

Food Recalls and Deception:

A Special Interview with Kohl Harrington

By Dr. Karen Becker

DB: Dr. Karen Becker

KH: Kohl Harrington

DB: Hi, I'm Dr. Karen Becker. Today I am going to interview Kohl Harrington. Kohl is a documentarian, a film producer, and a film maker. He has put together an amazing project. Kohl you have a lot to share with us. Welcome, first of all.

KH: Thank you.

DB: Tell me a little bit about the project first. Of course, I have a million questions. What is the project and what is the inspiration of the project?

KH: The project is Pet Fooled. It's a feature documentary. The inspiration basically came from my co-producer, Michael Fossat, who had a dog, who had veterinarian problems, itchy skin. The person in charge or the person hired to basically groom the dog said, "This dog keeps having issues because of the food. Google 'grain-free pet food'." That led to him Google-ing and being confused, which led to basically a feature film about the topic because it was so confusing.

DB: Kohl, when you were brainstorming about this idea, have you ever investigated anything animal before? I know that you have been in this industry forever. But were you nervous about approaching, not much as pets, but pet foods? Pet food as a topic. Were you nervous?

KH: No. I was basically stepping into it clueless. I never heard of anything related to the pet food industry being a topic alone. I grew up with dogs. I grew up in Florida, so I grew up with dogs. They were outside dogs. They would roam and hunt things themselves. We had cats growing up too, but the cats, they would eat the cat food and then go catch their own things. I've been exposed to that as a kid. But the only thing I knew was dogs eat dog food; cats eat cat food. You buy it in can, and that's basically it. I stepped into it blind, not knowing anything.

DB: Very blind. Your learning curve was exponential.

KH: It was about two years into the entire process. Basically the first year was just trying to figure out what's the issue. Because whenever you research online, the thing that was interesting to us was that you had two basic ideas on the Internet about the way the world works: corn is great; corn is bad. Raw is great; raw is bad. You had basically two worlds that existed. We were just trying to look at both sides to kind of weave through each side to see which one makes more sense.

DB: Would you say you spent about a year in the research or investigation phase? How long did it take you to figure out a path?

KH: Basically you're just online swimming through anything and everything to learn as much as you can. You're calling people and trying to dig a little bit more. It took about a year just researching the project

and meeting with people before we had about like, I would say, 15 people who ironically are all in the Chicago area.

Michael and I both looked at each other and said, "We have a lot of people in Chicago. Let's just pack up and go." We packed up and went to Chicago for a week and spoke with a lot of people. The majority of the film comes from those interviews that happened in that week.

DB: When you were kind of wading through this amazing amount of information, I'm sure that you realized that not only is it a very heated topic, a very passionate topic, but certainly in the last 40 years, there have been all sorts of reasons that people have become very concerned and involved with this topic with the recalls, and of course, the massive amount of animal deaths because of pet foods.

Were you aware of the recall issue? I know that the allergies, food allergies, or skin irritation in a personal pet kind of introduced you this topic. Were you aware of the recall issue before you investigated or had no idea?

KH: Had no idea basically. I don't think I had ever thought about pet food before. When Michael asked me, "Hey, I think this can be an interesting topic. It's confusing." I was like, "Really?" It just sounds like, "OK. There's a problem in everything."

The interesting thing after it's made is I feel like a lot more people are aware today about things. They've heard about things. The advent of the Internet. Everybody's on the Internet all day, every day. These things like the recall have lived on, because we still have recalls. People are a lot more aware today than I was. I wasn't aware of anything. It took me a year to kind of understand what byproduct was. It was confusing and it's set up to be confusing.

DB: It is. I know when I met you, you were still in the investigation phase. I love that because both of you were very objective. You didn't have an underlying goal other than to learn more and to figure out what the issues surrounding this industry were, which I think is a noble goal and also a very confusing, ultimately a confusing goal. You did a great job of kind of sifting through all the issues. At what point in your research or in the film making process did you have AHA moments? At what point were you like, "Oh, my gosh. This is starting to make sense in my own brain"?

KH: The reason I kind of thought it was, "Really? Pet food? You want to look into pet food?" was because there are really well-made documentaries out there and there are really not so well-made documentaries. It sounded at first a thought of somebody trying to make something out of nothing. That was my first reaction to the topic.

Whenever we started going through the research and we came across corn is great, corn is bad. The industry was saying one thing and obviously had people who were criticizing that. My naive thinking at the time was, "If this is really not true, if corn is really amazing for the dog, these companies will meet with me and they'll just fully explain." That didn't happen.

DB: Talk about that, Kohl. When you tried to make contact or made contact with some of the industry leaders, what was your experience?

KH: I basically kept a spreadsheet of everything. Anytime I would contact a pet food manufacturer or a person who worked at a pet food manufacturer, I would detail it in the spreadsheet. That went from calling the number, leaving a message, calling the media department, leaving a message, writing emails to basically personal emails to Facebook accounts that I knew the person worked for a certain company, and never received a response.

The only response I received eventually was after I had kind of a debacle at a conference. Hill's Science Diet called and they left a voice message, which is in the film. "We don't want to participate in this film." Beyond that voicemail, I haven't received any response ever from anybody expressing any interest in being in the film. That says a lot. The fact that you're being criticized for something and you're not really standing by it, because you don't have to.

DB: In your research phase, initially when you were making contact with all of these pet food companies asking for their input, their perspective, their side of the story and you had no response, you did a great job of kind of covering all your bases and getting all of the opinions coming in. The people that did respond to you had passionate strong opinions and ultimately those were the people you interviewed. How did you go about finding people that ultimately put together pieces of this film in a logical order for you?

KH: It was a mix of [inaudible 08:29]. The videos that you had you were reading pet food packages. Instantly, when I saw that, I was like, "I need that scene. I want to recreate that scene. I need that for this film." Because it was so brash and just very well-worded and very clear and concise for the viewer to understand.

The other person that is a major part of the film is Dr. Barbara Royal. We found her in an audio file on a law website. Basically, there was a guy by the name of Vince Field, who was a law student at the time and very passionate about pet law. He came to find out there was no money in pet law, so he practiced another form of law. But he's still passionate about the subject and that area.

When the 2007 recall had happened, he interviewed Dr. Royal. All he had was an audio file of her. I had no idea who she was. I just knew that I like 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 who are brave to say something. These are people who are very few and far between.

The way we approached everything basically is we would interview people. The interviews actually went a lot longer than anyone expected. I think our first interview was two or three hours. Somewhere up there. I would basically take these interviews, transcribe them, and every little detail in the interviews would lead to somebody else. It was just a constant building of, "This person says one, two, and three. I need to go fact-check that to see if that really exists, if that's true."

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A lot of information on the real side of the industry started to make more sense the deeper that I got into it. The deeper I got into the side of corn, for example... If there was a certain pet food industry leader saying, "Corn is great because of this study," I would then go by the study. I would read through the study. It was very clear that they were picking information and using it to their advantage. The study didn't outright prove that anything was better than another thing, but they were basically using a line to say, "Dogs can process corn," to then market "Corn is the best thing ever."

It was sort of those types of things that took a long time to do. It took about two years to fully like, "Oh, I finally understand everything." I don't know if the average consumer is going to take two years to fully tackle and understand this, but I feel like for anyone to really fully understand it for themselves, it's going to take around that amount of time as well. There's a lot of information.

DB: It's interesting because just wading through the ingredients that are most commonly put into commercially available pet food is one thing. But trying to wrap your brain around the raw food industry, or what raw food is or fresh food in general, that's probably something that you had never heard of prior

to you taking on this endeavor. You probably had never heard of feeding fresh food or raw food diets to dogs or cats.

KH: In our initial interview, it's funny. Because throughout the years, I've just been going through the footage and going through the footage and going through the footage. In our first interview, I remember laughing at myself in the beginning because it's like, "What do you mean by raw food?" You literally had to explain in great detail what raw food was because we had never heard of that ever. We just thought, "OK, no corn. Great."

We've been conditioned culturally through advertising to believe a certain way. Companies are spending tens of millions of dollars if not more to advertise their products. After a while, it's just a normal part of your thinking. It becomes a normal part of your thinking like, "That's normal. I need a car. I'm going to go buy one. I've seen this commercial."

DB: Part of your documentary includes some very touching interviews with people who have been victims of recalls. In fact their pets have died. How did you contact those people, Kohl? Or once you realized that recalls existed, how did you track down the people that you wanted to interview that had had personal experiences with the recall?

KH: There were two recalls that we covered for the film. One was the 2007 recall, which was the largest consumer product recall ever at the time. Of any product, not just pet food. The second was a chicken jerky issue.

While we were filming, an issue had come to light where I'd read an article about pet parents banding together on a Facebook page because they were having issues with sickness or death relating to treats. I basically got in contact with a person who kind of facilitated the whole Facebook page. She created a database of everybody that had reported to her that they had an issue – who the person was, where they lived on a map, was there sickness, if the dog lived or did the sickness result in death.

She had very detailed information with the chicken jerky. Through her, I was introduced to a lot of different people. If I were flying to Chicago to meet with somebody, I would go around and meet with all of the different people who would meet with me to say, "Tell me your story."

Randomly in Birmingham, we were filming at a conference. I took my camera guy to a restaurant he wanted to go to. Casual conversation. People were like, "Why are you here?" "We're filming a little documentary." "What about?" "Pet food." "Oh, my God. My roommate just had the worst issue with this chicken jerky treat." Even in a bar in Birmingham, people were having issues. We actually got to speak with her roommate who makes it into the film, [inaudible 14:43].

DB: I'm sure that those interviews – I have seen them – are very impactful. You had interviews that were insightful, interviews that were very emotional. What interviews were the most difficult or challenging during this process?

KH: I would just go back to that question, the previous question just to kind of finish my thought. The interesting thing about the chicken jerky situation was that I was meeting with people and was basically in real time. In Birmingham, I met with a lady who this just happened to her three days prior. She was still confused. She had never questioned pet food at all or treats. She would just go and abide what the package said to her. It's all-natural. It's home-style dog. Whatever that means.

What was interesting to me is what was happening was that you had all of these people all across the country where the same exact thing was happening to them. Sometimes the dog only got sick. Sometimes the dog died. There are other pet owners out there that fed that treat but never had an issue.

But the interesting thing was that every person involved in the chicken jerky issue did not want to be involved in the lawsuit. The only thing that they wanted was for the product to be pulled off the shelf, the problem to be fixed, and to move on. They had something bad happen to them. They don't want to be involved in the lawsuit because they're not going to get anything. They know that. All they want is the product to be recalled, so it's not killing more animals.

Each one had problems with calling the manufacturer and being ignored. That's what that scene points out, sort of how the company treats the consumer that they care for. That was a very shocking thing to me to basically call the company myself and have them respond, "Our treats have been tested. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) hasn't found anything."

I was lucky enough as well to have spoken with the FDA about the issue where they acknowledged, "There is an issue, but we can't prove that." It was this Catch-22 of, "There is a problem, but we can't find the smoky gun." What does that say? You just allowed the product to continue to be sold and continue to kill until you can find the smoking gun? You know that it's killing. You've admitted that it's killing. That's the way the world works.

The most uncomfortable interview that I had was I would say, we were randomly contacted by the Pet Food Institute, which is the lobbying organization. They contacted Michael and basically said, "We're affiliated with the industry. We want to help you out." My co-producer was like, "Who is calling?" They didn't say who they were for quite a while. It was very odd. They invited us to speak with them. We're like, "OK."

We took a trip to Washington, D.C. where we spoke to both the FDA and the Pet Food Institute. It was very clear with... Because you just want to sit back and you want to interview. You want to make that connection and speak from the heart. But with certain questions with the Pet Food Institute... I've been covering this chicken jerky issue, would you please explain what's going on. It's their job to represent the manufacturer. They're not representing the consumer. The Pet Food Institute is representing the interest of the manufacturer.

They said on camera and it made me uncomfortable, "There isn't a problem with chicken jerky. This has been tested for years and the FDA has found nothing." Our response was, "We record your answers." I've spoken with people. I'm not trying to catch you on camera saying anything to make you look bad. I've covered this issue and people are having issues that result in death. Everyone is aware of it. I don't understand why you're basically saying it doesn't exist. It was very uncomfortable. "The FDA looked into this. I trust the FDA."

Whenever you're speaking with someone, you're just trying to get their point of view that they care. It's hard to draw that conclusion that they care when something is happening. I met with people. These people are not making this up. There is no conspiracy. You say that you represent the interest of consumers as well, but I don't see any evidence that they've ever called anybody that I've spoken with and made the interest or the point that they care and they're trying to fix the problem. It's just brushed off as "It doesn't exist." Now, that's uncomfortable.

DB: Very uncomfortable. I'm actually really surprised that PFI even talked to you. I think it's interesting. But I'm not surprised by their kind of evasive responses at all. I'm not surprised at all.

KH: It's different to have the dichotomy between speaking to you and Dr. Royal and a lot of other people. Even the FDA was open and honest. They were like, "You can interview us for 30 minutes. Be quick." It turned into a couple of hours, because the topic is so in-depth and interesting. At the end of the day, what I gathered from the FDA interview was "Sorry, there are laws. We follow the law."

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If they were speaking in code with their eyes, that is what I took from the interview. “We know there's a problem, but we can't prove it.” It's frustrating. They were using terminology to me that said that they cared. They wanted to help more. But what can they do if it's not in the law that they abide by?

DB: I know that you have flown around the United States. I know that you have gathered countless hours of footage. How did you pick and choose? How long is the film?

KH: The final film is 71 minutes. We've shot hundreds and hundreds of hours of footage of interviews. We didn't know anything. We were shooting and learning at the same time. Interviewing someone for a couple of hours was very valuable to us, because we were able to have transcripts after interviewing someone with a lot of information. Especially from interviewing yourself, where we could then use what you said and find the facts behind everything that you said, which would then help us in the end.

The difficult thing about making a film is that you're translating this basically what could be a conversation into a visual aspect. For me, it's like translating English into a different language. It's where you can have a conversation in person with someone, but watching a film is an experience in and of itself. I had to weigh a lot between this making the most sense for the consumer watching and not getting bored.

It's like stitching a quilt really. What topic do we talk about first in order to get into this topic in order to get into this topic? Because if the order became mixed up, the viewer would lose all interest in the topic and be confused.

DB: I'm impressed that you were able to condense the volume of information down under 80 minutes. I'm totally impressed. What do you think the biggest takeaway for you personally was? Because your learning curve has just been like vertical on this entire topic. What do you think you've learned the very most from finishing this entire project?

KH: The reason why I liked the film is that it's Pet Fooled. It's about pet food but at the same time it's not about pet food. There are many different undertones of this film that represent other industries. The thing that kept me going throughout the years was the fact that I believe, as an American citizen, you have a right to question companies. You have a right to question your government. It's very clear that the industry does have influence towards people questioning this product, questioning this industry, really, and the products that they sell.

That's what kept me going throughout the years, the fact that I believe that you have a right to question what you're being sold. You have a right to transparency and know what is in what you're being sold. That was what was the biggest shock to me was that it really took a lot of time to just understand the basics of what's in these products. What should you have? What shouldn't you have? What should you avoid? That was the biggest shock was that how misleading – I don't know the corrective terminology to allude to how shocking the way this industry works.

DB: Deceptive. Deceptive is the word that I use.

KH: Deceptive. Yeah.

DB: Yeah. It is. This is a five-year project, Kohl? Is that right? About five years?

KH: We thought it would be two years. Then it turned into five. That's the way it always goes if you make a film, a documentary.

DB: Privately funded? I know nothing about the film industry. How do the logistics of funding and the distribution work?

KH: It was extremely low-budget. Basically, we had the funding for what we filmed. Filmed everything and hired the camera guy and hired a couple of editors to help us out along the way. Just friends and family. That was what allowed us to get through. Once we moved into the distribution phase, we said “Here’s our rough cut product. We can’t afford to finish it.” And so whoever wanted to distribute it and to like give us finishing funds to finish the movie. It’s a shoestring budget.

DB: Some of the best documentaries I have ever seen have been made exactly this way. I’m so excited to see the finished version if people – I know everyone watching this is going to want to see this, Kohl. Where are they going to go to see it? How are they going to get a hold of it?

KH: Basically, Gravitas is a company here in Los Angeles. They’re our distributor. They deal with video on demand (VoD). It’s basically going to be on all digital platforms. If you have a certain cable provider, let’s say, Time Warner is big here in Los Angeles, you can tie on to your VoD, through your Time Warner and find Pet Fooled. You can find it on iTunes, Hulu, Vimeo on demand. Basically, any digital platform, Xbox, you can find Pet Fooled. We wanted to make it as widely available worldwide on any digital platform that we could, because that’s where consumers are going to be able to watch this film.

DB: Yeah. Absolutely. What’s your projected release date?

KH: The release date is October 4.

DB: So exciting. Very exciting. I was honored and flattered to be a part of this documentary. I’m excited about what it’s going to accomplish in the sense that – you’re absolutely right. In five years, there has been evolution in the industry. But the majority of people still have no idea that there are issues within the pet food industry that they at least need to be aware of to make the very best choices for the animals that they’re caring for, certainly.

I appreciate your conviction in hanging in there to finish this. It’s such an important topic. You’re really one of the few people I know that have had just the ability to want to tackle it and get the job done. I appreciate everything that you and your team have done. I can’t wait to see the finished product. Thanks, Kohl.

KH: Thank you, too. Thank you.

[END]