialty cat diets, too. Because so many cats suffer from obesity, a poster in-store that read 'Is Your Cat Overweight?' definitely would generate interest."

Though food is a year-round purchase, several manufacturers suggested that retailers take advantage of certain times, such as kitten season.

"We offer special freestanding displays for our KMR Kitten milk replacer during birthing season so that consumers can easily find the product when they need it the most," said Darlene Frudakis, president and chief operating officer of PetAg Inc. in Hampshire, Ill.

"Typically, consumers look for such a product in an emergency situation," she added. "If the product is not available, the retailer will lose the sale."

It follows that if retailers promote the product during kitten season every year, they will build a reputation among consumers. A good time to highlight specialty cat diets is during the new year, according to Everson.

"People are making resolutions to lose weight and it's become common to extend such thoughts and ideas to the family pet," he said.

Outside the store, social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter have the power to create a product buzz and drive sales.

"I see social networking sites as a wonderful platform to put out information," Ratner said. "It follows that, armed with such information, customers in the vicinity of the store who were probably shopping elsewhere will at least come inside and look around."

And the cycle continues. If the retailer can hold a customer's attention through relevant information and samples, he or she likely will come back--and bring friends.