



The History of Dog Food

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The history of commercial dog food is short in comparison to the length of time that dogs have been companion animals. The use of bagged and canned foods became popular in the United States after World War II. Most people born in the last fifty years do not have any memory of feeding dogs in any other manner. The notion of the term 'dog food' has become so entrenched in the vocabulary that most people state they would never feed their dog 'people food'. The misunderstanding is that food is 'food', and that commercial dog foods are simply heavily processed 'people food' that is specifically made for shelf life and economy.

Until commercial dog food grew in popularity, dogs generally ate whatever food was available in their environment. For farm dogs, this could include raw meat scraps, raw milk, eggs and food found scavenging. City dogs probably depended on scraps from the owners' table, and offal and cheap cuts of raw meat from the butcher. Dogs owned by the very rich and royalty are reported to have had meals specially prepared them, with great attention to the quality and addition of seasonings to the diet.

In 1860, the first processed dog food was introduced by James Spratt, of Cincinnati, Ohio who developed a biscuit made of wheat, beet root, vegetables and beef blood. His inspiration for this product came from watching stray dogs eat hardtack thrown away by sailors off ships in port. The name of this new product was called Spratt's Patent Meat Fibrine Dog Cakes. Other companies quickly jumped on the bandwagon, and more baked dog products were on the market. Some offered paid endorsements by veterinarians, while others made claims to cure a dog of worms and certain diseases.

While the controversy continued on dog nutrition, new forms of packaged dog foods were appearing on the market. The depression in the 1930's also prompted dog owners to look for less expensive methods to feed their pets. Less raw meat was fed, and more grains and cereal products were introduced in home diets. Canned meat products were introduced in the 1940's and in 1943, dehydrated dog food was introduced, with the instructions of 'just add water'.

New debates were developing on feeding dogs, and several marketers of the new dog products were stating that their products were superior, as they were able to utilize waste products such as grain hulls, sweepings, and meat unusable for human consumption. Another argument was that fresh meat was just too expensive to feed dogs, and that it actually made them too 'finicky'. While it was noted fresh meat and vegetables were superior, they argued that dogs could be fed more economically with these factory waste products, and still do well.

The sales of dry processed dog foods picked up considerably after World War II. Mill operators and grain dealers were finding a good source for their by-products in the dog industry. Slaughterhouses were also available to sell non-human grade, diseased meats, unusable parts, and meat by-products to pet food manufacturers. This created a market for products that previously had been discarded. Since many of these meat sources were non-human grade, the practice became common to mix these with the grains and cook them together for many hours or days to kill bacteria and disease. The final mix was then formed into pellets that were easily bagged for convenience of feeding.

Then, in the 1950's the Purina Company discovered an innovative new

concept for dry dog food. Dry dog food was generally found in two forms prior to this. One was biscuit, or crumbled biscuit, known as kibble, which was baked. The other type was dog food made in pellets of which the ingredients had to be hand mixed. Purina's new technique was called "extrusion". The extrusion process consisted of combining and cooking the ingredients together in a liquid form, and then mechanically pushing them through the extruder, which expands the piece of dog food and then it is baked again. These dog food pieces were much larger and lighter than the pellets, giving an appearance of 'more for your money'. Thus began the onset of 'clever marketing' in the race to promote dog food to the public.

In 1969, according to Dr. Kronfeld DS PhD DSc MVSc from the University of Pennsylvania, School of Veterinary Medicine, the pet food industry utilized veterinarians to proclaim that all meat dog foods were incomplete. He reports the editor of the *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association* also agreed with this, and said dog foods needed to be fortified with nutrients, too much protein was harmful and some carbohydrates are necessary for the dog's health.

Convenience was the first selling point for prepared and packaged dog foods. Scooping dry pieces of food into the dog's food bowl was more time saving than cooking or preparing their pet's dinner. The second selling point was developed by a professional marketing campaign. Dog food companies began labeling their dog foods as complete, with no additional foods or supplements being necessary. In fact, they began warning the public that adding table scraps could actually be dangerous to the dog's health. An active campaign was developed in 1964 through the Pet Food Institute, to in-

form the public of the dangers of table food scraps, and the importance of feeding processed dog food. This was accomplished through press releases to one thousand newspapers, articles in 16 magazines, including *Redbook* and *Good Housekeeping* and airing this information on 91 radio stations.

Continuing marketing strategies included using celebrities in television commercials, making dog foods that produced their own 'gravy', making dog kibble into various shapes, and using dyes in the dog food so it would look 'natural' and pleasing to the dog owner's eyes. Pet food ads were appearing regularly in the media and designs were developed more to attract the owner's idea of a tasty and visually attractive meal than for the dogs' health. Pet food sales moved from the feed stores to the grocery stores, with bright labels and appealing pictures. The marketing strategies were paying off, and soon pet food sales were surpassing the amount of money spent on baby food. Aisle and shelf space for dog food sales were expanding by leaps and bounds each year as more dog food companies joined the marketing competition.

The next marketing strategy was in specialty diets, formulated for specific diseases or disorders in pets. The first diets were developed for kidney and heart disease in 1948. These have expanded to more than 20 specialty diets being offered today. Dr Mark Morris DVM, founder of Hill's Pet Products (Science Diet) was the first in the field to develop this idea. The Purina Company quickly followed, along with several other companies. Only veterinarians offered these Hill's prescription products. This really began to portray dog nutrition as complex, and the public relied more on their veterinarian's advice about nutrition, than trusting their own judgment or common sense. Shopping now expanded from the supermarkets to the veterinarian's office.

Up until 1974, the National Research Council (NRC) developed the protocol

for the nutritional values needed in pet food. The Animal Protection Institute (API), in their article "What's Really in Pet Food" points out that in 1974; a new organization was formed, called the American Association of Feed Control Officials (AAFCO). This group was organized by the pet food industry. They decided to change the standards of the NRC (National Research Council) testing procedures from extending feeding trials of the dog food over a period of time, to simple testing of the chemical analysis of the dog food. While this provided results for the percentages and breakdowns in the dog food, it certainly didn't address the type of food used, freshness, or digestibility of each of the ingredients. As API states in their article, this leaves the pet food industry to police itself, without government intervention.

In 1985, the National Research Council updated their guidelines for nutrition, instituting three important changes. The first was that the percentage requirement was removed for protein, and instead requirements for ten amino acids were listed by weight of the dog. These were developed for growth and adult stages. The second change was removing the word allowances from the guide, and replacing it with the word requirements. This was to provide information on the availability of nutrients in the food when eaten and digested. It also developed a chart that listed factors that could affect the bioavailability of the ingredients of the food chosen and mixed together for dog food. Bioavailability is defined as the efficiency of absorption, and the availability of amino acids in the food. The intent of this classification was to take into consideration that many of the ingredients are affected by processing, heating and cooking. Combining certain ingredients also affects nutrient value, especially in the phytates in grains that block certain minerals, and the differences in animal and plant amino acids profiles.

The guidelines urged consideration of all the above in formulating percentages of the nutrients in the dog food,

for analysis AFTER it was cooked and processed. The third recommendation was that the nutrients of the food be listed in metabolic energy of each 1,000 kilocalories. The advantage here is to be able to measure the food on a unit energy basis, and to be able to compare foods more accurately.

And what was the response from the pet food companies? Ben Sheffy, of the James A Baker Institute for Animal Health at Cornell University participated in the 1985 NRC revision and he reported the responses ranged from "disappointment to anger". Today, pet companies are still using the 1974 protocol for nutrition, and no serious efforts have been made to accept the 1985 proposed changes, nor are the food ingredients based on bioavailability.

Ben Sheffy states, "Protein from animal sources is a strong contributor to palatability of dog food. Judicious use of 'digests', particularly in coating, can improve palatability but it is difficult to beat the real thing. It will be difficult to maintain high nutrient bioavailability when processed proteins, poorer quality ingredients with more elevated fiber contents are used. Even if average digestibility is achieved, this does not necessarily indicate high bioavailability, although knowing apparent digestibility will be a big step forward."

The next trend in commercial pet food was called the "premium" dog foods. These foods are advertised to be more nutritional for dogs, and they offered different types of blends for all stages of life, including puppy diets, maintenance diets, performance diets and senior dog diets. This brought several new markets for pet foods, and lent a new sense of helplessness to the public. While these foods were advertised as 'premium', they were still using the old standards from the NRC 1974 requirements. The public became more confused. Not only couldn't they be trusted to feed an adult dog, now different formulas were "needed" for various life stages of the dog.

Veterinarians today continue to en-

courage the use of dry dog foods, and instill a fear in pet owners about preparing their own dog foods. Here is a quote from the Canadian Veterinarian Association pamphlet on pet food, *A Commonsense Guide to Feeding Your Dog or Cat*:

"Why Are Homemade Diets Not Recommended? Homemade diets are not recommended because there is a good chance that all the necessary nutrients or the proper proportions will not be provided. Incorrect preparation and cooking may also deplete certain nutrients and result in a deficient diet. As well, homemade diets are usually more expensive to produce, without providing better nutrition."

Interestingly, the CVMA is also the pet food certification system in Canada. The implication is that dog owners are not knowledgeable enough to prepare food for their pets, and that canine nutrition is a mysterious affair, best left to researchers, scientists, and veterinarians.

This quote is from the Pet Food Institute's website, on Pet Nutrition: "A Well-Nourished Pet is a Happy Companion! Your pet's good health and happy disposition are dependent on good nourishment, exercise, grooming, and visits to the veterinarian.

"Good nourishment is important, and, with today's wide assortment of commercial pet foods fully formulated for all stages of pet growth, it is easy to feed your pet well-balanced meals. These foods allow you to cater to your pet's preferences (including food rewards and treats) and, yet, ensure a healthful diet.

"Veterinarians and animal nutritionists have determined that table scraps are not balanced meals for pets and are deficient in nutrients. Adding scraps to a balanced diet often adds extra calories that are detrimental to the pet's health.

"Supervise your pet's diet carefully. For your pet's basic diet, make sure the food you use is specifically labeled

'complete and balanced'. Products intended for special use or supplemental feeding will be labeled as such. Make certain that the pet has plenty of water to drink and do not overfeed. If, for any reason, you feel that your pet is not doing well on a particular diet, talk with your veterinarian.

"Remember, a healthy pet is a happy pet which will bring you years of happiness and companionship."

The Pet Food Institute is the organization representing pet food manufacturers. They state that they represent 95% of all dog and cat food companies in the United States. Their quote implies again that a specific formula is needed for dogs, and balance is of premier importance with the thought of unwanted consequences if not followed.

In the 1980's, consumers were becoming more educated on nutrition for their own diets and reading labels on food products. With this information in hand, dog owners began reading the dog food labels and questioning some of the ingredients in pet foods. The ingredients of most concern were the chemical preservatives.

Due to the pressure from the public on the use of these chemicals, many pet food companies have eliminated them, and are now using vitamin C and vitamin E for preserving fat in dog food. This led to the next trend in commercial dog foods, which is marketing brands that are labeled as natural, either by offering organic foods, human grade foods or new forms of meat to pet foods, such as venison, fish, or rabbit. Some even offer whole chickens as the main meat ingredient, and state they don't use meat by-products or other less nutritious ingredients. However, all the brands offered still continue to heavily process and cook all ingredients, and the food is still approximately 65% grains, grain fillers, fibers, and grain by-products.

Consumers are now more aware of the ingredients in dog food, most notably the poorer sources of protein and the

high percentages of grain. However, most veterinarians still advocate the use of dry dog foods, and carry many of the top distributor brands in their clinics. They have learned, through the education from the pet food industry, which writes the nutrition textbooks for the veterinary colleges, to tell their clients that only processed dog foods are formulated scientifically to meet their dog's nutritional needs.

If a dog owner wants to learn more about canine nutrition and feeding their dogs a fresh food diet, there are only a handful of books on the subject. Very few veterinarians will encourage owners to feed this diet. While the information is available, it takes diligence from the dog owner, and the courage to face the disapproval of the veterinary community and advertisements from the pet food industry.

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