

# PPN NOW

PERSPECTIVES & ADVICE FROM AROUND THE INDUSTRY

## VOICES

### NASC Gets It

Manufacturers of animal health supplements understand the value of the small, independent pet retail channel and these stores' unique ability to interface and educate consumers.

BY B.C. HENSCHEN

**T**hey like us. They really, really like us!

That was my feeling recently at the annual meeting of the National Animal Supplement Council (NASC), a nonprofit organization whose manufacturer members must comply with quality standards in the production of animal health supplements. I was there leading a discussion on the struggles of the micro independents, and NASC members had some wonderful suggestions on how manufacturers and micro independents can work together to strengthen the industry.

When I am talking with manufacturers, I can often tell they are not really interested in my business because I am a small, single-store operation. These are the larger brands that have media campaigns and a large internet presence, and, quite frankly, stores are merely a fulfillment center to them. I can tell you it is quite the opposite with the members of NASC.

NASC understands that micro independents really are the trendsetters. Many products start out in the small independent retail channel and end up in the larger multi-store operations because of the groundswell started by the micro retailer in the area.

Members of the council also understand that they are relying on customers walking in to pet specialty stores. Supplements are really an add-on item. If pet food manufacturers continue to build their business around e-commerce, there's nobody there to talk to the consumer about how important adding a probiotic to their pet's kibble is or how a joint supplement can really help. What's even scarier to me is that if we don't continue to promote the micro independent pet specialty store as the go-to place for information, then more and more people will rely on the internet, and the internet is a very scary place when it comes to animal supplements. Let's face it: Animal supplements are not tightly regulated, product claims are not always legitimate and safety is a real fear.

Let's say a consumer is getting his pet food auto shipped from one of the large e-commerce sites. He mentions to a friend at the dog park that his pet is having some scooting issues. That friend tells him how she discovered a kelp supplement that has helped improve her dog's dental health and thinks there must be a great supplement to help with the dog's scooting issues. The consumer goes home and starts researching supplements for

his dog's problem. He comes across a great website with a "vet-recommended" anal gland supplement. He purchases it, and it does nothing. That consumer might write off supplements completely at that point, thinking it's all hogwash and not realizing that he picked the wrong product. Worse yet, think about a consumer whose pet has an issue because the product they chose was really an unsafe product. In those cases, stories told at the bark park will likely lead to negative consumer experiences with and perceptions of supplements.

*"A product ... needs to have a story, and it's our job to tell that story."*

I believe a product should have more than just a great ingredient list. It needs to have a story, and it's our job to tell that story. When a customer comes in to my store looking for a new pet food, I spend time talking about who makes the food, where it's made, the company's safety protocols and, in most cases, I can talk about visiting the manufacturer's facility. If I don't have a story to give on a product, then I'm not going to sell it. That was a very hard stance to have on supplements. There is a lot of secrecy in supplements, and although I did find some manufacturers that were willing to pull back the curtain and let me understand their sourcing and processes, there is still a lot of information that is not accessible to retailers.

When I'm recommending a supplement, I always show the NASC Quality Seal and explain what that means. That seal indicates that the company has been checked for manufacturing safety and ingredient sourcing, but that is only a small part of why I am so loyal to NASC products. The main reason is for the council's adverse-reaction tracking. Think about it, who is tracking a problem with a supplement?

The Dietary Supplement Health and Education Act (DSHEA) provides strict guidelines for the labeling and marketing of human dietary supplements. DSHEA established supplements intended for human consumption as a new class of food for purposes of federal regulation. DSHEA does not allow dietary supplement manufactur-

ers to make overt drug claims, such as that they cure, prevent, mitigate, treat or diagnose a disease. The legislation did not provide such guidelines for animal health supplements. I guess that leaves it on the FDA's shoulders, but I can tell you animal supplements are not high on its list. Neither is pet food for that matter.

Membership to NASC means a manufacturer is required to investigate and resolve every adverse event. All members must report on a monthly basis, whether they have an adverse event or not. This system tracks adverse events by ingredient or product, and information is available to the FDA. While I like the reporting requirements for overall product safety, I absolutely love it for the data it can provide a manufacturer about product information.

Let's say a company has made a supplement using a new herb, "herb A." Herb A has gone through the company's testing and safety protocols for use as a liver support. A few other companies are also using herb A in their supplements. A customer who has been using herb A calls in to the manufacturer with information that his dog became sick. That company helps the customer and gets all the information to report to NASC. Another company gets a call about a dog getting sick on a supplement that has herb A in it. That information is reported to NASC. A few more phone calls and a few more reports, and NASC is able to correlate that all the pets were also taking a fish oil supplement. After looking further into the available information, manufacturers then know to print on their product information and packaging "do not use this product with fish oil."

We micro independents are educated on that information from the manufacturer as well, and when making a recommendation of herb A to a customer, we know to ask if they are currently giving fish oil. The customer leaves knowing that they'll be using the supplement properly, so it's a win for us and for the manufacturer. That personalized, educated service is why NASC loves us.



**B.C. HENSCHEN**, a certified pet care technician and an accredited pet trainer, is a partner in **PLATINUM PAWS**, a full-service pet salon and premium pet food store in Carmel, Ind. His knowledge of the pet food industry makes Platinum Paws the go-to store for pet owners who want more for their pet than a bag off a shelf.



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