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Market Trends

The Dogness Effect

The trend toward pet humanization and pampering supporting product premiumization is the No. 1 driver in the US petfood market, so when Nestlé Purina decided to poke fun at pampered pets in a high-profile ad campaign it was not without risks. Launched in spring 2009 the “Quick. Get That Dog Some Alpo” program features pooches pampered to the extreme, including a dog in a tub with cucumber slices soothing its eyes and an undignified-looking afghan with rollers in its fur. “Lost!” cry out posters referring to dogs like Spike, who was last seen sporting flashy duds and a sequined collar. The campaign’s interactive online features include a “Fifi Test” through which pet owners can gauge their pet’s “dogness” and a film documenting the “rescue” of over-pampering-endangered canines. The point (aside from the obvious of selling Alpo) is that America’s dogs are in danger of losing touch with their true canine nature, a tragedy that can be averted by simply feeding them “real meat Alpo,” ergo the tagline “Real dogs eat meat.”

The campaign is effective on multiple levels. First, due to its tongue-in-cheek approach it probably manages to avoid offending even the most zealous pet pamperer. Second, through its reliance on billboards and online media, it delivers both cost savings (to the advertiser) and heavy-duty visual clout. Third, it calls attention to a value brand that some would argue can’t hold a candle to all those superholistic/human-grade products out there these days, except in this way: it costs a whole lot less—83 cents a can to be exact, according to Information Resources, Inc. *InfoScan Review* data for supermarkets, drugstores and mass merchandisers other than Walmart (week of October 5, 2008). That’s below the wet dog food unit price average of \$1 and the unit price of Purina’s own Beneful Prepared Meals (\$1.82), and way below the prices of ultrapremium brands like Pet Promise (\$3.21). For dog owners during these tough economic times, saving that kind of money on a product promising real meat *and* “re-caninization” may seem like, well, a meaty proposition.

Commenting on the campaign to *Advertising Age* (February 7, 2009), Dean Hanson, Art

Director at Minneapolis agency Fallon explained that “It seemed like a natural to take this very solid substantial dog food and say it’s time to wake up and get back to fundamentals” since “everybody is guilty of putting human personality on dogs.” And indeed, Packaged Facts believes that Fallon may very well have (inadvertently?) touched on one of the “next big things” in pet ownership and product marketing: a swing away from the fashion of treating pets like people in ways that are not the healthiest for either pet owner or pet. As Martin Deeley, veteran dog trainer and President of the International Association of Canine Professionals, notes in his introduction to celebrity dog trainer’s Cesar Millan’s bestselling *Cesar’s Way*, “Dogs are not small humans...Dogs are dogs, and we need to respect them as dogs. We do them a huge disservice by treating them like humans and thus create many of the bad behaviors we see today” (as assessment with which, by the way, Mr. Millan wholeheartedly agrees).

So then, will we be seeing a shift away from pet anthropomorphism, toward encouraging our dogs to be dogs, and our cats to be cats? Absolutely, Packaged Facts predicts, based in part on the fact that, in the area of pet nutrition, we already are. One potent indicator of this trend is growing consumer interest in raw/frozen foods designed to mimic as closely as possible what pets would eat in the wild, driven by activity in the pet specialty channel (where the big petfood trends almost always begin). According to our July 2008 report, *Fresh Pet Food in North America: The Raw/Frozen, Refrigerated and Homemade Wave*, sales of fresh petfood including raw/frozen foods will make double-digit annual percentage gains through 2012. Also playing the “wild” card are a number of marketers fielding dry petfood, including Eukanuba with Naturally Wild; Canidae, via ingredients including salmon; and Taste of the Wild, whose High Prairie Canine formula features bison and venison (see “Taste of the Wild,” *Petfood Industry*, March 2009). Mars’ Whole Meals dog food “sticks” encourage dogs to interact with their food much as they would a bone, in keeping with the practice of their spokesperson—celebrity veterinarian Dr. Marty Becker—to encourage the use of “food puzzles” to promote foraging.

In other words, funny though it may be, Nestlé Purina’s “dogness” theme is rife with underlying messages that should, Packaged Facts believes, be taken quite seriously.



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