

A Botanical Boost

Megan Dischler, international sales manager for Herbsmith Inc., discusses how herbal remedies and supplements can improve the health of a pet and a pet store's bottom line.

Pet Business: Many industry experts believe that pet stores can profit from creating a cohesive "healthcare" department. In your opinion, how should herbal remedies and supplements factor into such a department?

Megan Dischler: I think that herbal remedies and supplements are a really important part of a healthcare department. Oftentimes, I see that supplements—and herbs, in specific—offer a unique challenge for the retailer. Supplements and herbs give the retailer an opportunity to consult with their customers about health and wellness. Retailers that are able to offer more of a consultative approach provide an added value to their customers. As a result, customers continue to frequent the same retail location for future advice and consultation needs.

PB: What is the best way for pet specialty retailers to educate themselves about the variety of herbal remedies and supplements available on the market today?

Dischler: Working with manufacturers is key. Manufacturers are eager to share our knowledge, support and educational resources. There are some great books that can help, as well. *Four Paws Five Directions* [by Cheryl Schwartz, DVM] is one of my favorites; so is Greg Tilford's book, *All You Ever Wanted to Know About Herbs for Pets*.

PB: What are the most common conditions addressed by herbal remedies and supplements right now?

Dischler: Most supplements aim to address the most common issues that ail the modern dog. Allergies, joint support, calming and digestive health are really prevalent right now.

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PB: What is the next big trend in herbal remedies and supplements?

Dischler: I expect that we will see a continuing trend towards natural or alternative supplements.

PB: What sets natural and alternative supplements apart from traditional products? What is the particular appeal that they hold for pet owners?

Dischler: More and more consumers are asking for natural products because they are looking for alternatives to products that contain a lot of fillers, preservatives and mystery ingredients, and they are looking for products that are free from negative side effects. I think consumers are starting to look at labels more closely and really examining the things that they are feeding to their companions.

Natural and alternative supplements can offer a way to support health and address health concerns without the negative side effects often associated with reactionary measures. Of course, when health concerns

arise, we want there to be a veterinarian involved. That being said, I think most vets will agree that animals that are fed well and are supported with supplements heal better when things like surgery are needed and tend to be less affected by negative side effects associated with some pharmaceuticals.

PB: With such a variety of products on the market today, how can retailers go about building a safe, effective selection for their stores? Is it possible to carry too much variety in this category?

Dischler: It is really important to be well educated on the supplement products that you offer. I think that it is a good idea to offer a middle-of-the-road and a high-end product for each of the most prevalent issues—for example, joint support. While I think that variety is good, I would suggest that retailers should maintain some focus and keep the selections simple. This will make for a more consumer-friendly shopping atmosphere.

PB: What is latest news from Herbsmith? Are you working on any new product introductions for the upcoming year?

Dischler: We are thrilled with the success of our newest introduction, Sound Dog Viscosity joint-support soft chews. They have been a huge hit.

We are also very excited to be launching Micro Flora, the most comprehensive digestive supplement available. It comprises probiotics, prebiotics, digestive enzymes and, of course, herbs for digestive support. We anticipate a huge response to this formula, which just launched at the end of January.

We are also planning to launch another herbal formula to our line of herbal supplements. Stay tuned! **PB**