



# dog diets get specific

Increasingly, dog owners want diets specially designed for their pets—and today's advanced breed-specific food technology gives them what they want. BY KATIE A. VOSS

**N**iche marketing has its hand in everything—and dog food is no exception. There are foods for everyone: big dogs, medium dogs, small dogs, couch-potato dogs and high-energy dogs. There are foods for dogs with flatulence, joint problems or itchy feet. These days, every dog has its diet.

Stocking your shelves with plenty of brand names and specific diets is key, according to Dr. Edward Moser, consulting veterinary nutritionist for Old Mother Hubbard (Tewksbury, Mass.), maker of Wellness pet foods. “What you’re really doing is giving the pet owner choices,” he said. “Giving them the opportunity to make the choice of what’s important for not only their interests—maybe they’re vegetarian or they like the idea behind grain-free diets—but the dog also has needs.”

The numbers agree with Moser. More than 67 percent of respondents to an April 2007 global study on the pet food industry published by Global Information Inc. (Moorestown, N.J.) consider new product trends very important to the pet food industry during the next five years. The most important new product trends focus on condition-specific, size-specific, life stage-specific and breed-specific foods.

That’s great news for retailers who capitalize on advanced diets based on years of research. Veterinarians, nutritionists and pet food manufacturers now know certain ingredients combined with certain supplements in certain amounts can create the perfect diet for specific types of dogs.

Best of all, breed-specific diets just might be a wonder product in terms of functionality and marketability. Not only do the foods offer multiple

solutions in one bag, but, when paired with a knowledgeable staff, they can make your store a valuable portal for pet food and solid information.

## Meeting Specialized Needs

Size-specific foods are tailored to canines based on their needs for protein and fat, explained Moser. Large-breed dogs require moderate to low protein and fat levels because they are prone to gaining weight, while medium-sized dogs need a moderate level of protein and a higher level of fat. Given the speedy metabolisms of small dogs, an enhanced level of protein and a moderate level of fat are necessary.

Last June, Old Mother Hubbard introduced a size-specific product extension of its Wellness Super5Mix line. Its Large Breed Puppy Health is made with special calcium and phosphorus levels for proper bone development and controlled fat and calories for well-paced growth. Its Large Breed Adult Health is formulated to prevent obesity and includes glucosamine and chondroitin to help overburdened joints, as well as live probiotics and increased natural fiber to



promote easy digestion through large dogs' relatively small gastrointestinal tracts. Its Small Breed Adult Health is composed of specific protein and fat levels to simultaneously support small dogs' metabolisms and prevent obesity. The smaller bite-sized kibble is proportioned for small jaws and teeth.

Royal Canin USA's (St. Charles, Mo.) breed-specific diets had their roots in the company's diet for Persian cats, developed in the late 1990s. "And it went on from there. As time went on we looked at different breeds," said Dr. Brent Mayabb, technical services manager for the company.

Now, Royal Canin offers three breed-specific cat foods and 12 breed-specific dog foods formulated for the morphological, physiological and behavioral characteristics of each animal. The company recently released Cocker Spaniel 25—the number represents the protein percentage—formulated with a special blend of amino acids and essential vitamins to help strengthen the skin's natural barrier function—even in the dog's delicate ear canal—by increasing the amount of fat between skin cells. This is especially helpful for cocker spaniels, a breed that often plays host to a variety of volatile skin problems.

The Eukanuba breed-specific line from P & G Pet Care (Dayton, Ohio) includes five different

formulas—for boxers, dachshunds, German shepherds, Labrador retrievers and Yorkshire terriers. "This product line was developed for the breed-centric consumer that wants the very best nutrition for their purebred dog," said Dr. Eric K. Altom, senior nutritionist at Eukanuba. "The diets are designed to address the unique nutritional needs of select breeds, [according to] observations supported by studies from breed clubs."

For instance, the Eukanuba German Shepherd formula is made with fructooligosaccharides and a special blend of dietary fiber to help support the breed's notoriously touchy digestive system.

Similarly, Royal Canin Bulldog 24 is made to accommodate the English bulldog's very unusual square-shaped jaw, which makes it difficult for the dog to grasp pieces of food and chew. The special flat, s-shaped kibble was specifically designed for short-jawed—also known as brachycephalic—breeds. Furthermore, because the many creases in bulldogs' loose, folded skin make them susceptible to dermatological diseases, Royal Canin's skin barrier complex is helpful for them, too. Highly digestible proteins and starches, insoluble minerals and balanced fibers promote correct digestion and help reduce gas in the bulldog's "highly active" digestive system, as

fanciers of the breed delicately put it.

"We don't just pick breeds randomly," Royal Canin's Mayabb said. "We look for certain breeds that have a regular series of problems and we try to see how we can address those problems through nutrients. There are certain breeds that don't have any problems that can't be addressed specifically, so we won't move onto a food for them."

### Going Au Natural

For customers looking for alternatives to kibble diets, Sojourner Farms (Minneapolis) offers a meatless, dehydrated natural food mix that can be customized with a protein source based on a dog's breed and geographic ancestry.

The woman behind this idea is Kate Solisti, a holistic animal nutritionist and the author of *The Holistic Animal Handbook: A Guidebook to Nutrition, Health and Communication*. "Dogs developed in different parts of the world ate different kinds of food," she said. "So it stands to reason that a St. Bernard bred and raised in the Swiss Alps had a different diet from a Chihuahua raised by the Aztecs in central Mexico. Dogs respond to their climate and the food that's available."

Solisti said that the breeds that react most positively to breed-specific feeding are those that evolved in the

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northern climates, such as huskies, malamutes and Samoyeds. “They have a high requirement for fat and no requirements for carbohydrates. After all, where would they get any in such an environment? So if you feed them fish-based diets supplemented with things like sweet potatoes and berries, you’re feeding those dogs the way that they had to eat.”

According to Solisti’s theory, coastal breeds—breeds that spent a lot of time in and around the water, such as Newfoundlands and Portuguese water dogs—thrive best with fish in their diet. And while most canines do not handle grain-heavy diets particularly well, those that originated in highly agricultural areas might possess an inherent tolerance. For instance, Vizslas were brought up in the breadbasket of Hungary and often have an easier time digesting foods containing unrefined whole-grain brown and white rice, barley, oats and rye.

Ward Johnson, president of Sojourner Farms, agrees with Solisti’s view. “I certainly believe that animals should eat closer to the way that they would eat in nature,” he said. “There is a definite benefit to eating fresh, wild food. There are no pellets or kibble in nature, so an animal that eats a natural diet based on ancestry should see just as much benefit as an animal



Royal Canin’s Cocker Spaniel 25 and English Bulldog 24—the newest in the company’s line—target common health and conformation problems in those breeds.

eating natural food, period.”

However, Solisti suggests keeping an eye on pets to see how they react to breed-specific feeding. “Breed-specific diets can do wonders for your pet, but it’s always important to keep in mind your dog’s own health history, activity level and personal preference, as well,” she said.

Dr. Sally Perea, a board-certified veterinary nutritionist and consultant for Davis Veterinary Medical Consulting (Davis, Calif.), agrees with Solisti’s caveat. “If you have a Lab that hunts or does agility or tracking, you may not want to feed a [breed-specific] Lab diet because they probably won’t be getting the fat levels they need as an active dog. So it’s a really good

## THE NEXT INNOVATION IN DOG FOOD

**B**reed-specific dog food. Size-specific dog food. Life stage-specific dog food. What’s next? How about ultra-premium dog food based on Fido’s personal DNA?

It could be possible, thanks to new discoveries in nutrigenomics—a veritable buzzword in the veterinarian community following a discussion on the topic at the American Veterinary Medical Association’s (Schaumburg, Ill.) annual convention in New Orleans last July.

Nutrigenomics is providing a better understanding of how diet and specific nutrients affect gene expression directly, or how different components in the diet will determine overall physiologic responses.

“Historically, we think of food as sustenance,” said Dr. Brent Mayabb, technical services manager for Royal Canin USA (St. Charles, Mo.). “It helps us with basic functions. But there are nutrients

that work on the molecular level. And now with advances we can see what it’s doing at the genome.”

While research is just beginning, veterinarians say that figuring out the link between diet and the expression of certain genes has the potential to ease arthritis, stop obesity and control the onset of diseases.

“It’s really an interesting concept because we’re talking about nutrition,” Mayabb said. “We have to eat anyway, so with these specialized diets we can possibly address serious problems without having to rely on a lot of drugs. You can nourish your pet while at the same time deal with issues on a molecular level. You’re using nutraceuticals instead of pharmaceuticals and there’s just something more natural about adjusting the way you feed your body according to information from DNA than taking a lot of drugs.”

—Katie A. Voss

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Old Mother Hubbard entered the growing size-specific food market with extensions of its Super5Mix product line.

point to just begin by looking at the dog from an individual standpoint.”

### Marketing Made Easy

Breed-specific and size-specific foods are a breeze in marketability, thanks to their functionality and the convenience of providing nutritional solutions to multiple problems in a single package. “Rather than pick and choose what you need to feed to address which problem, you can feed a food that addresses the problems all at once,” Mayabb said.

And there is just something downright appealing about taking a bag of dog food off the shelf when a likeness of your dog is smiling on the front. “I think breed-specific diets are kind of fun for people and they’re based on true needs for those breeds,” said Perea. “Pet owners like feeding something that’s been developed for their individual breed. It’s been customized and it just makes them more comfortable feeding that diet.”

Perea also pointed out that the foods can act as an educational tool. “Miniature schnauzers are prone to hyperlipidemia—which means a lot of fat in the blood. So Royal Canin has a mini schnauzer food that’s lower in fat. And that food being out there on the shelf might help people pick up on problems they didn’t know about previously. An owner might not know that their mini Schnauzer needs to be on a lower-fat diet.”

With breed-specific formulas and knowledgeable employees to explain them, your customers will enjoy a great shopping experience that will keep them coming back for that perfect food. **pa**

Katie A. Voss is the editorial assistant for PET AGE.

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