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# petage

PRACTICAL IDEAS FOR THE BUSY PET RETAILER OF TODAY ... AND TOMORROW

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## Golden Years, Golden Opportunities

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# Golden Years, Golden Opportunities

Looking for a promising niche opportunity? Consider products that address age-related ailments in dogs and cats—from digestive issues to arthritis.

**By Romy Schäfer**

**A**nyone who's ever owned a pet has wished, at one time or another, that they could add several dozen years to their beloved companion's life. While this may not be feasible (yet), it is possible to help dogs and cats grow old gracefully—with better diets, an array of specially designed products and advances in veterinary medicine.

In fact, products made specifically for aging pets are as close as it comes to a sure thing for most pet stores. Especially when you take the time to educate your employees and your customers about the benefits of these products.

Let's look at the types of products you can stock to help your aging four-legged customers thrive—and keep their owners as profitable customers for years to come.

## Senior Diets

One of the best ways for pet owners to help their aging dogs and cats thrive is by giving them foods that meet their changing nutritional needs and address common age-related health issues, such as obesity, arthritis and kidney disease.

"One concern that we have with senior dogs is weight management," said Dr. Al



Skid-resistant footwear—such as Power Paws socks from Woodrow Wear L.L.C.—make it easier for older dogs with hip dysplasia or arthritis to stand up and walk on slippery surfaces in the home.



Townshend, staff veterinarian at WellPet (Tewksbury, Mass.). "Older dogs, of course, are much more vulnerable. Their metabolism is slower, their activity level is less and, if they get the same amount of calories, they tend to gain weight."

Dr. Sean Delaney, chief nutrition officer for Natura Pet Products (Fremont, Neb.), also stressed the importance of keeping pets lean. "Keeping an animal at an appropriate weight is the one proven intervention that increases life span," he said. "That's very important for all folks with pets to remember. A third or more of pets are overweight, which translates into a lot of other things that can become more problematic."

Diabetes, heart disease, osteoarthritis, digestive issues and skin problems are just some of the ailments tied to excess weight.

Fortunately, a variety of dry and canned senior foods are formulated to help keep aging dogs and cats lean. Senior pet foods typically contain less fat, which means they contain fewer calories per serving. In addition, they usually contain other ingredients considered beneficial for aging dogs and cats, such as L-carnitine to help burn fat; added protein to offset less efficient digestion; antioxidants for cognitive function; omega-3 fatty acids for heart health; and glucosamine and chondroitin sulfate for joint health.

### Dietary Supplements

Despite the ready availability of senior dog and cat diets nowadays, many people still don't buy these products. Perhaps they don't want—or can't afford—to pay more for a senior food. Perhaps they

**“We're all thinking about how to increase the health and longevity of our pets. The great sadness of having pets in life is that they don't outlive us. Anything that we can do to help them have a better quantity and quality of life is very important.”**

—Dr. Sean Delaney,  
chief nutrition officer, Natura Pet Products

don't realize that an animal's dietary needs change as it ages. That's where multivitamins and supplements can come in.

"Most people don't change pet food," said Dr. Phil Brown, senior vice president of marketing and regulatory affairs for Nutri-Vet L.L.C. (Boise, Idaho), which sells life-stage nutritional supplements, including Senior-Vite Chewables for dogs and Multi-Vite Senior Soft Chews for cats. "They put their dog on one food, and that's all they ever feed. What happens if there's less of a micronutrient in that particular food? By complementing the food with a good multivitamin, they're kind of covering their bases."

Function-specific supplements, on the other hand, are formulated to address specific health issues, many of which are common among older dogs and cats. If a dog is a breed that's predisposed to cataracts, for instance, it may benefit from a supplement that contains ingredients known to support ocular function, such as lutein and vitamins C and E. Hip and joint supplements that contain glucosamine and chondroitin help promote good joint health in breeds susceptible to

joint problems or osteoarthritis.

"I like multivitamins, but if your dog has a joint problem, then you want a product that has glucosamine and chondroitin because you want to target that problem," Brown said. However, he added, pet owners should use supplements judiciously.

### Hardgoods and Softgoods

While senior diets, vitamins and supplements address age-related problems from the inside out, special furniture, apparel, topical treatments and other products can make a senior pet's life more comfortable, too.

Elevated feeders, for instance, make it easy for arthritic dogs to dine without stooping. Orthopedic beds with high-density foam offer extra support for vulnerable joints, while heated beds provide therapeutic warmth. Portable steps and ramps help senior dogs and cats access their favorite snoozing spots.

And footwear with skid-resistant soles makes it easier for canines with hip dysplasia or arthritis to stand up and walk on hard, slippery surfaces. For example, Power Paws dog socks by Woodrow Wear



Senior diets, such as these specially formulated diets from WellPet and Natura, address pets' changing nutritional needs as well as age-related health issues.



L.L.C. (San Jose, Calif.) give dogs better traction so they can rise from a prone position and walk without struggling, said Lorraine Walston, founder and president of the company. The socks also prevent pets' nails from scratching hardwood floors.

Another apparel item developed with arthritic dogs and cats in mind is the Warm Whiskers Pet Therapy Jacket from Fur What Inc. (Chatsworth, Calif.). The easy-on jacket comes with a microwavable heat pack filled with buckwheat and lavender and a cold pack filled with non-toxic gel to relieve the pain associated with arthritis, tendonitis, bursitis, ligament injuries, hip dysplasia and more. It

also can be used to cool pets on hot days or warm them up on cold days.

Many veterinarians use the Warm Whiskers Pet Therapy Jacket for post-surgical wounds and injuries. "Right now, there's nothing with a cold or heat pack that they can recommend and send home with a pet owner that they can wrap around their dog's or cat's leg, tail or elsewhere, besides the torso, out of fear of cutting off circulation," said David Sternlight, sales director at Fur What.

### Topical Treatments

Like humans, senior dogs can benefit from grooming products designed to relieve the itchy, dry skin and dull hair

that come with age. Medicated baths, shampoos, conditioners and coat tonics minimize itching while enhancing the pet's appearance.

Older cats sometimes have trouble grooming themselves effectively, resulting in hair matting, skin odor and inflammation. When a bath is a must, a waterless or liquid shampoo formulated especially for cats will soothe even the fussiest feline.

A relatively new category of topical products for senior pets is massage lotions and gels. As their names imply, these products are designed for owners to use as they massage their pets—an activity that calms the animals and helps soothe their aching muscles and joints.

## What Ails Them

**DOGS AND CATS** face many of the same health issues that people face as they age. Fortunately, veterinarians can treat many of these ailments just as physicians treat them in humans.

Here are four common age-related problems being studied by veterinarians:

- **Osteoarthritis.** Researchers have been studying and treating arthritis and other joint problems in dogs for many years—and now they're beginning to take a closer look at arthritis in cats. "In the last five years, we have identified far, far more arthritis in cats than we thought was there, and no one knows why," said Dr. Steven C. Budsberg, professor of small animal medicine and surgery and director of clinical research at the University of Georgia College of Veterinary Medicine (Athens).

"Part of it is identification—meaning, we weren't looking for it—but now we are. The prevalence has probably not been that different [than in dogs]; we just didn't pick up on it. The question of why it's occurring is the conundrum," he said.

One reason researchers failed to realize the magnitude of the problem is that cats don't exhibit the same symptoms as dogs. "Osteoarthritic cats are not going to act like osteoarthritic people or dogs," he said. "Cats are kind of like birds. They don't show signs of disease until they're almost dead. It's a protection method."

Once researchers determine why cats develop osteoarthritis and the symptoms they exhibit, they can begin to develop a course of treatment. "When you can't find a cause, you're simply dealing with the aftermath," Budsberg added.

- **Diabetes.** Like people, cats and dogs are more susceptible to diabetes as they grow older. However, researchers are now seeing an increase in Type 2 diabetes in people and their companion animals. "Let's face it, our pets do the same things we do," said Dr. Cynthia Ward, professor of internal medicine at the UGA College of Veterinary Medicine.

Fortunately, Type 2 diabetes can be controlled in dogs and cats the same way as in people—with insulin and a managed diet. Of course, dog and cat owners can reduce their pets' chances

of developing diabetes in the first place by keeping them at a healthy weight.

- **Cognitive dysfunction syndrome.** "It's a bigger problem than we thought," Ward said, "and there haven't been a lot of research studies done on it."

There is no cure for cognitive dysfunction syndrome. However, L-deprenyl (Anipryl), a medication used to treat Cushing's disease, an adrenal gland disorder in dogs, seems to help dogs with CDS.

According to Ward, dogs given the drug in a clinical trial for Cushing's disease seemed more aware of their surroundings. "You can't ask a dog what it did yesterday," she said, "but, certainly, with the use of this drug, we recognized that a lot of dogs got a lot better, seemed more aware and had more energy."

- **Gastrointestinal problems.** "As dogs get older, we tend to see a decline in the number of beneficial bacteria in their GI tract and an increase in the number of pathogenic bacteria," said Dr. Sherry Sanderson, an animal nutrition expert and associate professor at the UGA College of Veterinary Medicine. Given that about 70 percent of a dog's immune system is located in its GI tract, according to Sanderson, gastrointestinal health is important for a dog's overall health. That's where prebiotics and probiotics come in.

"Probably one of the hottest areas [in veterinary research] right now is prebiotics and probiotics," Sanderson said. "Prebiotics are nondigestible food ingredients that, when they reach the large intestine, act as nourishment for the beneficial bacteria."

The most common food ingredients that serve as prebiotics are certain types of dietary fiber, such as fructooligosaccharides and beet pulp.

Probiotics, on the other hand, are live, beneficial bacteria that, when given to a host in sufficient numbers (think billions), afford health benefits to that host.

Probiotics increasingly are found in certain foods and dietary supplements.

—Romy Schäfer



Like people, senior pets need diets to meet their changing nutritional needs and address issues like obesity, arthritis and kidney disease.

Introduced earlier this year, Pal Dog Senior Treatment Gel from Juno's Garden (Pacifica, Calif.) is a lightweight, greaseless formula made with orange and ginger oil, organic extracts, flower essences and other ingredients that are safe for dogs to ingest. It is formulated to easily penetrate the coat and skin, said Juliann Eskite, owner of the company, which manufactures organic skin care products for dogs and cats.

"I designed it because I had a senior dog, Soleil, who was 15 years old when she passed. I did a lot of massage on her the last year. It was nice to massage her, but I felt like it would be nice to use something that wouldn't pull on her hair so much and maybe stimulate the muscle, smell good and calm her down. That's essentially why I created [Pal Dog Senior Treatment Gel]," she added.

#### Selling Senior Products

Employee education is key to effectively selling products for senior dogs and cats. "The best thing retail stores can do is take the time to educate their sales associates on the value of good nutrition and give them a good understanding of

Pet owners can use massage products such as Pal Dog Senior Treatment Gel from Juno's Garden to soothe achy muscles and promote relaxation.



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Multivitamins, such as Senior-Vite Chewables from Nutri-Vet L.L.C., provide micronutrients that may be lacking in basic pet foods, while function-specific supplements such as FlexPet with CM8 from Flexcin International Inc. address issues such as joint pain caused by arthritis and osteoarthritis.

all the products that they sell in their store, so they can ask the consumer the right questions to make the right recommendation,” advised WellPet’s Townshend. “You have to ask, ‘How old is your pet?’, ‘What’s its level of activity?’, ‘Is it a male or female?’, ‘What breed is it?’, ‘Does it have any medical issues?’, ‘Is



The Warm Whiskers Pet Therapy Jacket from Fur What Inc. features an attachment strap to keep microwavable heat packs or freezable cold packs in place.

it overweight?’ All those questions are essential for a retail salesperson to make the right recommendation.”

Brown concurred: “The key to [selling] supplements is knowledge—understand what they do and what the differences are in the products you carry. And, certainly, you want [to buy from] a company that’s

been around for a long time because, for me, that means they’re not in there for a quick buck. They’re there to promote animal health.”

Of course, for some products, a demonstration is worth a thousand words. Sternlight recommends retailers show pet owners how to use Fur What’s Warm Whiskers Pet Therapy Jacket via an in-store demonstration or video.

“I think that as people have grown accustomed to their own health changes or needs as they age, they’re thinking about how those translate to their animals,” Delaney said. “We’re all thinking about how to increase the health and longevity of our pets. The great sadness of having pets in life is that they don’t outlive us. Anything that we can do to help them have a better quantity and quality of life is very important.” ■

*Romy Schäfer is a freelance writer based in Mount Prospect, Ill. She has written for business-to-business publications for horticulture, customer service, pet and home furnishings professionals.*






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