

Pet Expos Exposed



Two major pet events happened in Sydney two months apart in two different locations—one for the pet trade and industry and the other geared towards consumers. They were worlds apart with the Pet Industry Association of Australia Pet Expo held at Darling Harbour in September and the Sydney Pet and Animal Expo at Rosehill Racecourse. While the former has grown from strength to strength in its best year ever, the latter is a dog that has seen better days.

The PIAA event was not open to the public, featured 100 stands, had a lively grooming exhibition and competition as well as having seminars for pet businesses and its own catalogue, showbag and much more. It's been running for over 20 years. Close to 2000 people attended with a record number of overseas attendees. More than two thirds were first time expo attendees. There was also a bus tour of top Sydney retailers which was booked out far in advance with a few members so fascinated by the stores that they forgot to board the bus and had to catch up.

A one-day Groomex event for groomers was held the day before with seminars and international speakers. At the hotly contested extreme grooming showcase, a record number of competition entries comprising 67 scissor and clipper armed groomers were sweating to outcolour, outclip, outwit and outlast their opponents as the fur flew to wild applause.

It's a crucial event for retailers to see what's new, hot and happening from the distributors and marketers introducing products from overseas. This year there were a variety of standard collars, leads, toys, treats, aquarium products, foods and a few surprises. The funniest item would have been the air conditioned insulated doghouse which came with its own webcam so an owner can watch their pet from a computer, mobile phone or PDA.

There was a surge of the new breed of pet retailers—online pet e-tailers looking for new product through the aisles and talking to some of the larger pet product distributors. Interestingly a number were told that if they weren't a 'bricks and mortar' operation (one that had a physical store) then they wouldn't be able to buy product from many of the established suppliers. The reason most cited was that their established traditional stores would be miffed and take their business elsewhere.

As one online storeowner pointed out "They're afraid that we (online stores) will be undercutting the more traditional store in the belief that we have less overheads. But what's ridiculous is that there are several traditional stores in Sydney and Melbourne that have a hefty online presence and they're selling product online, cheaper than most stores. What's silly about this antiquated policy is it would take them (the distributors) hours to drive around Sydney to all the stores and compare prices but with my operation they can easily take a couple of minutes to check my prices online."

"You could argue that we sell a little cheaper because we only have the postage costs to contend with but you can bet a customer who has found their cheap product online could call into other stores and purchase for the same price. As it is, my operation adheres to the recommended retail structure."

There's certainly room for new business models in the pet market as commerce evolves. What was interesting about the PIAA trade show is that it's prime for new product to be showcased and trotted out to weary retailers and yet surprisingly little new product on offer. Compare it to the large US and Europe trade shows and it was disappointing to see a lack of innovative and clever new products. There were a couple we found and have placed in Creature Comforts but overall it was slim pickings.

It's clear that many of the new innovators entering the pet product market can't afford the stand fees and costs associated with exhibiting. The price of a stand compares to the gargantuan and highly exposed gift trade fairs put on by Reed. So huge is the gift one, it swallows the whole of the Darling Harbour Exhibitions Centre and attracts thousands of gift and specialist retailers. Hopefully the PIAA show will be able to expand and accommodate the upcoming pet entrepreneurs in future.

We noted in a previous issue that the Sydney Pet and Animal Expo held each year at Rosehill Racecourse was getting tired and old and this year confirmed it with fewer exhibitors, smaller attendance and a large number of last minute non-pet stands featuring chiropractors, kids toys, vacuum cleaners, honey, and potions without the major exhibitors who used to use this event. It's no wonder the Brisbane Pet Expo was put down last year and it appears that the Melbourne event may be suffering the same fate as Sydney. The loss of meaningful major brands, Dr Harry, relevant stands and the overall lack of promotion and marketing means that the event may have run its course at the racecourse.

CRAFT BEER AND FOOD: PERFECT PARTNERS

BEER IS ENJOYED ON MANY DIFFERENT OCCASIONS WORLDWIDE AND INCREASINGLY WITH MEALS IN AUSTRALIA WITH OUR VAST MELTING POT OF CULTURES AND THEIR RELATED FOOD STYLES. IT IS A GREAT OPPORTUNITY TO DISCOVER HOW DIFFERENT CRAFT BEERS CAN DELIVER ON FLAVOUR AND MATCH UP WITH THESE EXOTIC FOODS.

Often, icy cold beers are enjoyed purely for refreshment, however beer can also be tasted at slightly warmer temperatures, their flavours savoured and the beers matched to complement food. The grain-based nature of beer makes it a food in itself, and the huge range of flavours and aromas now available in Australia make beer a perfect match with nearly any kind of food.

Most beers go with most foods, one can never be totally wrong in a selection. Choosing the beers and foods that enhance one another means paying special attention to the gustatory qualities of both. Beers can complement food or contrast with it, and then the beer can come back in at the end and cleanse the palate. For example, a spicy Thai stir-fry is complemented by a hoppy beer like James Squire Pilsener. The hoppiness challenges that spice, then cleans it off the palate. On the other hand, a blander beer might contrast with a spicy dish, let the spice come through and then cleanse the palate.

In general, we should match strength with strength. Strongly flavoured foods demand stronger more assertive ales. Delicate dishes or natural seafood work best with delicately hopped beers. To make a simplistic analogy with wine, where a white wine would do, select a fine lager. Where a red wine is right, then look at the more robust and flavoursome ales.

Combinations work best when they share some common flavour or aroma elements. The nutty and crystal malt characters of a beer like James Squire Amber Ale have a "flavour hook" with the caramelised flavour of a grilled steak or rack of lamb. The chocolate, roasted coffee flavours of a stout or James Squire Porter mesh nicely with the rich chocolate notes of chocolate mud cake. Herbaceous hop notes share the aromatic spice characters of basil and mint and can complement dishes using those herbs.

Total beer enjoyment is based upon creativity and experimentation. The ground rules are simple. If a dish has excessive spice, vinegar, acidity or salt, or is curried, pickled or corned, then it is not friendly to wine, and beer is the better choice. Go forward and try some of the great beer styles of the world that are now available fresh in Australia.



James Squire

NEVER FORSAKE FLAVOUR



The numbers speak loudly as to why pet businesses and brands are not investing. When we started this magazine in 2004, there were 125 stands in their official exhibitors catalogue, down to 117 in 2005, 112 in 2007 and plunging to 91 this year. Major pet food brands like Supercoat, Pedigree, Advance, Nutrience, Bushs, Lovitts, OEM and others saw little value in the Pet Expo. As one food manufacturer noted to me, seeing people glomming multiple sample bags and then tearing them open and mixing them with other foods killed it for them. They also could not track any increase in sales as a result of exhibiting.

The pet pharmaceutical companies soon followed. Though they used the stands to run competitions and captured consumer details from them, the results weren't there. Merial (Frontline) dropped out along with Dr Harry, Novartis, Bayer (Advantix, Kiltix, Advantage) also stayed away and Exelpet from the Mars group drifted away as well. Smaller medical treatment companies opted out such as Valueplus, Troys, Innovet, and few neutraceutical companies saw the demographic of attendees as their target market.

It used to be that major distributors used the Pet Expos to show off what's new in their products but industry biggies Masterpet, Pet Pacific, Dr. Neils with Greenies and Triple Crown elected to do other events while smaller key brands such as Pig In Mud, BARF, Big Dog, Doggles, Sassy Treats, Delibones and Four Paws joined the exodus. Next were the pet stores that left with Pet Barn, Kellyville Pets, The Real Macaw, Mondo Cane and smaller store stands disappearing.

In the wake of these dropouts, the promoters desperately tried to fill spaces with non-pet service stands. You could pick from three Free Spinal Checks as chiropractors set up shop. If you had a sweet tooth there was a honey stand as well as health products that aren't for pets. Two stands featured vibrational devices that you stand on. You could buy a sheep skin at one stand and there was another with kid toys and another with cleaning devices.

So why has the Pet Expo fallen on hard times? One smaller super premium dog food distributor who did this Expo for the first time, and also regrettably signed up and paid for the February Melbourne show in advance, summed it up this way. "I didn't really think the crowd was there to spend any money, wanted freebies, samples and whatever they could lay their hands on without paying. Frankly, there didn't seem to be many pet lovers there, it seemed more like an outing to wander around, maybe see the petting zoo and a reptile demonstration. But it wasn't our crowd."

Another smaller pet food brand rep felt, "The event hasn't changed over the years other than getting smaller, the aisles getting wider and stands getting fewer and far between. Because it's held at the same outer West venue at Rosehill Racecourse, it's not a compelling event that you have to go to each year. Because of its location,

people with discretionary income from the Eastern Suburbs, North Shore, Balmain, the Shire, Hills and city can't see making the trek and with all the events that happen in Sydney, especially free Council Pet Days, they can't justify spending \$14 a head and the petrol."

There are some good aspects to the Pet Expo—breed organisations can display their dogs and cats as well as answering questions on them and guiding people to the breeders and away from backyard operators or pets from market stalls. Though sometimes maddening with the same songs—"Who Let The Dogs Out?"—the dancing dog competition and agility shows are fun. And there are pet seminars that attract audiences when the right personalities are presenting or if there are exotic animals on display.

Every event of this kind has a lifetime and runs in a cycle from development through growth and then decline. While this dog may have had its day, The Pet and Animal Expo appears to be limping and likely not to make it much further. What's needed is a new pet event, more upmarket and exciting and less old school. One idea that has been put forth is getting the PIAA to stage a public event, perhaps at Fox Entertainment District which would include an indoor show with stands, an outdoor area where breed organisations can display but also an area where people can bring their pets separate from the exhibition.

It's likely that another promoter or events company will try to step in and run a competing event as happened in Brisbane when the Pet and Animal Expo collapsed there. The Spectacular Petacular started up by a pair of dynamic women who set low prices for exhibitors and sponsors as well as a great advertising and marketing strategy. The success was evident in their numbers: 350 exhibitors, 20,000 attendees through the gates with over 5000 animals in four acres. They don't charge charities for sites. And Dr Harry will be a regular feature. You can see their site for the previous March event at www.petacular.com.au. The event will be March 14-15 in Brisbane's RNA Showgrounds.

Another idea that has been floated may be combining a trade expo with a consumer show after and a pet industry awards show, pet fashion event, competitions and other events around a Pet Week theme. If the expo and consumer event were held at Fox, the side events could easily be accommodated at neighbouring Centennial Park or other nearby vacant lots. It may be an idea whose time has come.

What ever happens in the future, there is a market for both consumer and trade shows exposing the best, new products and services in our national and local markets. It's clear that switched on pet owners want to attend these shows with or without their pets. Consumers want a touchy and feely experience whilst being able to ask questions.

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