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Help Line Hell



Spare a thought for those call centre operators on the front line of 1800 or 1300 toll free consumer assistance lines for pet foods, flea and tick treatments, toys and treats or other pet products. They sit at a computer screen all day long and answer questions from online inquiries as well as taking calls from consumers who have questions, need help or are concerned about their pets.

While most of the queries are fairly straightforward, sometimes that can be downright hilarious or touching. The operators are not only asked questions about their own products but can also bear the brunt of complaints or anger, even against other products they don't handle. After hearing some of the more humorous stories as well as bizarre ones, we decided to open up our lines to the call centre staff for their anecdotes.

In relaying them here, we elected not to use the company or product name, the identity of the contributor or the person who they spoke to.

One common theme is call centre operators all shudder at the thought of school holidays, a period of 'Help Line Hell'. "That's when kids who are bored or mischievous get into the pantries and find the toll free numbers on the packages of pet food or treats—usually at kid level in the pantry—and start calling without their parents' knowledge." Maria from a major pet food brand relates.

"You can tell by the voice if it's a kid, even when they try to disguise it by lowering their tone or affecting an accent. Then you listen to what they are asking and see if it's a serious question or if it's leading to a prank, hoax or joke. Sometimes kids say the darndest things but they also can ask some of the most intelligent questions about their pets so we don't discount them at first."

This one is a classic. "Hi I feed my guide dog your product and lately I am not happy with the appearance of the food. Has it changed?"

"There was a letter thanking us for our beef variety of canned food as it has added something extra to her beef stroganoff and it's now the family favourite! That letter is now hanging on our wall whenever we need a pick me up laugh."

A pet care advisor from another set of multinational pet food brands, Felice, has had ten years at phone front and relates her best calls. "We share a lot of stories here among the girls and we all hate full moon which tends to bring out the wackos. And we always have a good laugh here. Whenever we get a weird or funny call, we put them in the monthly report to share around with the rest of the office."

"You sometimes get very sad and lonely people, especially the elderly whose pets mean the world to them but who might also be housebound and wanting to talk to someone. But that is balanced by the sometimes hilarious calls we get."

"I would like to put a transmitter in my cat how do I go about this??"
Don't you mean microchip?

"My 9 year old son eats your cat food as a snack while he is on the computer, will this harm him in anyway?"

"My two gold fish died and I didn't know what to do ... its not like you can take them to the vet for a consult?? So I used a straw to try to resuscitate them but sadly they did not make it... they were my best friends and they used to come to the top of the tank when I called them... "

"I sleep with my dog he shares my pillow and often likes to lick my face and now I have an itchy bottom. Can I get worms from my dog? "

"Do I towel dry my dog or blow dry my dog after using the flea shampoo as it does not say on the bottle and I normally blow dry but thought I would ask?"

"Sadly, no, I don't have the packaging. I tend to open the box and put the contents into an air-tight container. So. oops, sorry, no...BUT... of course I still have the THING! I keep thinking it will burst open and it will be like "Invasion of the Body Snatchers", something will leap out and eat my defenceless dog! Of course you may have it back. It took up half the box, so when you talk of replacement, just half-a-box of biscuits will do... and thank you."

Lorraine works at a major multinational pet food company and has her own set of corkers from the rest of the staff who met after work for drinks to go over their favourites,

"I just wanted to tell you that I think your ***** cat biscuits are way too hard for humans to eat, I just tested one and I nearly broke my teeth!"

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"Hi there good afternoon! I work at Melbourne Zoo and we're just trying to compile complete listings of all the products we use. Are you able to send me analysis of (a leading dog food brand)? We use it as "scatter food" for the bears due to satisfactorily low fat, salt and protein. Oh, and they love it!"

"Can brother and sister dogs have puppies? Or do they know to leave each other alone!?"

"My vet told me that (a leading Australian kibble food) is cereal based and that is was ok for me to eat. I can't believe how bland it is!"

"I can't enter the *** ** Promotion because there are no last five digits on the barcode. The barcode has four digits and then a space and then another four digits. How do I enter?"

"Why did you change the *****? Now there's a green biscuit in the only ***** flavour my five cats would eat and they hate it. Now what am I supposed to feed them? No-one asked me if I wanted it changed, why didn't you call me and ask first."

Another funny one has to do with dog treats from a major company contributed by Lisa.

"I've been buying your *** ** bones forever, and I broke one in half to give to my dog and there's string in it! How did that get in there? Is there rope in the *** ** recipe? I imagine that wouldn't taste very nice, but my dog seems to love them."

My best friend, Fluffy has enjoyed your (major brand of seafood cat premium treat) everyday for 4 1/2 years. However, since your label change he won't touch it. As this is totally unlike him, I read the label on an old tin compared it with the latest label and found one change - the deletion of METABOLIZED ENERGY 48kcal/100g. The loss of this one ingredient means we are left with many, many tins of ***** Fluffy just won't eat. We managed to purchase a couple of old tins and he wolfed these down. Can you please help me? Are there any old tins still available? If not could you please reinstate the missing ingredient as Fluffy will not eat any other variety or brand. Please help me as my best friend only deserves the BEST! - and we can't see him starving."

And one more...

"My cats won't eat anything else but ***** that purple box competitor of yours is crap - the cats despise it! And you may not know, but you can actually feed birds with it, and drop 2 kibble into the fish tank and it dissolves and they eat it up like candy. So you could re-market it and call it 'Go-Bird' or "***** Fish!"

Though the call centre operators for dog and cat foods probably get the wildest calls, one of our friends who works with bird foods has her own cute stories.

"Hi, I bought one of your products in the US for my parrots because I hadn't seen that package or size and it looked like really good bird treats. So I got a big bag. But when I came through customs, the Xray machine picked up the bag in my luggage and it got confiscated. I've called the bird shops in Sydney and none of them know of the product. Can you replace it please because I lost it and it wasn't my fault."

"I have a cockatoo which I hand feed. I love your product and give my bird the treat a lot. But whenever my husband tries to feed him while he's on my shoulder, Loopy gives him an almighty bite and has drawn blood. Is there something wrong with the food or is it my bird?"

A marketing manager for a local company that makes wholesome canned dog and cat food has also had some extraordinary tales to tell. As Sandy tells it:

"There was a letter we received thanking us for our beef variety of canned food as it has added something extra to her beef stroganoff and it's now the family favorite! That letter is now hanging on our wall whenever we need a pick me up laugh."

"We have a central answering machine for after hours calls and a customer rang to add to the conversation she had with the machine insisting she spoke to someone on Sunday morning."

"We do a lot of pet shows and events, often having showbags of a variety of our products. After one major event, we got a call the next week asking, 'I purchased a showbag at a recent show and would like to know how many years it will last because I don't have a dog yet.'"

"Speaking of shows and bags, we are often asked how much our marked \$5 show bags are!"

"But the one that got me one day was , 'Why are your can lids sharper than other cans?'"

Joelene has worked at the switch of a pet toy and lead company for several years and is amazed at the sorts of dumb questions she's gotten.

"I bought your most expensive harness for my dog and I want a refund or replacement because it's defective! Just after putting it on my dog in the car after I bought it in the pet shop, I went back into the mall to do some shopping and when I came back, he had eaten through it in two places and taken it off. What are you going to do about it?"

Another one was from a frantic woman who had just given her puppy a ball that she had only just detached the tag from. "I can't find the ball I just gave my puppy, the one that has the bell in it. I've looked everywhere and even picked up the dog and shook him to hear if it tinkled. My puppy looks all right and I have felt his tummy and there's nothing hard. Do I need to go to a vet?" Five minutes later she called back somewhat sheepishly to say that her other dog had it in her mat hidden away.

One company we can identify along with the product is Dr Neil's whose Marketing Manager Ben Reay sent us this howler:

"I can only think of one really funny story to pass on. Belinda was the person who took this call.

A customer from a non-english speaking background called up and asked if she could order some 'caution'. We didn't stock a product by this name, and no one had even heard of anything called 'caution'. This went on for a few minutes, asking her what the product did, which she wasn't able to tell us.

What made it stranger was that she said she was looking at a packet, and it was definitely called 'caution'. We asked her what else was on the packaging, and this is where it gets amusing.

She said underneath the name 'caution' it said "Keep out of reach of Children". Turns out she was looking at a packet of Nuheart, which has a caution up the top of the packaging!! I've attached a picture of Nuheart for you too.



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Well, that's it for this issue but I know that when other people in the pet industry read these, or perhaps those at pet stores or other pet businesses want to submit their funny stories, we'll be eager to share them in the next issue. Email topdog@urbananimal.com with yours.



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