



nutrition in the pet foods they stock.

Lifestyle choice or health need?

Although the increase in premium foods can partly be put down to owners' lifestyle choices, the obvious link between poor nutrition and veterinary problems can't be ignored. Clare Scallon from Butcher's Pet Care references the connection between a nutritionally deficient diet and sensitive stomachs in dogs, "Owners can alleviate these types of problems by feeding a more natural meaty complete and balanced diet, cutting out all extras, banning table scraps and serving a specially made food such as Simply Gentle."

Grain-free

Grain-free has been popular in the pet food industry for some time, and was probably one of the first major speciality pet food trends. It originated in the dog food market, to alleviate the digestive and skin complaints that allergies to certain grains can cause in dogs, and when other health benefits were seen by owners, talk turned to the idea that 'in the wild' neither dogs nor cats would eat grains. Today grain-free foods are available for cats and even small animals, not just dogs.

High-protein

Protein as a food source is much easier for animals to digest than carbohydrates, and offers a

more protein in many cases. It's more interesting than the standard flavours pet owners are used to seeing. Exotic meats such as buffalo or kangaroo, for example, will catch your customers' attention and be seen as something slightly more special than the usual chicken or beef, and don't forget that different flavours can be good for tempting fussy eaters.

Despite the stereotypical cat that loves tuna, fish isn't something that cats would naturally eat in the wild. It is, however, a fantastic lean protein and it's currently also very popular in dog foods and treats.

In recent years, insect protein has been considered in pet nutrition studies as a sustainable and high-quality alternative protein source for cats and dogs although what consumers' initial reactions to 'grain-free grasshopper' or 'cricket crunchies' on your shelves would be is something to consider, despite the fact their pet probably already catches and eats the odd insect now and again.

Raw commercial diets

Raw food diets have been lauded by many as the most natural way of feeding dogs and cats, and more owners are becoming interested in raw feeding their pets because of the possible health benefits, including better digestion and improved dental and oral health. While qualifications in canine or feline nutrition aren't necessarily required, providing completely homemade raw food diets that fulfil all a cat or dog's nutritional needs can be fairly complex, and many pet owners either don't have the time or aren't confident they'll get it right. There's also a squeamishness factor in handling and preparing raw meat and offal.

This is where commercially produced raw food diets such as those supplied by Nature's Menu, Nutriment and Natural Instinct come into play. Sold in handy

Limited ingredients

Just as consumers want to know what's in the food they're eating, pet owners want to be able to understand what they're putting into their cat's or dog's bowl. They want what's best for their beloved animals, and knowing that what they're giving them as food or a treat is just one ingredient, or contains limited ingredients, makes them feel much better than a list of unfamiliar letters and numbers on the back of the box.

Companies like Symply Pet Foods show a great awareness of this preference among consumers, producing hypoallergenic ranges that are free from artificial flavourings and colourings and are made up of limited ingredients.

While new premium, alternative health and specialist diets tend to begin in the dog food market, it's reasonable for retailers to expect cat food and small pet food to follow the same trends – just look at the history of grain-free. Nicole Paley, Communications Manager at the Pet Food Manufacturers' Association, agrees, "The trends in the dog food market tend to follow in cats – such as an interest in grain free, tailored nutrition and products that have a focus on well-being. We now have life stage diets for some small animals too so the tailored nutrition approach is definitely following here." ■

Common conditions improved by tailored nutrition

- Food allergies
- Age related ailments
- Kidney disease
- Skin complaints
- Poor digestion