

Sifting Through the Choices  
By  
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As a successful pet food retailer, we are approached almost weekly by food manufacturers that would like us to carry their foods. On top of scrutinizing the ingredients and the company itself, I always do one more test that I know most of my customers would...I Google it.

The amount of information on pet food and nutrition on the Internet is almost overwhelming. I've learned how to sort thru it because I don't believe everything I read, and believe that just because someone got it onto the Web does not make it true.

What do I look for in a food company? I look for a history of how long they have been in business, and what if any recalls have they had. Where is their product actually manufactured? Do they provide an easy to find actual ingredient list?

I click on the search engine of where to buy. If I can only find that food available for purchase on-line, I would be very concerned. Any good and reputable food company would want their food available in stores, especially Independent pet stores where the staff knows and understands the products.

I'm also leery of foods that are too widely available. Do I really want to feed my pet foods that are in every grocery store, big box, farm supply or garden center? That focus on mass marketing tells me that the food company values quantity far more than quality—which could also translate to their ingredients and production.

What about foods that are only available at veterinary clinics, like prescription diets? Although a few of these diets have some therapeutic benefit, the ingredients of most of these foods are not something I would choose to feed my pets. Quite often, we have foods in stock in our store that can address the very same health issues as a prescription diet.

What about foods that say 'recommended by vets' right on the bag? Or what if your vet recommends a certain food but your local trusted Independent pet store doesn't carry that food. In that situation I would ask my vet specifically why that food is beneficial to my pet. I would then ask my trusted pet store why they do not carry that food, and what foods may be an acceptable substitute. It is no secret that a few food manufacturers give veterinarians huge incentives in exchange for promoting their brand to clients.

Remember, no matter who refers you to a food, be it a vet, friend or store employee, you, and you alone are responsible for reading the ingredients and making an informed choice. A good Independent Pet Store will help you gather the information you need.

Back to the Internet. What about the 'Miracle Food' who's website promises it will take care of any problem your pet has ever had? When you do more searching you find the Miracle Food talked about in blogs and nutrition chat rooms. You find a zillion testimonials, but when you start calling pet stores to see who has it, no one carries it. That, in a nutshell, is a good marketing campaign, but not necessarily a good food. You don't know who is really posting on those blogs and chats. Also, any website that reviews or compares pet food brands should not also 'happen' to sell those brands that it favors.

So I find a brand of food that looks good—what next? I find that company's website. On that site I'd like to see a short bio of the company, as in 'who are we, and what is our mission'? I like to be able to see an ingredient list with as few clicks as possible. If a company is proud of their food, their ingredients are easy to find.

If I click on the Retailer Locator, can I find the food at at least 2 stores within 10 miles of my home? Does the website list customer service contact info with a phone number as well as an e-mail link. Do they *want* to hear from customers or do they avoid it? Are there any news or articles on the website? If they ever had a recall was it promptly listed on the website, or is that info buried? (a recall can happen to the best of companies, it's how they handle it that is most important).

Does my local Independent Pet Store carry it, or at least have they heard of it? We go to many trade shows throughout the year, and we are exposed to the majority of foods available. It's a red flag if we have never heard the name. If we *don't* carry it, and it's a good food, we may have something that is almost identical. Just ask. Sometimes not carrying a food is an issue of space, and reliable availability to us.

*While reading this, I hope I have given you more help than confusion. You may have picked up that I have a slight bias towards the Independent Pet Store vs. the Big Boxes. You are absolutely right. I have made a career in the pet industry by increasing my knowledge as much as possible to assist my customers (and their owners). My actions and answers to you are not dictated by the Corporate Answer Book, but by my love for your pet. That's as unbiased as it gets.*

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