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Exotics Marketplace: Customers Get Chewsy

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When it comes to selecting beneficial treats for small mammal pets, owners want all-natural, Made in the USA, multipurpose chew products.

By Ramona D. Marek

According to the American Pet Products Association's (APPA) *2013-2014 National Pet Owners Survey*, small animal ownership rebounded after a dip in the market that spanned a few years.

Recently, more people have acquired rabbits, guinea pigs, hamsters, gerbils, rats and mice as family pets. The increased growth is on target with strong sales of associated products, including chew products.

"Small mammal chews are very popular accessories, and the category is growing all the time," said Melissa Ross, director of marketing and education for Oxbow Animal Health in Murdock, Neb. "This growth has been driven in large part by a desire among pet owners to provide the best quality of life possible for their pets."

On a Need to Gnaw Basis

In the wild, small mammals can find plenty of natural chew objects to keep their constantly growing teeth in check, but when kept as pets, owners must provide their pets with appropriate chew products for proper dental health, said interviewed sources.

Although these pets all are small and furry and have aradicular teeth, a one-size-fits-all approach to chews doesn't work.

"Hamsters, gerbils, rats and mice need to gnaw to keep their front teeth from over-growing," said Carol Kuzdek, owner of Whole Pets in Boulder, Colo. "Rabbits and chinchillas don't gnaw as much, but it's important for them to have chews to help shape their front teeth properly." According to interviewed sources, pet owners know exactly which qualities they're looking for: simple, healthful, all natural, Made in the USA and free of artificial colors, flavors or additives.



"Lucky Buck Wafers, a top seller in our store, are thin pieces of deer antler, great for small animals like rats and hamsters," said Sherry Redwine, co-owner of Dallas-based Odyssey Pets. "They are all natural, something they would chew on in the wild, and something not usually seen at your local big-box store. Also, Oxbow makes some single-ingredient, freeze-dried treats that are very healthy and palatable. Sometimes simple is better."

"Pets International has just introduced a new line of Kaytee assorted chews in May 2014," said Mary Ann Loveland, associate brand manager of Kaytee Hard Goods/Pets International, a division of Central Garden & Pet Co. in Walnut Creek, Calif. "The Chew Toy Layer Cakes are long-lasting, natural wooden chews that help trim and clean teeth; the Chew Toy Carrot Patch has three chews with a variety of textures, including a wooden carrot for gnawing, a sisal carrot for cleaning and loofah for flossing; the Chew Toy Jumbo Crispee Garden is shaped like a carrot or ear of corn and is made from vegetable-dyed loofah for flossing."

[Two for the Price of One](#)

Pet owners expect chew products to not only provide dental health, but also environmental enrichment and high-quality nutrition for their pets.

"We limit our small animal products to Oxbow because of its high quality," said Whole Pets' Kuzdek. "We sell a lot of the timothy chews, including Timothy Carrot and Timothy Twist, and

treats made from timothy hay, but we also sell quite a few timothy mats, hideouts and tunnels, which are great products for small animals to hide or rest in and are also edible.”

"The Timothy Club line of woven hay habitats and accessories (100 percent hand woven timothy hay, 100 percent edible) qualify as chews," said Oxbow's Ross. "The Timothy Hideout is particularly versatile and can be stuffed with hay and healthy treats to encourage burrowing. The entire line is preferred by many pet owners wanting to enrich their pets' living space with smaller, chew-type items.”

Amy Olson, merchandiser for Rhinelander, Wis.-based Drs. Foster and Smith, an online retailer, said the company's two top-selling chew products include the Chew Toy Dental Workout Kit by Ware Manufacturing. The kit contains a "barbell" and cube made from woven willow branches that small animals not only chew on, but also push around for playtime activities. The chew products are sold under the toy category promoting the importance of both environmental enrichment and dental health, Olson said.

Making the Right Choice

With strong sales in a growing market and customer demand for high-quality products, consumers must sometimes choose between purchasing "premium" products or remaining budget conscious.

"Consumers really fall into both ends of the spectrum; it is always best to provide both a high-end and low-end product to meet everyone's needs," said Sonia Wertz, sales manager of Lixit Corp. in Napa, Calif.

According to retailers and manufacturers, the average price for chew accessories is about \$10 or less, providing a variety of choices to consumers well within a reasonable price range.

When it comes to purchasing chew products, pet owners, faced with many similar products to choose from, have to decipher which items provide the greatest benefit for their pets.

"An educated sales staff is the most powerful tool a store has in communicating the importance of chews," Ross said. "Every customer is different, and we've found that the stores' sales associates have a major influence on the buying decision when it comes to chews. When the sales associates take the time to explain the difference between chews that look the same but have different prices, which ones use potentially harmful materials like wire and string and which ones use 100 percent hay, it's very easy to help customers choose the safest, most preferred option.”

Odyssey Pets' Redwine said she'd like to see more products at the higher end of the spectrum.

"There aren't many high-end, all-natural choices for small animal treats, toys and chews. A lot of them are targeted toward marketing to children and have artificial colors and flavors.”

Proper Placement

Location plays an important role in chew sales. Interviewed sources agreed that chews should be sold in the same area of the store as food and hay products, which are part of essential

health. However, the most powerful selling point is having chew products in small mammal habitat displays. When customers see a product being used, they are more likely to purchase it, retailers and manufacturers stated.

It's also wise to take advantage of special promotions at different times of the year, including National Pet Dental Health Month in February, said Ross.

INDUSTRY VOICES

What is the most important thing small mammal owners should know about chew products?

"Pet chews and accessories may seem secondary to daily nutrition, but the potential health issues they help prevent can be very serious. Dental disease is one of the most common health issues seen by exotics veterinarians, and proper wear plays a major role in maintaining dental health." —

Melissa Ross, director of marketing and education for Oxbow Animal Health in Murdock, Neb.

"Finding the perfect chew may take some trial and error. Rotate a variety of chews to find which ones your small mammal is using most often. Also, make sure to inspect each chew daily and remove any larger broken or chewed off pieces, as well as any debris that may fall off and accumulate in the habitat." —*Amy Olson, merchandiser at Drs. Foster and Smith in Rhinelander, Wis.*

"Offer a variety of safe-source chewing products to your small animal. Choose different materials and textures that offer different benefits to your small animal pet." —*Mary Ann Loveland, associate brand manager for Kaytee Hard Goods/Pets International, a division of Central Garden & Pet Co. in Walnut Creek, Calif.*