Feeding Facts and Furphies
Part 1

Furphy: People make rational buying decisions.
Fact: We all make decisions based on emotion.

Have you ever thought about why you buy the food you feed your pet? You may be surprised to learn that the most important factors in your decision may have nothing to do with the food itself nor the needs of your pet. We have identified three main types of factors in buying decisions: food factors, animal factors and human factors. Of these, it is the human factors that play the most important role – after all it is the human who buys the food. What are these factors? They include:

Where is it made? Many people like to buy Australian made products including pet food. Economists argue over whether this is actually good for the economy but the fact remains that it is still a popular sentiment. Some people are also concerned about ‘carbon miles’ and will prefer to buy locally produced goods.

Who made it? Some people distrust multinational companies, particularly those with dubious ethical practices. Unfortunately, as companies grow and take over other smaller companies, most become a mixture of good and not so good divisions, so choosing an ethical company becomes a messy affair. For instance, Cadbury earned public acclaim for its decision to make its Dairy Milk chocolate Fairtrade certified. However, soon after that happened, the company was taken over by Kraft which has been criticised and boycotted for its reluctance to ensure fair trade practices in the coffee market, in which it is a major player. Some people will now see Cadbury as less ethical while others will see Kraft as more ethical. All of the major superpremium brands of pet food are owned by multinationals so the issue can’t be avoided. People will buy from companies they trust, whether they be small companies or large multinationals.

Advertising. We all make decisions based on emotion and advertisers know this and exploit it when advertising pet food. This is not to say it is wrong – it is just a fact of life. Some ads are very clever or funny. We have included some below.
(to see more check out http://inventorspot.com/articles/10_hilarious_international_ads_for_pet_products_17594 and http://inventorspot.com/articles/pet_ads_2_17896 )
Part of advertising is the use of celebrity endorsements. We have many people tell us they buy “Dr. Harry’s brand” of dog food presumably because if Dr Harry recommends it, it must be good! It seems that nowadays Dr Harry's star is waning and now whatever Dr Chris (of Bondi vet fame) says must be true.

Dr. Peter says, beware of celebrity endorsements – they don’t do them out of the goodness of their heart.

**Convenience.** This is becoming more and more one of the most important issues for many people with busy lives. Many do not want to spend time cooking meals for their pets and adding extra ingredients to balance it out. Superpremium dry foods are increasingly popular as they are balanced and extremely convenient.

**Cost/Value.** This is another important issue for many people although it is probably value that is more important than actual cost. Food that costs more than another food may in fact represent better value, especially when other factors such as convenience and quality are taken into account.

Costs are best compared on a per day basis as pet food vary enormously depending on type and digestibility. As a general rule superpremium dry foods such as Eukanuba and Hills are a similar cost per day as top of the range supermarket canned foods.

**Natural vs Commercial.** Although this may seem to be a food factor rather than a human factor, the truth is it has more to do with people’s philosophical leanings than the benefits of the food itself. Some vegetarians and vegans for instance insist on feeding their pets a vegetarian or even vegan diet simply because of their own beliefs.

The term ‘natural’ is interesting in relation to pet foods as it is so vague as be almost meaningless. Many commercial foods have ‘nature’ or ‘natural’ in their brand name or advertising. Is it ‘natural’ for cats to eat tuna? It is unlikely that in the wild, cats would swim out into the ocean to do battle with a large blue fin tuna fish, so in a sense, most of the meat that is fed to dogs and cats is not a ‘natural’ diet. A ‘natural’ diet for cats would be birds, mice and insects!

Home prepared diets may be fresher than commercial diets but are not necessarily more natural and neither are they necessarily better for the pet.

**So what to make of all this?**

While we feel qualified to comment on pet factors and food factors and in the next part of this series we will discuss these, the human factors above are very much an individual choice which we must respect. Being aware of them can help us to make more informed choices. In the next part we will explore what makes a good diet and why some are better than others.