

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL, MONDAY NOVEMBER 3, 1997

Why Vets Recommend 'Designer' Chow

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NEW YORK - Shopping at a pet store here, Meredith Kane grabs a 4-pound bag of Hill's science Diet. At \$9, it is nearly double the price of cat food sold in supermarkets. But Ms. Kane is unswerving in her devotion to this "designer" brand for her cats, Cecily, Oscar, Kit Kai and A.J.

Why? "My vet recommends it," she says.

Every year, millions of people spend a total of \$9.4 billion on pet food - and many, like Ms. Kane, choose brands solely on a veterinarian's recommendation. Over examining tables across the country, more pet doctors lately are trashing trusted brand names like Purina and Kal-Kan, calling them "junk food," and directing people to shell out an extra \$20 or so for a month's supply of super-premium "high science" foods.

The biggest beneficiaries: Hill's Science Diet lines, made by toothpaste giant Colgate-Palmolive Co., and Eukanuba and Iams brands from Iams Co. of Dayton, Ohio. Sold only through pet stores and veterinary clinics, the designer brands pack more calories per bite and promise higher-quality ingredients based on "pioneering research in animal nutrition" tailored to a pet's "life stage" or age.

The result: Vet suggestions ringing in their ears, many pet owners have switched brands - and the life-stage category has amassed a Doberman-sized \$2 billion chunk of the market.

But few pet owners know just how far premium-market-leader Hill's has gone to sew up the vet endorsements.

'Vets Trust Them'

Borrowing a page from the pharmaceuticals companies, which routinely woo doctors to prescribe their drugs, Hill's has spent a generation cultivating its professional following. It spends hundreds of thousands of dollars a year funding university research and nutrition courses at every one of the 27 U.S. veterinary colleges. Once in practice, vets who sell Science Diet and other premium foods directly from their offices pocket profits of as much as 40%.

"Vets trust them," says Janil Norris, a fresh graduate of the School of Veterinary Medicine at the University of California, Davis. While she was in school, a Hill's program allowed the struggling student to pay just \$3 a bag for a special prescription brand for her cat, Buffalo Sean. A bag normally runs about \$25. She also received a small stipend, courtesy of the Hill's program, to study orthopedic surgery with a Los Angeles vet. "Hill's was just always around," she adds.

A little too much, perhaps, for makers of supermarket brands. During the past five years, Hill's sales have surged more than 20%, and now make up an 8% share of the market - half that of No. 1 Ralston Purina Co., according to Davenport & Co. in Richmond Va. For the same period, sales of pet-food giant Ralston grew 11% but its market share fell one percentage point; sales at Mars Inc.'s Kal-Kan unit tumbled 28% and its share slipped three percentage points.

Nabbin Tabby Early

Hill's marketing strategy is especially potent since pets are among the world's most loyal consumers. Nabbing Tabby early is critical: once a pet takes to a particular brand, a later switch can sometimes cause gastrointestinal troubles; and because a lot of felines are finicky about the look of their vittles, many brands come in distinct shapes, like X's and triangles. Since almost everyone asks their vets what to start feeding a new pet, Hill's cleverly has managed to steer billions its way with that all-important early recommendation.

By chasing after the nation's 126 million cats and dogs through the backdoor of vet offices, Hill's has emerged as a crown jewel at Colgate. Hill's sales - which last year were nearly \$900 million, up from \$40 million 15 years ago - reflect the power of word-of-mouth marketing. While some competitors spent between \$40 million and \$90 million each to advertise last year, according to Davenport, Hill's paid \$1.9 million. Chicken feed.

Part of the Family

"The bulk of our expenditure goes to the veterinary community," says John Steel, who just retired as Colgate's senior vice president of global marketing and sales. The company won't reveal its marketing and promotions budget. He adds: "It's just like taking drugs: You go to the doctor and he prescribes something for you and you don't much question what the doctor says. It's the same with animals." Pet-food marketers also say the rise of high-science vittles has to do with American consumers' obsession with their own health. "People think of pets as an extension of the family," says Robert C. Wheeler, Hill's chief executive.

But the reliance on vet endorsements has its critics. "Consumers think they're getting a better product because veterinarians are recommending it," says Ann Martin, author of a new book, "Foods Pets Die For." She notes that many pet doctors are "brainwashed into thinking they have to recommend these commercial foods," having been so heavily exposed to them in vet schools. Adds Francis Kafifelz, professor of nutrition at Cornell University's School of Veterinary Medicine in Ithaca, N.Y., "I've never seen any research to prove animals fed premium products all their lives have fared better than animals fed standard products." More definitive research would require "a lot of animals and a lot of time," he says, and it is too early to say there is one best pet food." Despite that, he feeds his golden retriever Hill's Prescription Diet.

Science and Sales

Pet-food marketers insist it is science, not salesmanship, that ultimately sways many of the estimated 36,000 small-animal veterinarians in the U.S.

At the Hill's research center in Topeka, Kan., scientists proudly point to Cocoa and Brandy, two 18-month-old Labrador retrievers. Since she was a pup, Cocoa has munched only Hill's products, while Brandy ate a Brand X food that Hill's won't name. Brandy is fat and has a dull coat. Cocoa is bright-eyed and slim, with a lustrous coat. "The products do what we say they do," Mr. Wheeler says. "We're not selling dog food. We're selling nutrition."

Makers of supermarket pet foods disagree. Ralston Purina, which now sells two premium lines and is reaching out more to veterinarians, says even its lower-priced foods such as Dog Chow and Puppy Chow provide the same basic nutrients as the super-premium brands. "What you're hearing from veterinarians might be colored

somewhat by the products they have for sale," says Larry McDaniel, a vet himself, and Ralston's director of veterinary marketing.

But Hill's has a long history with the veterinary community. Hill's Pet Nutrition was founded in 1948 by Kansas veterinarian Mark Morris, who, in his own kitchen, cooked up a special diet for treating kidney problems in dogs; 20 years later the company introduced its Science Diet brand, touted as a healthier alternative than the table scraps commonly used or low-priced foods sold in supermarkets.

The company - which never was more than a niche player in pet food and began to diversify into other pet products, such as flea shampoos and sprays - was acquired by Colgate in 1976, when Hill's was part of Houston-based Riviana Foods. Several years later when Colgate, of New York, decided to shed all noncore business and put Hill's on the block, a senior executive named Reuben Mark, who would later become Colgate's chairman, argued to keep the fledgling company.

"I was struck by the similarity of our world-wide toothpaste business, with the endorsement of the dentists being so important," Mr. Mark says. "I knew if we did the same thing with Hill's, it could be an enormous global brand."

So, similar to Colgate's spadework in dental schools, Hill's now funds a nutrition professorship in nearly half of the nation's vet schools. Hill's employees wrote a widely-used textbook on small-animal nutrition that is distributed for free to students. Hill's also sends practicing veterinarians to seminars on wringing more profit from clinics and offers the only formal nutrition-certification program for clinic technicians. In a savvy marketing coup now being copied by other pet-food companies, Hill's each year donates tons of free food for the pets of cash-strapped veterinary students.

Hill's also beefed up its sales force, which has grown to more than 500 people from just 16 in the early 1980s, including many who are vets. Outside universities, Hill's is believed to be the country's single largest employer of veterinarians. One is Tony Rumschlag, a territory manager for Hill's in Indianapolis. Last month, he arrived at the Post Pet Hospital armed with framed posters to hang on walls, post-it notes for the reception desk and free samples of Hill's dog treats for the clientele.

Weight Watchers

"Dr. Tony" headed for Exam Room Three, where he met with hospital veterinarian Scot Harbin to talk about recommending Hill's diet foods for the fat cats and pudgy dogs that visit the clinic. Today, Hill's is launching a special two-month promotion to pay the clinic \$3 per animal it puts on a diet. "We're offering a bounty to get pets on a weight-management program," Dr. Rumschlag says.

Dr. Harbin likes the idea, and sets a goal of putting one dog and one cat on a diet each day. The money raised might be used to host a pizza party or even dinner at a fancy restaurant for the staff, he says.

Later, Dr. Harbin concedes that for years Hill's "sort of had a lock on the veterinary market." But now, he says, competition has increased. "At 12:30, -the Eukanuba rep is coming in to give her spiel," he says.

Dr. Rumschiag moves on to the Broad Ripple Animal Clinic, where he hands over 200 custom-printed coupons for pet owners to receive a discount on Hill's food. He also pledges about \$1,200 worth of free puppy and kitten food, about 175 bags, to dole out to new pet owners who visit. Not only will the help the clinic sell more food, but the coupons could help get pet owners back into the clinic for a checkup, he figures.

David Brunner, who owns the hospital, says the marketing push sometimes makes him uneasy and adds that he is careful to tell clients they can always find the same foods at the pet store. "I don't want to be perceived as a food salesman," he says. "We don't want it to enter clients' minds that "Oh, you're just trying to sell me dog food."

Junk-Food Diet

Yet he and other vets say they are convinced premium foods are far better than cheaper brands. One doctor compared using cheaper supermarket pet foods to feeding a child potato chips and pizza every day. Dr. Kallfelz of Cornell says the basic ingredients in most pet foods are the same, but the difference lies in the amount, quality and concentration of ingredients. In general, he says, standard foods have a higher concentration of vegetable proteins, while premium foods have a higher concentration of animal proteins. Premium foods are generally the same from bag to bag, while the formulation of standard foods can change, depending on market prices for ingredients.

But Dr. Brunner says his trust in Hill's products stems mainly from the success he has had in treating animals with urinary tract infections, kidney disease and other problems with the specially blended Hill's Prescription Diet foods. The diets can only be prescribed by veterinarians and are more than twice the price of supermarket foods.

Other pet-food makers that have launched their own premium brands, including Purina's Pro Plan and Mars's Waltham brand, have also tailored their products to tempt vets. Ralston Purina, for instance, offers 13 "therapeutic" diets, which can only be prescribed by vets, to compete with Hill's popular Prescription Diet brand. The company also now has free food programs at a handful of U.S. veterinary colleges, and this year "significantly increased" its veterinary-marketing budget to provide coupons for vet students to receive big discounts on Purina foods.

To compete with Hill's stature in vet schools, Purina last year announced a \$550,000 endowment for a professorship in small-animal nutrition at the University of Missouri-Columbia College of Veterinary Medicine in Columbia, Mo. The company also provided a \$175,000 grant to the American College of Veterinary Nutrition to develop a "noncommercial" nutrition curriculum for all vet schools to follow.

'Share of Mind'

"We feel strongly if the playing field is leveled in the veterinary colleges, it will go a long way toward unbiased education, and it will only benefit us," says Purina's Dr. McDaniel. "We feel we're making significant inroads into 'share of mind' of the veterinarian."

Not to leave anything to chance, the company is hoping to grab a share of consumers' minds. In new ads for a blend of Purina One, a dog visiting a neighbor's house prefers the Purina One food served up there. The reason? The main ingredient is lamb, the ad says, tastier than the corn in that "designer dog food."

For its part, Mars has hired a public-relations firm to tout its Waltham pet-nutrition-research center in England, and is running ads saying its foods are "developed by vets" at the research facility. Last year, Mars spent \$50 million on advertising - a 50% jump from 1995, according to Davenport.

The rivals are clearly nipping on Hill's heels. New York vet Harold Zweighaft says a sales call from a Purina representative persuaded him to start stocking Purina food

along with Hill's. "Now I have as much Purina as I do Hill's" he says. When New York interior designer Christiane Lernieux got her frisky Labrador pup Jake six months ago, she was all too happy to snap up some Eukanuba Lamb & Rice, on her vet's recommendation. "It has coat enhancers," she says, stroking Jake's smooth amber fur. "My vet says it's the highest quality brand."

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