

Sorting Out Supplements

Be a resource for veterinarians evaluating oral joint health supplements

Don't let the confusion of a crowded marketplace keep your customers from providing their clients the best information possible. Distributor sales representatives (DSRs) can help veterinary customers sort through the world of equine joint health supplements to better assist their patients – and open new business opportunities.



“When you see the variety of products out there with many different ingredients, you wonder: Do I make my decision based on contents, company or price? There are many factors,” says Bill Bookout, president of the National Animal Supplement Council (NASC). “There’s no magic bullet, and the veterinarian is the best and most qualified person to make recommendations to the client to optimize the outcome for the animal.”

Often, a combination of supplements and prescription products will be warranted to help prevent or resolve lameness issues in horses. Supplements are not as strictly regulated by the FDA as prescription products. This results in

a range of brands, formulations and claims that can make the decision-making process confusing for horse owners, veterinarians and distributor sales representatives.

DSRs can use their connections to manufacturers and skill in evaluating information to include only the most substantial contenders. The criteria are simple and will leave DSRs, and their veterinary customers, with a manageable set of recommendations, Bookout recommends.

“Every single sales representative can sell veterinarians a product,” he says. “Instead, DSRs should optimize the value they provide to veterinarians through their knowledge. What’s going to create customer loyalty is providing and extending value.”

Word of mouth

A positive recommendation from a fellow salesperson or horse owner is a good place to start, but don't accept the recommendation at face value – especially if it's on a website.

“Don't believe everything you read on the Internet,” Bookout says. “Any person who has an issue can go there,” he says. “More is not necessarily better. Someone says the vet recommends this, and then I add these other three products – that's not necessarily the best approach.”

There should be some research to support the word-of-mouth buzz, says Stacey Buzzell, DVM, equine product manager, with Nutramax Laboratories Veterinary Sciences, Inc.

“The most important thing is for veterinarians to stay educated,” Dr. Buzzell says. “In my experience, clients will come to their veterinarian for information. There's always

a fad in a specific discipline or region. There's always the next latest and greatest ingredient that will make your horse sprout wings and fly. But, is there really research or just is it just word of mouth?"

Manufacturer presence

DSRs should recommend products from manufacturers with expertise in the equine joint health industry, Bookout says. The quality of raw materials can vary widely, and more experienced companies have established manufacturing standards that help control the variation.

Checking for basic items like a lot number and expiration date can indicate these standards are in place. Similarly, there needs to be a clear way to contact a staff veterinarian or technical service representative if there is a product question.

NASC member companies who have successfully completed the NASC audit certification program are allowed to display a quality seal on each supplement package. This indicates the company adheres to good manufacturing standards and adverse event reporting processes, and complies with labeling and claims guidance.

Established brands and manufacturers that have been in the equine industry a long time have established a stake in the industry and aren't willing to risk their reputation and brand equity selling inferior products, Dr. Buzzell says.

"If it's not a name that you recognize, it may be a company that [doesn't specialize in] joint health supplements, or maybe is hitting a lower price point and not putting out a high quality product," she says. "Everyone doing their homework and asking questions can ensure clients are spending their money in the best way to help their horse."

DSRs can help veterinarians keep track of the latest fads, evaluate the products and inform their veterinary customers. Then, veterinarians are better able to have a complete discussion with horse owner clients and separate fact from fiction, Dr. Buzzell recommends.

Familiar ingredients

Time-tested ingredients included in most major supplements include glucosamine, chondroitin sulfate,

methyl-sulfonylmethane (MSM), avocado/soybean unsaponifiable extracts (ASU), hyaluronic acid, collagen, omega fatty acids, cetyl myristoleate, vitamins and herbs like yucca and devil's claw.

It's not necessary that every product contain all major ingredients. Products that do contain all such ingredients may be a warning sign that the brand doesn't offer a tailored formulation with effective levels of a few, targeted ingredients.

"Some of the products have everything in them, but they may not have adequate levels of [each ingredient] in there," Dr. Buzzell says. "And, horse owners may have to give half a bucket to get the right dose. So, then it's not easy to administer and likely more expensive."

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Reputable companies can also provide safety studies that measure any negative effects of ingredients at higher-than-average levels, she notes.

In addition, the price point should be within a range for the industry. Anything outside of the range can point to lower quality raw materials or a dose of the ingredient that's too low to be effective, Bookout warns.

"Cheap products are cheap for a reason," he says. "A dramatically lower price point for one product compared to another is a red flag to search for additional information."

Fit for patient

A supplement that works for a young, trail riding horse may not be a great fit for an experienced international competitor, says Lydia Gray, DVM, staff veterinarian and medical director for SmartPak.

"We offer an online supplement 'wizard' to help horse owners narrow down their options and help them choose the best joint supplement for their horse's age, workload and competition level," Dr. Gray says. "We ask them to describe the horse's movement – is he the type of horse that comes out stiff but works out of it?"

Is a supplement ACCLAIMed?

Nutramax Laboratories Inc. worked with recognized veterinarians to develop a simple test for horse owners choosing an equine joint health supplement. The acronym ACCLAIM can help owners – and DSRs – choose a reputable product.

- A company name you recognize
- Clinical experience to support the safety and efficacy of the product and experience in horses
- Contents of the product are clearly noted with ingredients you recognize
- Label claims shouldn't be unrealistic and should support normal and healthy function
- Administration recommendations for how to give the product and what to expect
- Identification of lot and expiration date
- Manufacturer information including how to contact them

Even with the help of an at-home wizard, the veterinarian can be involved in two important ways. First, the DVM should evaluate the horse, its current health and soundness status. Second, he or she can evaluate the product to see how it fits into the horse's current job.

"Work with the owner to come up with a strategy that fits their budget and the lifestyle of the horse," Dr. Gray says. "A horse in light work can benefit from support, but it doesn't need aggressive support like a horse in intense work, such as an international athlete."

Owners selecting supplements on their own risk wasting money on products designed for different types of horses. Or worse, they could mask pain that indicates a joint problem and jeopardize future performance.

Product claims

Be wary of claims that are on par with prescription products. Claims that use words such as "diagnose," "treat," "prevent" or "mitigate" disease should be substantiated by the FDA.

"The claims that companies can make are limited to claims that support the normal healthy function of the body," Bookout says. "These products can't be patented, as they

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are natural substances that can't be protected via intellectual property, which is why there is not more research. There's really not the avenue to recoup the investment that it takes to do broad clinical research. I think supplements are beneficial in supporting joints and preventing joint issues, but there is limited research." Combinations of individual substances can be patented. Supplement manufacturers with research to support products still should not make claims outside of supporting healthy function of the body.

"Any supplement claim about pain and inflammation is a no-no," Dr. Gray says. "No quality oral joint health supplement should be saying anything like that. If an owner isn't sure, he or she should talk with their veterinarian and ask if it's a claim to be concerned about."

Prescription medications and supplements are complementary, she notes. A well-rounded program approaches joint health from all aspects, including physical work, such as turnout and massage.

"Good science is always open minded," Bookout adds. "If these products didn't work, the industry wouldn't be growing. But they're not magic bullets and should be part of a comprehensive care program." ■