

Tuffy's Pet Foods: Retail partnerships key to success

Tuffy's, a three-generation family-owned business, credits its success largely to the relationships it has formed with both its customers and its retailers.

LINDSAY BEATON



Tuffy's Pet Foods is a third-generation, family-owned dog and cat food company with staying power.

"Back in 1964 when we first started Tuffy's Pet Foods, my dad was the first salesperson," says Charlie Nelson, president of Tuffy's and KLN Family Brands (Tuffy's parent company). "He was the first person out there, driving a small truck, delivering food, shaking hands and growing a business together. We sold the company in 1971 when my grandpa retired. And we bought this company back 30 years later, in 2001, mainly because the previous corporate owners were planning to close its doors, and this company meant too much to our community. Jim Farrell (who specializes in Special Projects at KLN Family Brands) and I were the first salespeople in 2001, again going door to door, store to store, growing our business."

According to Nelson, they immediately got to work answering one key question: why.

"We really start with, why are we doing what we're doing, and it's certainly to make the safest and best products out there, and continue to grow and remain family-owned," says Nelson. "But at the end of the day we're able to do some rewarding things because we're in business, and that's what I hope people think of when they think of us. We're a big believer in giving back, whether it be to our employees through profit sharing, giving back to the pet food industry or supporting organizations that mean a lot to us."

Tuffy's recently donated to the Hurricanes Harvey



Tuffy's Pet Foods: Understanding the human side of pet food

www.PetfoodIndustry.com/articles/6874



Tuffy's complete line of pet food products include grain-based and grain-free formulas, as well as both dry and canned formulas, catering to the requests of the company's customer base and the retailers it works with. *Photo by Tuffy's Pet Foods*

and Irma relief efforts, providing a monetary donation as well as over 8,500 pet meals to the animals and families impacted by these disasters. KLN Family Brands has also partnered with the Pinky Swear Foundation, an organization with the goal of assisting every child who is battling cancer, and has committed to donating US\$1 million to the organization to assist families who have been affected by pediatric cancer.

Independent retail partnerships key to Tuffy's success

"Without a partnership and relationship with the independent specialty retailer, we wouldn't be here today, plain and simple," says Nelson. "We have survived and been successful because of those relationships. So as we continue to grow, in the front of our minds we're always thinking about the independent retailer."

Building those relationships and then maintaining open lines of communication are absolutely vital to Tuffy's past, present and future business plans, according to Nelson.

"It's everything," he says "We have, basically, an open-door policy here. We do everything possible to get our retail partners and potential partners here to our community. We want them to see our facilities, meet our people, see what we do and how we do it. We believe this allows us to be very transparent with our partners, and gives them trust in us that we will make the best quality product for them and their customers. It is absolutely key for us for people to see what we do and how we do it, and we welcome that."

Tuffy's prides itself on ensuring those relationships stay solid, and on working so closely with independent pet food retailers. Those retailers have influenced the way

Tuffy's continues to expand into the pet food market. For example, the company has recently expanded its NutriSource grain-free line of pet food to include small/medium and large breed puppy formulas, and added 20 new products to its canned food lines.

"I think we recognized, as everyone has, that grain free is not a fad," says Nelson. "There's a consistent and continuous play there. And as we've seen that grow, we've taken a similar approach with our grain-free lines as we took with our grain-based products, and that is that we need to be a little more specific: we need to look at small breeds, we need to look at weight management. It was being requested by our retailers, and we want to give the retailers what

they're asking for. If we want to stay top of mind, we need to have what the customer is asking those retailers for."

Navigating e-commerce in the pet food industry

E-commerce is a hot topic in the industry right now, for good reason: as internet-based purchasing increases in the

JUST THE FACTS

Headquarters: 245 1 Ave. N.,
Perham, Minnesota, 56573

Facilities: New, state-of-the-art
production and office facility totaling
600,000 square feet in 2015 that
manufactures dry, semi-moist dog
and cat foods.

Officers: Kenny Nelson, CEO; Charlie Nelson, president;
Kurt Nelson, COO; Tami Kalina, CFO; Jon Ebeling,
general manager; Dan Schmitz, vice president of sales

Sales: Double-digit growth

Brands: NutriSource, Pure Vita, Natural Planet

Distribution: Independent pet retailers, specialty pet
stores

Employees: 300

Website/Social Media: www.nutrisourcepetfoods.com;
nutrisourcepetfoods on Facebook;

@nutrisourcepetfood on Instagram;
@nutrisourcecpf on Twitter



↳ TUFFY'S PET FOODS: RETAIL PARTNERSHIPS KEY TO SUCCESS

pet space, manufacturers are looking for ways to grab their own piece of the online customer pie. Tuffy's seemingly went against the grain when it pulled its products from Chewy.com after the online pet products retailer was acquired by PetSmart in the first half of 2017.

"We, before anybody else, made the decision to walk away from Chewy's," says Nelson. "A significant part of that decision was based on who they sold to, and our commitment to the independents. In a way, it's a challenging decision, because we're walking away from business with a little bit of the unknown yet. But at the same time it was an easy decision, because it was a reminder to ourselves who our partners are, who got us here and who is going to keep us top of mind going forward.

"As far as the future, we know this: we need to have internet and e-commerce exposure," says Nelson. "We need to be found on the internet. We are working through that, discussing options with our management team and with wholesalers from a logistics and an execution standpoint."

According to Nelson, Tuffy's plans to move forward with

two points in mind no matter how their final e-commerce strategy develops.

"One, we're going to have direct communication with those customers, because it's extremely important for them to know who we are and it's extremely important for them to understand we're doing everything possible for them to purchase our products through the independent channel," he says. "And two, if we're going to sell product online, people are going to pay a premium for that convenience. Our goal, no matter what, is to absolutely steer people back to their retailer."

The future of Tuffy's Pet Foods

The company's strategy isn't going to change any time soon, according to Nelson, and Tuffy's commitment to the pet food industry is stronger than ever.

"We love the pet food industry," he says. "We are committed to our partners and greatly enjoy the relationships we have developed over the years." And no matter what, "we will continue to focus on why we do what we do." ■

