The Natural Advantage

Manufacturers of natural flea and tick treatments say there’s no need to resort to chemical measures, when their products can off the pests quickly, safely and effectively. BY PAMELA MILLS-SENIH

Fleas. They’re so small and yet they—and their equally repellent cousins, ticks—are capable of striking huge fear in the hearts of pet owners everywhere. Upon discovering these bloodsucking little beasts residing on Miss Precious or Max, folks typically whip into a frenzy of chemical countermeasures—especially in the case of fleas, which exhibit an unhappy tendency to spread to the rest of the house.

Although the desire to quickly eliminate the problem is understandable, pet owners do not necessarily have to rely on chemically-based formulas, according to manufacturers of natural flea and tick products. However, convincing pet owners of this still remains somewhat challenging, says David Binken-Weiss, sales manager for Natural Chemistry, a Norwalk, Conn.-based manufacturer of chemical-free, botanical-based flea and tick solutions, among other natural products.

When a pet gets a flea infestation, it becomes a very emotional situation, and finding a solution that works is at the top of the list. “The emotional component is very important,” says Binken-Weiss. “People believe that natural products don’t kill or work as quickly—especially when the emotions kick in.”

Dwight Holcomb, president and CEO of PetLife Organic Inc, says his company also has to battle the perception that natural products aren’t as powerful as conventional ones. Located in Pasadena, Calif., PetLife Organic manufactures a full line of bio-based cleaners and nontoxic insect treatments for dogs and cats.

“Due to the misconceptions, some people believe that anything that is either labeled or associated with being green or eco-friendly is ineffective when compared to other non-green products. That is simply not true,” Holcomb says. “We offer a comprehensive line of products, and we are constantly expanding our product line.”

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Chemical Versus Natural

However, perceptions are changing, says Holcomb and Binken-Weiss. As folks increasingly incorporate more natural and organic products into their lives, they’re doing the same for their pets—purchasing natural/organic foods, treats and toys—and steering clear of chemicals and synthetic ingredients altogether. Consequently, natural flea and tick products are becoming more popular, especially as word of their effectiveness gets out.

“With the increase in the use of natural products by pet owners, it’s important for retailers to understand the difference between conventional and natural products,” says Stephanie Blome, founder and CEO of Wondracle, headquartered in Austin, Texas. “Our products provide natural alternatives to chemical-based pesticides and products.”

“Among the many benefits of our products is that they are safe for pets, including cats, and our products are effective against a wide range of pests,” Blome says.

“Once consumers understand the difference between conventional and natural products, they’re more likely to choose natural products for their pets. This is a great opportunity for retailers to offer a more comprehensive line of products to meet the needs of pet owners who are looking for natural alternatives.”

A Direct Investment in Customer Loyalty

Traditional flea and tick products are still the gold standard, but more consumers are turning to natural products for their health benefits. This trend is not only good for the environment, but also good for business.

“Natural products work by affecting the neurotransmitters, like octopamine, that only insects have,” she continues. “This is how we repel (preventively) and kill (treatment phase) the fleas and ticks on the animal and in the environment without using poison.”

Boone says it’s important to educate customers on the benefits of natural products. “It’s more than a courtesy for new consumers, it’s a direct investment in customer loyalty,” she says.

Selling these products takes commitment and conviction from retailers, especially when it comes to educating customers. Manufacturers, however, get the ball rolling by providing information on their websites, and by offering in-store support and staff education.

Boone says Wondracle provides scientifically backed information, along with “solution-driven, practical advice.” Additionally, the company’s website offers a feature called “Ask a Holistic Vet,” where customers can get a personal response from a holistic veterinarian.

PetLife Organic connects with its target consumers by working with vets, retailers, associations, non-profits and pet-centered social media communities. The company provides retailers with countertop displays and encourages them to hand out free samples to customers purchasing chemical treatments.

“We also support store docks with product information, so they can better serve the needs of their customers,” Holcomb says.

Adding natural flea and tick lines to their inventory helps pet stores reach revenue targets in a variety of ways. “The advantage is clear,” says Holcomb, selling complete treatment solutions with products for pet, home and lawn provides the opportunity to more completely serve customers, enhancing the value of the retailer to the customer and, consequently, loyalty.

Offering all-natural treatments not only helps ensure customer satisfaction but also opens the door to a new type of clientele. “Retailers can also use these products to cross-sell additional products to pet owners, which can lead to increased sales,” says Holcomb.

Binken-Weiss agrees that offering natural products can help retailers increase sales. “These products work better than conventional products and are more effective at killing fleas and ticks,” he says.

“Effective products and treatments mean satisfied repeat customers,” Binken-Weiss says. “Those are important for retailers to ensure they are reached and are knowledgeable of these products before recommending them to their customers.”