

Bowls With a Purpose

The latest generation of pet dishes goes well beyond just holding food or water.

By Lori Luechtefeld

The pet-bowl category, while certainly a staple among pet retailers, is anything but mundane. Just as owners are increasingly putting added thought into the benefits of the food they feed their pets, they're also giving greater consideration to the receptacles in which they deliver such food.

John Sutton, president of Wetnoz Products USA in Pflugerville, Texas, said the economic downturn has hit particularly hard for pet boutiques, which are the outlets most likely to carry specialized pet bowls. But that's not to say customers won't buck up for certain higher-end products. Rather, pet owners are placing an emphasis on value instead of trendiness, Sutton said. Thus, bowls designed to address special needs of pets are still in demand.

"For example, there are bowls made out of bone china," Sutton said. "They're beautiful. But how functional is a bone-china dog bowl?"

On the other hand, items like elevated feeders meet a real need for pets.

"If a dog is eating off the floor, they literally have to swallow uphill," Sutton said. "It's hard, especially for geriatric dogs, as arthritis affects the neck about the same time it does the hips."

Fernando Becattini, president of Tower-Star Pets, manufacturer of the Neater Feeder, in Malvern, Pa., agreed bowls that serve a function continue to appeal to pet owners, even during the downturn.

"I think when you have a product that solves a problem, there's not too many bowls that get into a price range that would deter a pet owner from buying it," he said.

In this respect, Sean Rowe, president of Veterinary Ventures Inc. in Reno, Nev., noted that there are currently many more technologically enhanced waterers and feeders on the market than in the past.

"For one thing, the cost of this technology

has become more affordable and therefore ends up in more products—such as motion sensors, RFID (radio-frequency identification) tags, pumps for circulation, etc.," he said. "The cost of these items has come way down, and the quality has gone way up."

Similarly, Tim Homer, CEO of Fuzz-Butt Marketing in Coachella, Calif., noted that the pet bowl category is rife with new innovations. For example, he said, manufacturers have recently introduced bowls designed specifically for messy eaters.

"Traditionally, feeding bowls have been laid flat, either on the floor or on a stand," he said. "By building additional walls and food traps into the bowl design, most of the water and food spilled by a dog is kept within the bowl either to be eaten by the dog, or allowing the owner to discard the excess water."

As an example, Homer pointed to the Neater Feeder and Hugx feeding bowls, both of which are designed to minimize pet messes. The Hugx does so through a unique curve and angle design, while the Neater Feeder features protective walls to reduce splashes, and a colander-like filtering system separates spilled food from spilled water. The Neater Feeder's design also prevents ants from getting into food, as do others, such as Petmate's Fool-A-Bug bowls.

Bamboo's Feed + Toss bowl (shown upper right) is also designed with sanitation in mind. The product features disposable snap-in liners that owners can discard after feeding, eliminating risks associated with bacteria.

Chase Albritton, supervisor at Burke Pet Center in Burke, Va., said the product is attractive because it eliminates the need to regularly clean a pet's bowl.

Bowls that circulate water via a pump system represent another growing category within the pet-bowl market.

"This means the water can be passed through filters, therefore giving the pet a



fresher water supply," Homer said. "Running water also has a tendency to stay cooler, and it is reported that dogs actually prefer to drink flowing water."

This past January, Veterinary Ventures released the Drinkwell 360 Pet Fountain, which is designed to allow multiple pets to drink water at the same time due to its circular design and multiple streams of water. This fall, the company released a stainless-steel version of the fountain as both a style upgrade and an option for pets with allergies to plastic.

Rowe noted that trends in pet bowls generally fall into two categories: style/design advances and technological advances. Many of the latest bowls on the market represent a combination of these trends.

"Some new stylish designs and materials do have added benefits for the pets beyond making their feeding area more 'Martha Stewart-ish,'" Rowe said. "For example, some cats do have a natural allergy to plastic and therefore ceramic, glass and stainless steel can take care of that.

"Also, some new cat dishes are fairly shallow so the cat does not rub its whiskers on the edges of the bowl, which can bother some cats," added Rowe, pointing to cat bowls offered by Wetnoz as a case in point.

Other multipurpose bowls, such as automated feeders and waterers, can take on many forms, Rowe said. Some automated feeders are implementing advanced features such as the use of RFID collars for the pet, he said. Others make use of motion sensors to detect if a pet is close. According to Rowe, WaterDog offers a motion-activated outdoor waterspout for pets.

"I have even seen a water bowl that has blinking LED lights when the water gets low and can tie into your home wireless network to send you a text or e-mail when the water is low," added Rowe, noting that he wasn't sure whether that product ever actually made it to market.

Homer said that time-release feeders represent yet another technologically advanced option for owners. Not only do such bowls give pets access to food while owners are away, but they also provide a means of controlling the amount of food

released at any given time, which can be useful for dogs with special dietary needs. The LeBistro electronic feeder by Petmate, represents one of multiple options in the category, Homer noted.

Another common feeding problem occurs when dogs eat too fast, which can lead to regurgitation or, in extreme cases, bloat. Michael Kitchen, president of Brakefast in Virginia Beach, Va., noted that, of the various risk factors for bloat—including size, age, deep-chestedness, family history and speed of eating—the only one that pet owners are able to control is the speed in which a pet eats. Hence, many bowls on the market, such as Brakefast's, have been designed to slow ravenous eaters by putting obstacles in their way.

Another example is the EatBetter bowl by Contech. The bowl's wishbone center creates an obstacle that prevents gulping or vacuuming behaviors, thus encouraging dogs to take smaller mouthfuls and chew more.

The Pauser Ball by Omega Paw (shown lower left) serves a similar purpose—but without requiring a pet owner to purchase a whole new bowl. The freestanding ball (available in porcelain or stainless steel) can be inserted into a pet's existing dish, and serve to slow down excited eaters.

Amber Koenig, marketing coordinator for Wolverton Inc. in Lansing, Mich., said the main benefit of the Pauser Ball is its low price point, which proves attractive to owners who are daunted by the higher prices of specially designed bowls.

Stacey Genereux, a sales associate at Critter Jungle in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, said that sales of slow-feed bowls are on the rise at her store, and with good reason.

"There are many cases where dogs are eating too fast and not keeping the food down," she said. "I recommend the slow-feed bowls, and people are very happy with them—because they really do work."

In addition, Genereux said sales of travel bowls, particularly Outward Hound bowls by Kyjen Co., have been performing well. These fabric bowls include a two-compartment option that enables owners to easily transport both food and water for their pets.

Frank Immekus, manager of Wags to

Wiskers in Chelsea, Mich., said that his customers' demands are pretty simple when it comes to specialized bowls. High-end options such as electronic feeders and self-filtering water systems are in limited demand, so when he carries them, he only carries a few.

More popular are basic features, such as elevated feeders, spill-proof bowls and slow-feed bowls. Self-feeders and waterers that rely on gravity rather than electronics are also popular, as are bowls with simple benefits, like nonskid bottoms, he said.

Jennifer Zimmerman, a retail associate at Susan's World of Pets in Lewisburg, W.Va., said gravity-driven automatic feeders and waterers are also one of the most popular specialized bowls among her customers.

"A lot of our customers are gone throughout the day, and they want to know that their pets have access to plenty of food and water."

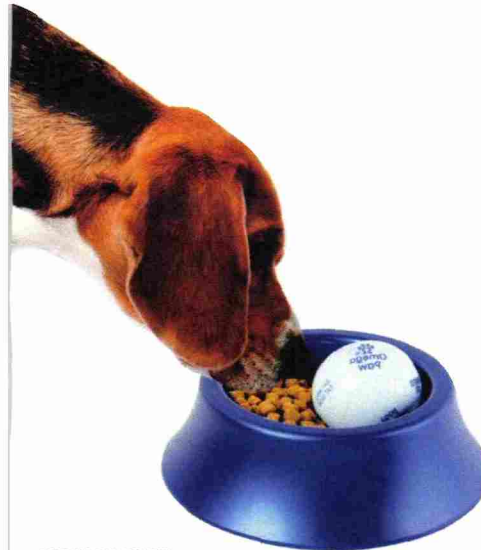
Indeed, bowls designed to meet the most fundamental needs of pet owners and their pets continue to be top sellers. For example, in the winter, Zimmerman said heated water bowls—designed to prevent water for outdoor pets from freezing—are among her top-selling bowls. A simple concept, yes—but also a missed opportunity for retailers who overlook such purpose-driven products. ■

A former in-house news editor for Pet Product News International and its sister titles, Veterinary Practice News and Water Garden News, Lori Luechtefeld is a writer and editor who specializes in the pet and veterinary fields.

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