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Oprah Targets Puppy Mills and Pet Stores

By Jon VanZile

Despite the fact it took direct aim at pet shops that sell puppies, an April 4 report on puppy mills that aired on “The Oprah Winfrey Show” isn’t having much effect on business, according to retailers.

The majority of respondents to a recent PET AGE poll about the show don’t sell puppies (65 percent). Another 12 percent believe the quality of their puppies speaks for itself.

And most store owners aren’t reporting any drop in sales directly due to the show, despite Oprah’s tearful plea to never buy puppies from pet stores and instead only adopt dogs from shelters. However, that might be because puppy sales were already drifting down, said several retailers.

“I wouldn’t say Oprah affected my business, but puppy sales are down,” said Steve Maciontek, general manager of Animal Kingdom (Chicago). “Part of it is the economy, and part of that is there are more sources for puppies, especially the Internet.”

Larry Greenberg, owner of Animal Magnetism in Naples, Fla., also reports that sales are down. But again, it has less to do with Oprah and more to do with the economy.

“We started feeling a downturn about May [1] of last year, when the real estate market around here collapsed,” Greenberg said. “If Oprah has affected sales, I have no way to tell. ... The day after the show, I had two people mention they saw it and that was it.”

However, one respondent to the PET AGE poll reported that sales were down \$28,000 after the show aired.

Several pet shop owners also said that Oprah’s show failed to represent the kind of respectable breeders that provide healthy, good puppies for sale.

“We watched the show,” said Sandra Gregory, owner of The Pet Shoppe in Turlock, Calif. “We were really shocked because of Oprah’s generalizations, and she doesn’t usually generalize like that.”

Michael Maddox, director of legislative affairs for the Pet Industry Joint Advisory Council (Washington), echoed that concern. “[Oprah] basically characterized the whole industry based on a few bad actors,” he said.

That was exactly the kind of show Maciontek was hoping to prevent. When the Chicago retailer saw the billboard purchased by Bill Smith, founder of Main Line Animal Rescue, an animal welfare group in Chester Springs, Pa., entreating Oprah Winfrey to do a show on puppy mills, he knew it was trouble. “After we saw the billboard, about a month before the show aired, we sent a letter to Oprah and asked her not to do a sensational story,” he said. “We didn’t want it to be one-sided, and we didn’t want it to be a cover-up either.”



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Maciontek says he never heard from Oprah’s producers, and the show went ahead as planned. The final line-up didn’t include any representatives from the pet store industry, large-scale breeding facilities, the American Kennel Club (New York) or the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

PIJAC knew Oprah was about to do a show on puppy mills, but the organization wasn’t invited to participate, Maddox said.

Ultimately, he said, it’s a losing battle when it comes to hostile media, and the best pet shops can do is to make sure customers get healthy puppies from good sources that maintain appropriate standards. “If somebody wants to present an unbalanced story because it’s sensationalistic, there’s nothing you can do,” Maddox said. “The broadcast painted the industry as a whole as failing to maintain standards in their breeding and sale of puppies.”

Some industry insiders are ready to raise those standards, according to one Michigan pet shop owner, who said he has been talking with both breeders and shop owners about creating and enforcing industrywide breeding standards.

“We need to police ourselves,” said the retailer, who asked not to be identified. “I believe as a retailer, we have the right and responsibility to hold breeders to a higher standard than even the government. The Animal Welfare Act is fine, but it’s not enough.” [July 2008 PET AGE]

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PET AGE QUICKPOLL: THE OPRAH EFFECT	
<p>One in four pet retailers are taking pro-active steps, such as focusing on customer education and reviewing supplier lists, in response to Oprah Winfrey’s April show on puppy mills. A total of 366 PET AGE subscribers participated in the poll, which was posted on the PET AGE Web site from May 5 to May 12, 2008.</p>	
WHAT ACTIONS ARE YOU TAKING IN RESPONSE TO THE PUPPY MILL REPORT ON “THE OPRAH WINFREY SHOW”?	
	% STORES
Nothing—we don’t sell puppies	65%
Focusing on customer education (signage about puppy sources, etc.)	18%
Nothing—the quality of our puppies speaks for itself	12%
Checking our supplier list to make sure we don’t buy from substandard facilities	6%
Changing suppliers	1%
Other	19%
<p><i>Totals do not add up to 100% because multiple responses were allowed.</i></p>	

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