

# Oral Care Is On the Rise

With more owners aware of the need for good canine dental health, manufacturers have upped their offerings with an eye on efficacy, convenience and price.

BY SANDY CHEBAT

The future of the canine dental health category is bright, according to industry participants.

"People are learning more every day about how closely oral and dental health correlate to heart health, and consumers continue to seek convenient and care-focused solutions that mirror human health products and trends," said Eric Abbey, president and founder of Loving Pets in Cranbury, N.J.

Deborah Brown, vice president of Pet King Brands in Westmont, Ill., agreed.

"The reason is increased awareness of the link between oral health and overall health in people and pets, and good oral health can extend the life of a healthy pet up to three years," she said. "The importance of providing good oral care to pets is emphasized more in the media, at the veterinarian and [in] the fact that so many retailers are now devoting sections to oral health."

While cost remains a factor in this category, dog owners are willing to pay a fair price for dental products that deliver the health benefits they seek, Abbey said.

Martin Shimko, president of SwedencareUSA in Poulsbo, Wash., agreed.

"Efficacy is, of course, the most important item for dental items, followed by ease of use," he said. "Cost is always a factor for pet owners, but they will spend more if the first two items are met."

Sales of dental products are climbing thanks to the continued humanization of pets, according to industry participants.

"The increased care that pet owners are giving their dogs and cats means pet owners are paying more attention to dental care," Shimko said. "The trend is based on pet owners looking at their pets as family instead of animals. The pet dental health market is very much influenced by the human dental market."

According to Betsy Berger, communications manager for Merrick Pet Care in Amarillo, Texas, "more than half of pet parents complain about their pet's breath and seek solutions for a dental treat that not only cleans teeth, but also freshens breath."

Retailers find that customers demand efficacy and simplicity in their canine dental care purchases.

"Customers are searching for a convenient way to maintain their pet's overall dental health," said Jessica Klingler, store manager for Pet Goods in Succasunna, N.J. "Many customers are finding that preventative care is far more affordable than costly dental cleanings and surgeries."

Pet pleasure also is important for consumers, said Jennifer Kluesner, co-owner of Jett and Monkey's Dog Shoppe in Des Moines, Iowa.

"We get requests for simple dental products or [ones that] come in a treat or chew form so the pet can also enjoy it," she said.



Pet Goods in Succasunna, N.J., highlights Merrick Pet Care's Fresh Kisses dental treats.



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## NEW PRODUCTS

## DENTAL TREATS TAKE THE LEAD

Summer 2017 proved to be an exciting season for the oral care category, as many companies chose then to present their newest offerings to the market.

Because many pet owners still avoid brushing their dogs' teeth, Loving Pets introduced Ora-Bone dental treats in July. Available in small, medium and large sizes to meet the needs of any dog breed or size, the treats are 100 percent made in the USA and feature "a patent-pending design [that] promotes better movement in the mouth and improved interaction with gums, teeth and tongue," said Eric Abbey, president and founder of the Cranbury, N.J., manufacturer.

Each treat includes varied textured surfaces to remove tartar and prevent buildup, and three breath-freshening ingredients freshen breath in the mouth and gut, he added. Retailers can choose from Ora-Bone in bags for on-shelf or clip strips, or as single-trial packages in a shipper/display box.

With the goal of revolutionizing canine dental care, WellPet launched Whimzees Brushzees to the U.S. pet specialty market at SuperZoo in Las Vegas in July. The new design features grooves and ridges to help remove plaque and tartar, and Brushzees are "engineered specifically for the ways dogs grip and chew, promoting fresh breath and cleaner teeth," said Lauren Brecher, brand manager of Whimzees for Tewksbury, Mass.-based WellPet.

Also in July, Merrick Pet Care released Merrick Fresh Kisses. The treats feature a double-brush design to clean teeth by removing plaque and tartar during the chewing of the treat. Specially formulated to freshen breath, they are made with natural ingredients, do not contain grain or potato and are available in two recipes, said Betsy Berger, communications manager for the Amarillo, Texas-based company.

Merrick Fresh Kisses infused with Mint-Flavored Breath Strips contain natural mint breath strip pieces infused throughout the treat to freshen breath. They feature coconut oil and a combination of peppermint oil, lemongrass oil and rosemary oil.

**Pet King Brands introduced its Oratene Antiseptic Gel to pet specialty retailers; the product was previously only available through a veterinarian. Formulated for serious oral conditions in dogs and cats, this chlorhexidine replacement can be used for "red inflamed gums, ulcerations, gingivitis, stomatitis and periodontal disease," said Deborah Brown, vice president of the Westmont, Ill.-based company.**

**"It has a mildly sweet, nonbitter taste and is readily accepted by most pets and provides soothing relief," she added.**

In May, SwedencareUSA debuted ProDen PlaqueOff Dental Bones. The chews are designed to help clean plaque and tartar by abrasive action and come in four varieties: Turkey & Cranberry Flavor, Chicken & Pumpkin Flavor, Bacon Flavor and Vegetable Fusion Flavor. Made in the USA with natural ingredients—including sea kelp—the chews contain no grain, gluten or soy, according to company officials.

## MARKETING

## GET THE WORD OUT

With National Pet Dental Health Month just around the corner—in February, to be exact—retailers and manufacturers said now is the time to promote the category and prime the pump up for sales.

"Pet specialty retailers can increase their revenue stream in a new direction as they convert customers into dental health care," said Martin Shimko, president of SwedencareUSA in Poulsbo, Wash. "Running specials and placement of dental care products to highlight them will bring the customer focus and dollars."

Jessica Klingler, store manager for Pet Goods in Succasunna, N.J., said they run specials to encourage clients to sample new products.

"We often put dental treats on sale in our circulars to encourage customers to try them," she said. "Our interaction with our customer in-store is the most impactful way of communicating the importance of dental supplements to our customers."

With veterinary clinics offering discounts on dental products and services during February, Jennifer Kluesner, co-owner of Jett and Monkey's Dog Shoppe in Des Moines, Iowa, said she promotes the items they sell by posting on social media and setting up a counter display to showcase their availability.

Also emphasizing the importance of media, Lauren Brecher, brand manager of Whimzees for Tewksbury, Mass.-based WellPet, said they "work closely with media partners and with their highly engaged audience on social media channels—Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Pinterest, etc.—to connect in real-time with pet parents worldwide."

For many customers, seeing—and smelling—is believing, so Betsy Berger, communications manager for Merrick Pet Care in Amarillo, Texas, encourages retailers to find opportunities to drive product trials.

"[These] are critical to educate pet parents about how dental treats work," she said, "from seeking product experience and user-generated content on social media to sampling campaigns to collecting recipe reviews and pet parent testimonials online."

To support its retail partners, Loving Pets in Cranbury, N.J., also suggests in-store sampling programs. The company works closely with bloggers and social media influencers to review products all year, promote education and outreach, and share open and honest feedback, said Eric Abbey, president and founder.

## RETAILER EDUCATION

## WHERE SALES BEGIN

Industry participants agree that oral health plays a critical role in a pet's overall health. Yet Jessica Klingler, store manager for Pet Goods in Succasunna, N.J., finds that many customers still believe that feeding dry food is enough to keep their pets' teeth clean. So education is essential, beginning with retail staff.

Kahoots Feed and Pet, which has stores in Southern California, provides extensive training to all associates, said Kristin Dutton, director of merchandising and private brand.

"All new items are launched with a training protocol so every associate is educated and can help any customer with any need she may have," Dutton said. "We also allow for vendor trainings through our 'train the trainer' model and have training materials available for associates to read or reference on an internal online portal."

Several manufacturers reported offering information and training for pet specialty retailers. For example, for retailers wanting more in-depth information, Pet King Brands in Westmont, Ill., provides webinars to train one person or an entire team.

As part of its Whimzees website redesign, WellPet created an easy way for visitors to navigate ingredients, and it continues to conduct demonstrations as well as store associate trainings onsite and through distributor sales representatives, said Lauren Brecher, brand manager of Whimzees for Tewksbury, Mass.-based WellPet.

Betsy Berger, communications manager for Merrick Pet Care in Amarillo, Texas, said that along with product information and in-store demos with pet retail staff, the company furnishes samples and coupons so store associates can try the treats with their own pets.

Sampling is an effective training method at Jett and Monkey's Dog Shoppe in Des Moines, Iowa.

"For the most part, our employees have used the products and seen the difference in their dogs," said Jennifer Kluesner, co-owner.

## INDUSTRY VOICES

What is the best way to display canine dental care products in pet specialty stores?

"Encourage sampling. Consider always handing out a sample and encourage a return visit/purchase."

—ERIC ABBEY, president and founder of Loving Pets in Cranbury, N.J.

"We offer countertop units to promote trial at the registers and dump bins that can be placed in high-traffic areas to promote the ever-important impulse buy. Trial is so important in the treating world."—LAUREN BRECHER, brand manager of Whimzees for Tewksbury, Mass.-based WellPet

"Merchandising is the first impression of a product that you give your customer. You have to make displays easy to shop, easy to follow and easy for the customer to make a selection. Keeping dental products grouped together and merchandised cleanly is most effective. We take pride in our merchandising in our stores."—JESSICA KLINGLER, store manager for Pet Goods in Succasunna, N.J.

"We merchandise [them] all together, first by type or method and then by brand. We find our customers shop by need in this category, so we want to make it easy for them to find what they are looking for. Our stores are empowered to create interactive and engaging displays to promote the need for these types of products during February, [which is National Pet Dental Health Month]."—KRISTIN DUTTON, director of merchandising and private brand for Kahoots Feed and Pet, which has stores in Southern California

"We have the easy-to-grab dental chews placed on our counter. Otherwise, we keep all dental products together in one area. That way we can start a conversation with the customer, see what need they have and show them what product or products will work best for their dog."—JENNIFER KLUESNER, co-owner of Jett and Monkey's Dog Shoppe in Des Moines, Iowa



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