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Many pet owners turn to organic, natural pet foods

By Theresa Howard
USA TODAY

NEW YORK — Sales of organic and natural pet foods are getting a boost from the nationwide recall of more than 60 million packages with familiar brands.

As brands from premium to store labels begin crisis-management efforts, an additional concern is that upscale organics are getting at least a temporary bump in share of the \$15 billion pet-food market. The recall has not only raised safety concerns, but has also

pointed out that many big-name premium brands contain some of the same ingredients as bargain labels.

Marketing “People purchasing some of these brands on the recall list think they are buying premium brands,” says Kristen Levine, founder of Fetching Communications, a public relations firm for the pet industry. “When you find out the same wheat gluten is going into bargain brands, it’s very disheartening.”

Natural and organic pet-food sales already had been

rising — 46% in 2005 over 2004 and an expected 36% for 2006, according to the Organic Trade Association’s 2006 Manufacturer Survey.

Thanks to the recall, “I would be shocked if organic pet foods don’t see a banner year,” says brand image expert Katie Paine of KDPaine & Partners.

Seeking to contain the damage, Procter & Gamble ran a letter in 59 newspapers this week to reassure consumers that its Iams and Eukanuba dry foods are safe and not part of the recall. Purina is posting shelf cards in stores highlighting unaffected products.

“We’re trying to develop messages for shelves which make it clear which products are not affected in the recall and to leave confidence about the brands that are affected,” says Steve Crimmins, Purina’s vice president of marketing for pet foods.

Paine thinks that may be futile for now. “Calling attention to your brand in times of a crisis doesn’t help. Time has to pass, and dogs and cats have to stop dying. Then that’s the time to advertise.”

Levine, however, thinks companies should act now.

“A few companies have done a really good job, but I don’t think we’ve heard enough from the others.”

Meanwhile, organic foods are gaining interest:

► Orders are up 300% for Boulder-based Natural Pet Nutrition. Its Pet Promise food is sold in stores including Whole Foods. A 25-pound bag with a list of “no’s” including “no added growth hormones” and “no antibiotic-fed proteins” costs \$35. “We’ve seen a really strong surge in demand,” says founder Dave Carter.

► Castor & Pollux Pet Works has had a tenfold rise in traffic on its website, says Shelley Gunton of the organic-food maker near Portland, Ore. “Sales have been on a growth ramp, but this springboards the category,” she says. “People who may have dabbled in organic products for their human family are looking out much more seriously for their four-legged family.”

► Online pet-food retailer Wagintails has had a 30% to 40% rise in sales, despite recall of some top sellers, thanks to organic and natural products, says founder John Gigliotti. “We feel like the loss of sales from the products we pulled will be more than offset.”