

10 Questions with Guy Blaskey

Pooch & Mutt has quickly established itself as a leading supplier of dog supplements. We spoke to **Guy Blaskey**, the company's driving force

Launching new pet food runs in Guy's family



Above: Cookie's condition started the whole venture

Below: Pooch & Mutt is for all shapes and sizes



1 What gave you the idea to launch Pooch & Mutt?

Over a decade ago my mum launched Blue Chip Feed, making feed balancers and supplements for horses, from our kitchen at home. Then our family dog Cookie was diagnosed with hip dysplasia. We started her on the Blue Chip Dynamic joint supplement and it helped her a lot, but the product wasn't 100% right for dogs and she didn't really like the taste.

Cookie's diagnosis was the impetus that I needed to look at the idea of starting Pooch & Mutt. I contacted our nutritionist and said: "Make a product where you leave in all the ingredients that are right for dogs and take out those that aren't right. Add new ones – and make dogs like it."

2 How has the brand developed?

We have come a long way in a short space of time. I have learned a lot more about nutrition, but I have got some great experts helping me.

When we were looking at the formulations for Mobile Bones we also looked at redeveloping another Blue Chip product to make Bionic Biotic. I had no idea if there would be a market for it, but it's the best afterthought I've ever had.

3 Do vets recognise the importance of supplements in the general health of dogs?

In my experience they are split 50-50. Half of them are in favour of supplements and, luckily, this half is growing.

Unfortunately, some vets only trust in medication and will happily put a young dog on a drug such as Metacam without telling the dog's owner about the possible side effects, instead of trying a supplement like Mobile Bones. I think this is very irresponsible.

4 What are the most common problems found in dogs?

The top three in my experience are arthritis, diarrhoea and skin/coat problems, being especially prevalent in the summer months.

The statistics point to a growing problem with dog obesity. The key to helping deal with this – in humans as well as dogs – is diet and exercise. Feeding a joint supplement like Mobile Bones can make it easier for an overweight dog to exercise, but people need the will to exercise their animals.

5 Which product do you count on as your best seller?

Bionic Biotic, in the newer 200g concentrate packs, is easily our best seller. When I launched it I was not sure that people would get it, as it is one product with a lot of different benefits.

Even now, three years down the line, people don't realise that this one product can stop their dog's diarrhoea, help it put on weight, stop it itching and improve coat quality.

We are wary of making it sound too much like a miracle cure but the truth is it contains a lot of active ingredients that do different things.

6 Tell us about your move into the American market.

We received requests for the products from people in the US. Sending them from the UK would have been costly and an administrative nightmare, and setting up with a US distributor was time consuming.

As the demand was coming from individuals online it made sense to work out a way to satisfy that demand directly. I found a pick-and-pack place in Illinois that could handle the logistics, then got to work on getting the products out there.

The products are currently available exclusively online. We had our first order within an hour of going live and made \$500/£315 in the first two days. I am sure it will take some time to get going, but I am happy with the start.

7 How have you set about marketing your products?

I am a big fan of the PATS shows as a means to market ourselves to retailers and like to back up our presence there with trade advertising.

The products are distributed through Natural Pet Products. They have some fantastic salespeople visiting stores around the country. I often pop into shops for a nosy around and love

seeing the stores that are stocking the products without me even knowing about it.

Throughout the year we tend to concentrate more on consumer marketing than marketing to retailers. What makes the trade buy from us is when their customers go in and tell them how good our products are. We use a lot of press advertising and we do a lot online with email and Facebook, having more than 2,500 fans.

8 What are your plans for the future?

We have a new product that we're testing at the moment. I can't go into detail too much, but we are getting great results. It is a product that may not have the widest appeal, but

will really help the lives of the dogs and their owners who need it.

And obviously we need to build on the US launch as well as the rest of our international expansion. Our Spanish distributor seems to be doing very well and we are sending a lot of products to Germany and, slightly strangely, Malta.

I am also keen to further develop the work that we do with rescue centres. If such a centre has a particular dog in need of one of our products we will send it on free of charge. For the rescue centres that buy from us on a regular basis we do matched donations: whatever they buy from us we double at a cost to us.

We have just started supplying the Labrador Lifeline Trust and the dogs there are really benefiting.

9 What are the challenges facing the industry?

There are tough challenges for independent retailers from the bigger chains, but I hope they can meet these challenges with the levels of expertise, service and customer interaction they can surely offer.

For manufacturers it can be a challenge to keep costs, and therefore prices, low, while ensuring that products are of the highest quality and meet ethical and environmental standards.

We are very proud to have both the PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) accreditation and The Ethical Award, but we did not change any of the ways we operate to get them – it's just the way that we thought we should go about our business.

10 How big do you want the company to finally get?

Our company mission is to ensure that all dogs can lead a happy, healthy life. So I would like Pooch & Mutt to get as big as it possibly can.

However, it is important that we do not grow at the expense of either the environment or our customers. In a recent customer satisfaction survey we got amazing results and one of the dangers of growing too quickly would be that it jeopardises our relationship with our customers.

They are extremely important to us, not just because they happen to buy our products but also because they are responsible for spreading the word about the products and providing useful feedback that helps us to improve them and introduce new ones.