

Market Outlook [July 2010]

New Research Stands to Make Pets the Next “Oat Bran”

Continuing the theme of last month’s installment, this column predicts that the positive impact of pet ownership on human health will lift pet industry sales much higher in the years ahead. And indeed, given that these benefits are anecdotally obvious, it seems odd that the industry hasn’t yet tapped this potential. This lack is all the more surprising since the pet ownership/human health connection has long been a theme for celebrity veterinarian Dr. Marty Becker, author of the *New York Times* bestseller *The Healing Power of Pets* and a regular guest on *Good Morning America*. The movement is also backed by APPA, whose Pets Add Life (PAL) PSA campaign emphasizes such benefits to pet ownership as stress reduction and heart disease prevention; and by The Delta Society, a human-services organization dedicated to improving human health through therapy and service animals.

Taking the cues, at least one pet industry heavyweight has recently embraced the pet/human health connection whole-heartedly. In August 2009, the Waltham Center for Pet Nutrition—a division of global pet food leader Mars—committed \$2 million to the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) for Human-Animal Interaction (HAI) research. The NICHD, a division of the National Institutes of Health, will combine the donation with funding from the National Institute of Nursing Research to form the first formal program in HAI. Although the field of HAI research has been around for several decades, previous studies have been small scale. In contrast, the NICHD studies will span four years and explore such key areas as the impact of animals on public health, including the cost-effectiveness of animals in reducing and preventing disease.

With Mars now leading the charge, other major marketers will likely follow suit in sponsoring research exploring the human/pet health connection. And based on existing scientific data indicating clear connections between pet ownership and enhanced human health and wellness, this column believes that a new critical mass of emerging research could make pets “the next oat bran,” sharply boosting household ownership rates and the size of the pet population. As of mid 2010, only about one-third of households have dogs and only about one-quarter have cats, according to Experian Simmons, and even 5 percent annual increases in the levels of pet ownership could result in dramatically improved pet market sales.