

When You Buy Pet Food, Are You Being Pet Fooled?

How much do you really know about what goes into those cans or bags of pet food you buy for your furry family member? 'Pet Fooled' is a documentary film for pet owners that strips away some of the secrecy surrounding commercial pet food and the industry that produces and promotes it.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Kohl Harrington and Michael Fossat co-produced a documentary on the pet food industry called "Pet Fooled"
- In my interview with Kohl, he discusses his inspiration for the film and the steep learning curve he encountered in his study of pet food
- Kohl also recounts what he learned about the pet food industry while making the film, including several things that shocked him
- "Pet Fooled" also features interviews with pet parents who lost pets after feeding them tainted jerky treats imported from China and sold by U.S. pet food manufacturers
- "Pet Fooled" is available for viewing on most digital platforms, including iTunes, Hulu and Vimeo

Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published January 08, 2017.

Today I'm interviewing Kohl Harrington. Kohl is a documentarian, film producer and filmmaker.

He's put together an amazing project I want to share with all of you. It's a feature documentary about the pet food industry called "Pet Fooled," and the inspiration for the film was actually Kohl's co-producer, Michael Fossat and his itchy dog!

Michael's groomer suggested his dog was itchy due to his diet, and told him to Google "grain-free pet food." Michael did some Google searches, and like so many others looking for information on pet diets, he was soon overwhelmed by all the conflicting, confusing information he came across.

Kohl knew nothing about pet food when he took on the project. "I was basically stepping into it clueless," he says. Growing up, his family had dogs and cats, but they were free-roaming indoor/outdoor pets who mostly hunted their own food.

The film took nearly six years to make, and according to Kohl, the first year or so was spent just trying to define the problem. Most of the information he found online depicted two distinctly different points of view about pet food. According to one view, corn is terrible and raw diets are great.

The opposing view is of course that corn is great and raw diets are terrible. So he had to research both sides of the argument to see which one made more sense.

At the end of their year of research, Kohl and Michael had narrowed their list of pet food subject experts to about 15, and as luck would have it, all of them were located in and around Chicago. "We have a lot of people in Chicago," Kohl said to Michael. "Let's just pack up and go."

They traveled to Chicago for a week, and the majority of the film is taken from interviews they conducted during that week.

Not 1 Pet Food Company Agreed to Talk to the Filmmakers

Among the many things Kohl learned during his year of research and while making the documentary is that the pet food industry promotes certain ideas that many pet owners disagree with and criticize them for.

Kohl remembers thinking that if, for example, pet owners are wrong about corn and it's really a great food for dogs as pet food companies insist, then those companies should be happy to meet with him and explain their position. "That didn't happen," says Kohl.

He kept a detailed log of all the pet food industry contacts he tried to make. He called company headquarters and left messages. He called media departments and left messages. He wrote emails, and he tried messaging through Facebook.

The only verbal response he received from a major company was from Hill's Science Diet. They left a voice message for him stating, "We don't want to participate in this film." Beyond that single voicemail message, Kohl never received any response from any of the pet food industry people he contacted.

"That says a lot," says Kohl. "You're being criticized by your customers for product claims and you're not willing to stand behind them, because you don't have to."

Lesson Learned: Honesty From Pet Food Companies Is Hard to Come By

For the documentary, one of the things Kohl did was research YouTube videos, and he happened to come across one of mine in which I'm talking about pet food ingredient labels.

He knew he wanted to use it for "Pet Fooled," "Because it was so brash and just very well-worded and very clear and concise for the viewer to understand," he says.

Another person featured in the film is my friend Dr. Barbara Royal, a holistic veterinarian and past president of the American Holistic Veterinary Medical Association (AHVMA). "We found her in an audio file on a law website," explains Kohl.

A law student who happened to be very passionate about pet food interviewed Dr. Royal after the 2007 melamine pet food recall.

"I had no idea who she was," explains Kohl. "I just knew that I liked the way she spoke about this topic. She was very upfront and honest. I needed that honesty about the topic."

Because there are two types of people that you meet: people afraid to say anything and people brave enough to say something. The brave people are very few and far between."

Kohl explained that each interview he conducted led to additional people he wanted to contact, and additional information he needed to fact check. The pet food industry's position began to take form the deeper he got into things.

If a certain pet food industry leader was touting a certain study about the benefits of corn, for example, he would find the study and read it. "It was very clear they were cherry picking information from their research and using it to their advantage," he says. Kohl says it took two full years of filmmaking before he had a good understanding of the issues surrounding pet food, and he feels it probably takes pet owners about the same amount of time because there's so much conflicting information out there.

"We've been conditioned culturally through advertising to believe a certain way," says Kohl. "Companies are spending tens of millions of dollars to advertise their products. After awhile, it becomes a normal part of your thinking. It's like, 'I need a car. I'm going to go buy the one I saw in that commercial.'"

Documentary Includes Interviews With Pet Owners Who Lost Dogs After Feeding Them Toxic Jerky Treats

In his documentary, Kohl covers two pet food recalls — the 2007 melamine disaster, and the ongoing jerky treat debacle. Through Facebook, he contacted a woman who facilitated a group of people whose pets had become ill or died after eating tainted jerky treats.

Through her, Kohl was introduced to several people who shared their stories with him. I've personally seen those interviews, and they're very impactful. Most of the people interviewed had never thought to question what was in their pet's food or treats. They trusted the claims printed on the packages.

"The interesting thing was that none of the pet owners involved in the chicken jerky issue wanted to be involved in a lawsuit," says Kohl. "The only thing they wanted was for the product to be pulled off the shelf, the problem to be fixed and to move on. All they wanted was for the product to be recalled so it didn't kill more animals."

Each pet owner had called the treat manufacturer and been ignored. "That was a very shocking thing to me," says Kohl. "I called companies myself only to hear, 'Our treats have been tested. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) hasn't found anything.'" He also spoke to the FDA personally, and the agency acknowledged there is an issue, but they can't find the proof they need.

"What does that say?" asks Kohl. "You just allow the product to continue to be sold and continue to kill until you can find the smoking gun? You know it's killing. You've admitted it's killing."

Filmmakers Have Very Uncomfortable Encounter With Pet Food Industry Lobbying Group

Kohl says one of the most uncomfortable encounters he and Michael had was with the Pet Food Institute (PFI), which is a lobbying organization. They contacted Michael and said, "We're affiliated with the industry. We want to help you out." When Michael asked who they were, they didn't immediately identify themselves.

PFI invited Kohl and Michael to meet with them, so they went to Washington D.C. and met with both the FDA and PFI, where they learned that PFI represents the interests of pet food companies, not consumers and certainly not pets. When asked about the chicken jerky treat issue, the PFI representatives said on camera, "There isn't a problem with chicken jerky. This has been tested for years and the FDA has found nothing."

"I've been researching this issue," Kohl told them, "and pets have died after eating the treats. Everyone is aware of it, including the FDA. I don't understand why you're saying here today that basically, no problem exists."

Kohl says the exchange made him very uncomfortable, because he expected that PFI would at least show some concern and indicate they were working to fix the problem. Their "no problem exists" response was a brush-off. Kohl felt the FDA was open and honest by comparison.

The agency's representatives actually seemed to care and talked with him for a couple of hours. They know there's a problem, but as of yet haven't been able to prove it. As for mandatory recalls of the treats, their response was, "There are laws. We follow the law."

Lesson Learned: The Pet Food Industry Is Misleading and Deceptive

From the countless hours of footage Kohl and Michael gathered for "Pet Fooled," the final film is 71 minutes in length. One of the biggest challenges they faced was translating interview conversations into visuals. "For me, it's like translating English into a different language," says Kohl.

He says watching the film is an experience in and of itself, which was his goal. He wanted the documentary to both make sense for the viewing audience, and not be boring.

"It's kind of like stitching a quilt," says Kohl. "What should we talk about first that takes us to the next topic, which gets us into the next topic? Because if the order of topics doesn't flow, viewers will get lost and lose interest."

One of Kohl's primary personal motivations for pursuing the "Pet Fooled" project was that he believes very strongly that as American consumers, we have a right to question the companies who sell us products, and the government agencies who regulate those products.

He was quite shocked to find out just how difficult it can be to get answers from pet food companies and the industries that represent them, like PFI, and how hard it is for pet parents to unearth information about the food they're buying for their dog or cat. He came away with the opinion that the pet food industry is exceptionally misleading and deceptive.

Where to Watch 'Pet Fooled'

"Pet Fooled" was produced on a shoestring budget according to Kohl. He and Michael called on friends and family to help out with extra camera work and other tasks. When they had the rough-cut product ready, they presented it to potential distributors, and those who were interested provided the funds to help wrap up the project.

Kohl and Michael and their distributors wanted to make the documentary as widely available as possible, so "Pet Fooled" is now available on most digital platforms (e.g., iTunes, Hulu, Vimeo, Xbox, etc.). It will also be available on cable VOD providers like Dish Network, Cox, Charter On Demand and Verizon Fios, to name a few. For further information and to watch the film:

- **["Pet Fooled" website](#)**
- **["Pet Fooled" Facebook page](#)**
- **["Pet Fooled" on iTunes](#)**
- **["Pet Fooled" on Amazon.com](#)**

I'm honored and very excited to have played a small role in the making of the documentary, and I want to thank Kohl for joining us today to talk about this wonderful project! "Pet Fooled" trailer:
