

Turning Innovative IDEAS into Profitable REALITY

Kentucky Equine Research (KER) has secured acclaim among horse feed manufacturers and horse owners as a progressive, reliable consultant. In addition to the consultation services it offers, the fifteen-year-old company has developed and tested state-of-the-art nutritional products at its research facility. Beginning in late 2003, the company widened its sphere of services to include a product development program intended to help other companies develop and market innovative concepts in equine nutrition.

The approach to product development, however, is methodical and, to some extent, rigid. If any one step is brushed off lightly or bypassed altogether, the creation of a scientifically sound and effective product may be foiled.

Dr. Joe Pagan, founder of KER, guides the team of KER employees involved in the product development program. The first phase of the regimen includes a primary evaluation of the proposed product. For this, two KER employees, Delia Nash and Theresa Weddington, undertake a comprehensive literature review. Published research in scientific journals is a logical leaping-off point, as an exhaustive search of past studies will often substantiate claims associated with a certain product or ingredient, and may bring to light any safety concerns. It's also the job of Nash and Weddington to evaluate carefully the validity and strength of these claims.

Literature searches are not usually limited to research conducted on horses. In the feed industry, there is a great deal of cross-species experimentation with feed ingredients. In innumerable instances, the results of such experimentation are notable and benefit the welfare of other animals. Such is the case with biotin, a B vitamin that was first introduced into the animal health marketplace as a feed additive for pigs that suffered from cracked and fissured claws. Following the introduction of biotin to feed, pigs began growing denser, and thus healthier, claws. The technology was then transferred to the dairy cattle industry, where foot problems have been directly linked to decreased milk production. Eventually, biotin filled a void in the horse industry.

One company with which KER is presently collaborating has a vested interest in omega-3 fatty acids. Because little research into omega-3 fatty acids has been conducted on horses, Nash and Weddington must first delve into its use in other species.

Kentucky Equine Research Launches Product Development Program



REVIEW, COMPARE,

"Omega-3 fatty acids have been studied for their reproductive effects in swine, and these trials revealed a reduction in joint inflammation and a boon to bone metabolism, and equine researchers are certainly interested in these possible benefits," said Weddington.

Additional studies have yielded a fountain of useful leads, Weddington added. "Bovine studies reveal that omega-3 fatty acids may help cows come into estrus with more regularity and thus predictability; other swine investigations have linked omega-3 fatty acids with improved sperm concentrations, viability, motility, and decreased abnormal spermatozoa; and studies on various species have discovered improved cardiac function."

Not in every instance does the literature review end with four-legged, barnyard animals. Over the past several years, much research has been conducted on the beneficial effects of omega-3 fatty acids on human physiology. While horses and humans may seem worlds apart, they are more alike than different on a cellular level. Nash and Weddington keep this question in mind when drafting the literature reviews: Is it possible to enrich the lives of horses with this product? And it's up to the KER team to decide the answer to that question.

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Another important component of the primary evaluation is a review of similar products and their prices, suggested applications, ingredients, and relevant claims made to the end user. This is also an opportune time to study the customer base and evaluate how much the average end user knows about a given product. The actual and perceived knowledge base among consumers is must-have information. In addition, KER studies popular conceptions, if any, the product may have in the real world.

As part of the consumer-polling process, the staff at KER plans to survey a cross-section of horse owners about its knowledge of a given product or ingredient. A simple questionnaire will be distributed to horse owners at well-attended trade shows and will be posted on the KER Web site. Questionnaires will provide valuable feedback about

horse owners' general knowledge and perception of the product, and will also give KER insight into how to position the product to horse owners.

In addition to literature reviews, Nash and Weddington will investigate possible regulatory issues. A crucial part of product marketing is ensuring that the product can be sold legally at its intended outlets, whether they be neighborhood feed stores or mail-order catalogs.

In the United States, for example, individual states establish their own criteria as to what may or may not be marketed in their boundaries. A product that may be sold over-the-counter in one state may need to be purchased through a veterinarian in another state. States also differ considerably on packaging; to create a label that will satisfy the requirements of all states and countries in which the product will be sold is a challenging and time-consuming chore.

Mike Lennox, the KER formulations expert, is familiar with the ins and outs of labeling and is responsible for gaining approval from the Association of American Feed Control Officials (AAFCO), if necessary. According to the association's Web site, "A basic goal of AAFCO is to provide a mechanism for developing and implementing uniform and equitable laws, regulations, standards and enforcement policies for regulating the manufacture, distribution and sale of animal feeds, resulting in safe, effective, and useful feeds." Lennox works tirelessly to ensure KER products meet the standards set forth by AAFCO.

And when the time comes to test the products on animals, KER is ready and willing. Through their partnership with KER, companies have at their disposal a dedicated research facility. KER maintains a herd of seasoned research horses, which include three-year-old and aged Thoroughbred geldings.

KER specializes in digestibility and exercise physiology studies. If KER cannot perform the required research on site, it will contract with another accredited research facility such as a university to carry out the study, though KER will supervise each stage of the trial.

In addition to controlled studies, KER has performed studies with several Thoroughbred farms. Cooperation with these farms allows KER access to a large population of horses of various ages. KER is also closely affiliated with several of the world's top three-day event riders. Horses in the barns of these equestrians offer yet another group of horses to test the effects of products.

The research component of this program requires the input and dedication of several KER employees. In addi-

tion to Pagan and Nash, Dr. Larry Lawrence, senior nutritionist at KER, helps design the research trial that will ultimately prove if a product is worthy of further consideration. Once the details of the trial are outlined, Nash and a group of interns must oversee the everyday nuts and bolts of the trial.

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The work does not end in the barn, though. The statistical analysis that is part of every research trial becomes the laborious duty of Nash. This number-crunching is often the least-liked aspect of research for many scientists, but the statistics ultimately reveal whether or not the desired effects of a potential product were achieved.

Another crucial aspect of this phase includes predicting possible manufacturing issues. For instance, products must be appetizing to horses. By testing the product on several horses, KER will gain an idea of whether or not palatability problems arise.

The final phase of the partnership lies in appropriately positioning the product in the marketplace. Though KER is not a marketing firm, it is closely aligned with Kentucky Performance Products (KPP), the company that supplies marketing support to KER's line of small package products including Neigh-Lox and Equi-Jewel. KPP may not, however,


be the best fit for marketing all products. Therefore, KER will locate and work with the marketing company that most suitably meets the demands of the client and KER.

Once a marketing company has been designated and a retailing strategy formulated, KER will continue to support the client and the product.

Several companies have signed on to collaborate with KER, and the companies are just as diverse as the projects. While KER welcomes all inquiries, its niche may be helping companies unfamiliar with horses and horsemen gain a foothold in the marketplace.

In addition to established companies, KER is willing to help individuals turn their innovative ideas into profitable reality. For some individuals, the cost of research prohibits them from seeing any follow-through on their ideas. At this point, KER can step in and help lead individuals through the sometimes wearying research, regulatory, and marketing channels necessary to observe their fledging idea take full flight.

"Each partnership is unique. In keeping with KER tradition, the program is tailored to fit the needs of the client. The client is number one," said Nash.

Since its inception, KER has maintained the fundamental goal of bettering the lives of horses. Over the years, it has achieved this through the creation of top-notch feeds and supplements. KER will continue this tradition as it partners with companies that have similar objectives, and the horse world will be better for it. 



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