



Veterinary Awareness of and Attitudes toward Natural Nutrition

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Proceedings from a CE-credit seminar conducted at the 2010 Central Veterinary Conference in Kansas City.

As pet owner relationships have evolved over the years, so have consumer demands for pet food options. In recent years, there has been explosive growth in pet foods with a natural claim. Practitioners may be challenged to explain natural pet food to clients who seek their recommendation. A recent survey revealed veterinary awareness of and their attitudes toward natural nutrition, identifying several significant needs.

A brief history of pet nutrition.

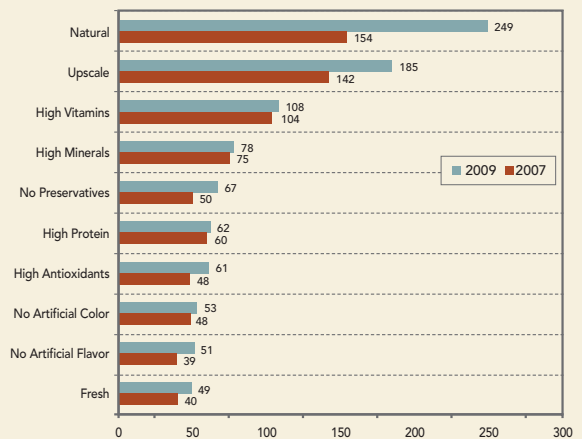
The first commercial pet foods mirrored knowledge being discovered in human nutrition. Vitamin, macronutrient and micronutrient requirements were being researched, however, pet foods were not "complete and balanced" as we know them now to be.

Beginning in the 1960s, we began to learn more about nutrition, specifically the nutrient needs of dogs and cats. Among the more important developments were life stage nutrient requirements for puppies and kittens, and the emergence of clinical and geriatric diets, concurrent with new findings in nutrition and improvement in veterinary care.

In recent years, socio-economic and cultural changes as well as consumers' humanization of pets have driven both increased variety and overall growth in pet products, particularly foods. Those products with the largest growth are premium dog and cat foods, treats, health care products and dietary supplements. All these point to consumer interest in health, happiness and wellness for their pets.

The largest and fastest-growing segment is natural products which have almost doubled since 2005. In 2009 alone, some 250 new products were introduced with a natural claim.

Top Marketing Claims (New Products)



Source: Packaged Facts Pet Market Outlook 2010-2011

What is natural?

Most in our industry turn to the definition created by the Association of American Feed Control Officials (AAFCO). AAFCO develops and implements guidelines for the creation of regulations and policies that control the manufacture, distribution and sale of animal feeds including pet foods. However, the definition is not only very broad but also open to interpretation:

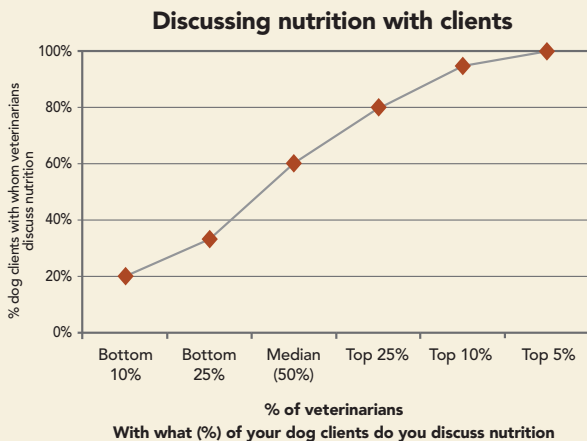
"A feed or ingredient derived solely from plant, animal or mined sources, either in its unprocessed state or having been subject to physical processing, heat processing, rendering, purification, extraction, hydrolysis, enzymolysis or fermentation, but not having been produced by or subject to a chemically synthetic process and not containing any additives or processing aids that are chemically synthetic except in amounts as might occur unavoidably in good manufacturing practices."

Highlights of the veterinary survey.

What do veterinarians think about natural? Before that, how often do veterinarians talk to clients about nutrition? When it comes to nutrition, what do veterinarians talk about to them? If a veterinarian recommends a non-prescription diet, upon what do they base that recommendation? And what is the veterinary perception of and experience with natural foods?

The survey was conducted in April by Trone[®], Inc. with its opinions@trone Veterinary Panel. Almost 600 veterinarians participated in the survey, resulting in a 95% confidence level with a +/- variance of 4.01.

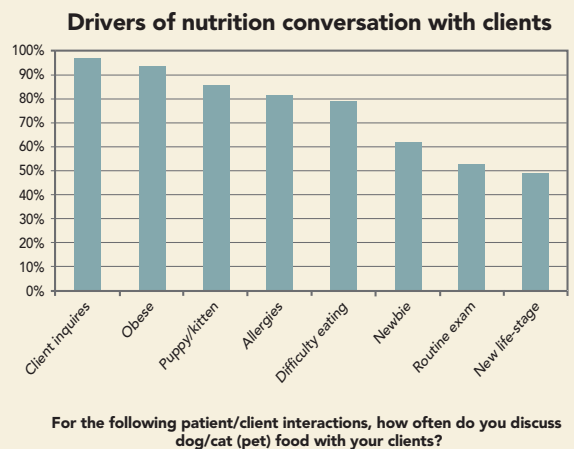
On average, veterinarians said they discuss nutrition with 55 to 60 percent of their clients. This does not appear surprising, but given ready access by clients to many other sources of information—especially online—it is encouraging to see such a large percentage talking to their pet's healthcare professional about nutrition.



When asked the question about life stages at which they discuss nutrition with their dog clients, again, it is perhaps not surprising that the puppy stage is the highest percentage. There is still a healthy amount of discussion during the dog's transition to adulthood and during adulthood. A spike as the dog becomes senior may be attributed to health issues that develop with age, suggesting a need to change to a new diet or perhaps a clinical diet.

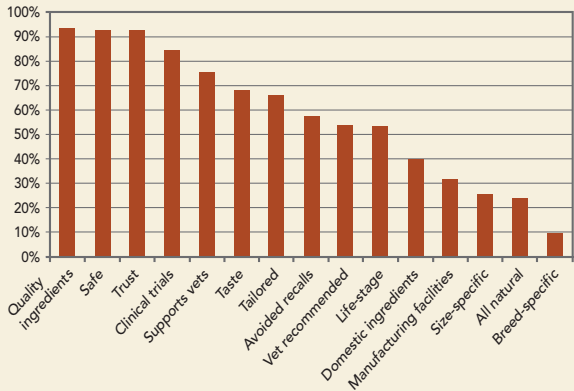
What prompts the discussion? Routine exams appear to be the average, but most conversations are started by client inquiries, followed by specific clinical needs such as obesity, allergies or the pet's difficulty in eating a particular food or the puppy/kitten life stage.

Opportunities for discussing nutrition suggest that often a change is necessary. Veterinarians were asked how often they counseled clients to change the pet's diet. Respondents reported that on an annual basis, they recommend to approximately one-third of all clients that they change their pet's non-prescription diet. Veterinarians were not specifically asked why they recommended a switch to such a large percentage of clients, but we can surmise that pet life stage, a change in appetite or a condition not requiring a specific clinical diet may contribute to the recommendation.



Quality ingredients and safety were noted by veterinarians as the top two most important features in recommending a non-prescription diet. While these are not likely surprising, we can infer that they have become even more important as the pet/pet owner relationship has evolved. Trust was equally important, from a company or brand perspective rather than perhaps individual foods. Interestingly, taste was cited in the next tier of attributes. We assume that palatability is important to practitioners not because it is an issue but rather to ensure that the pet is getting proper nutrition.

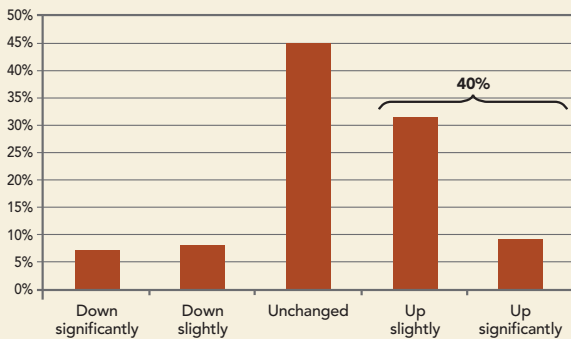
Attributes important to recommendation



When you consider recommending a non-prescription pet food, how important are the following features of the brand or product line of food?

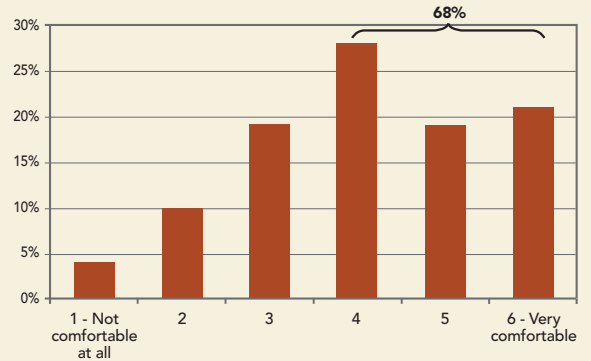
When asked specifically about natural foods, 40% of the veterinarians surveyed reported they were getting more client inquiries over the past year. We believe that this tracks with increased pet owner interest in natural foods—they are purchasing natural foods more frequently and so, are asking more questions. When asked whether they were comfortable discussing natural foods with clients, 70% said they were moderately to very comfortable talking about natural nutrition. However, many of the veterinarians also said they had difficulty distinguishing between natural foods and wanted to learn more about natural nutrition.

Client inquiries about natural foods



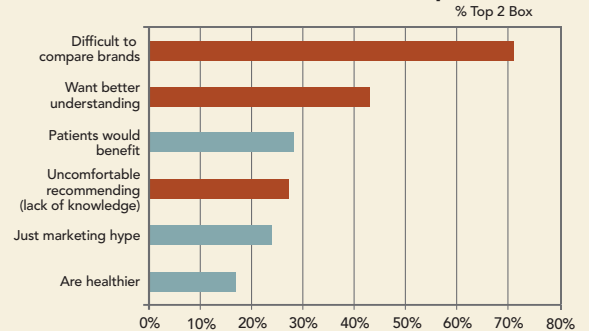
Which of the following BEST describes client inquiries about natural pet foods in the past year?

Veterinary comfort with discussing natural foods with clients



Which of the following BEST describes client inquiries about natural pet foods in the past year?

Attitudes toward natural pet foods



Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements about natural pet foods.

This finding from the survey points to several questions and unfulfilled needs. How do we compare natural pet foods on the market? More research and greater communication to the veterinary community would be beneficial. Definitions of natural such as that from AAFCO are very broad.

A definition alone is not the solution, but greater clarity from a regulatory perspective would be beneficial. And much more research—peer-reviewed and published—is needed specific to aspects of natural nutrition, such as basic research in digestibility, specific or systemic health benefits, ingredients and manufacturing processes. This will equip veterinarians to sort through a myriad of “natural” claims, and to evaluate and confidently recommend natural diets that are proven.

Dr. Swanson's seminar included studies conducted with pet owners regarding their awareness of and attitudes toward natural nutrition, to be covered in the next report. The CE-credit seminar will be available online and on-demand later in October at TheNutroCompany.com/Veterinarians.



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About The Nutro Company

The Nutro Company has been researching and perfecting pet food for over 80 years. Our mission is to provide superior, natural foods fortified with vitamins and minerals that you can recommend to your clients with confidence. Our diets are made exclusively from the finest ingredients and come in a range of premium formulas based on pets' individual physiological and nutritional needs.

Working in concert with WALTHAM, THE WORLD'S LEADING AUTHORITY ON PET CARE AND NUTRITION® and leading veterinary nutritionists, we are committed to further explore natural pet nutrition and how diets can best provide what nature requires. Our collaboration will result in informational and educational tools for the veterinary community and your clients.

