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SmartPak Equine

Customers' needs dictate growth.

by Kim F. Miller

A five or 10-year plan is common for most excellent businesses, but SmartPak™ Equine is an exception. The maker of customized supplement "paks" that are ubiquitous at many top training barns and privately owned stables, SmartPak is an excellent company for sure. But they do not have a plan detailing how big they will get or how many more supplements and horse and human products they'll add to their catalog-based business.

"Our goal is just to do our very best to come up with new ways to serve our customers, and to let that goal take us wherever it does," says Paal Gisholt, the company's CEO and husband to its founder and president Rebecca Minard. They have had that mentality since SmartPak's founding in 1998 and it has served them well. SmartPak now offers 360 supplements and medications from a fully licensed equine pharmacy, plus a wide range of products that help horses stay healthy and make horse ownership easier and more enjoyable. "Our main theme has always been that when horses or barn managers face challenges, those are opportunities for us to be helpful," Gisholt explains.

It all started when Minard got frustrated with inconsistencies in how her own horse was receiving supplements and meds. She noticed that his Vitamin E was lasting too long, while his

dewormer was used up very fast and it was hard to tell whether he was getting the right amount of joint supplements. Minard didn't blame the staff at the large barn where she boarded her horse. The task of getting the right supplements in the right quantities to each horse was in desperate need of simplification. That epiphany was the catalyst for SmartPak.

SmartPak lives up to its "supplements simplified" motto and offers many benefits in cost, convenience, product quality and the peace of mind that horses are getting exactly the daily doses their owners intended. Delivered in packs made of recycled plastic, with individually sealed wells for each supplement, the supplements and/or medications are labeled with the horse's name and product information. They are shipped automatically every 28 days to make sure customers never run out. The seals on each well ensure the integrity of each supplement and prevent mixing of supplements that might degrade efficacy.

Based near Boston in Plymouth, MA, SmartPak did not initially intend to branch beyond supplements. "In fact, we could have kept our lives a lot simpler if we hadn't," says Gisholt. "What happened was that customers wanted to add things to the monthly supplement shipment that came on autopilot: dewormers, Show Sheen, fly spray, for example." Once SmartPak crossed that threshold, things snowballed. Their catalog and online store now represent everything from rider clothing to horse gear and barn supplies and tack.

Supplements, however, remain the company's core business. New supplements and/or medications are added to the SmartPak system only after extensive scrutiny. "We only pick up products that we feel make a real contribution to the industry and only those that we are willing to put the SmartPak name on," says Gisholt. SmartPak's long and extensive association with the National Animal Supplement Council is one of many vantage points used to vet potential new products.

Health Trends

SmartPak's finger is uniquely positioned to take the pulse of trends in supplement use. Gisholt notes that digestive health and the balance of Omega 3s and 6s are at the forefront of advances in horse health.

"There is an increased knowledge among competitors and those who maintain horses in an active, stressful lifestyle that their horses are at risk for gastric issues, largely involving the stomach lining, and hind gut issues that affect digestion," Gisholt notes. The market is big because horses' digestive systems are not a good fit for their modern lifestyles and often grain-heavy diets. Many relatively new supplements are doing a great job of addressing these problems, he says.

"We are getting incredible feedback on these products. In some cases it's transformative."

The Omega 3 and 6 balance is integral to preventing inflammation that is a culprit in many equine health issues. "Horses should have five times as much Omega 3s as Omega 6s. Yet, it is still commonplace in the industry to feed corn oil as a source of calories that don't provide heat," Gisholt relays. "Corn oil can crank up the ratio of Omega 6s to 3s to 80:1, virtually creating inflammation at the cellular level, which is the root cause of a huge number of diseases."

Digestion and inflammation are just two of hundreds of equine conditions that can be positively addressed by supplements. The average horse owner can find the possibilities daunting and that's one of the reasons SmartPak is famously fanatic about its customer service team. Most are equine science graduates and all are salaried employees who have been given 10 weeks of training before taking their first call.

"The typical catalog company treats customer service as an operations function," Gisholt explains. Their per-call time is carefully monitored with the goal of cramming the most possible calls into the work day. At SmartPak that is never a component in employee reviews. "We base it on how many customer hugs they give or how many e-mails we get raving about the service they provided," Gisholt notes.

The SmartPak representatives are well equipped to advise customers. "We ask a lot of questions: what kind of riding they do, the horse's background and the owner's preference in taking care of the horse. We help them boil down, from what could be a list of 30 or 40 products, to a short list of recommendations." In some product categories, the key factor is the quantity of the active ingredients, while in other categories there may be more than one way to approach the problem. SmartPak reps help customers understand that some experimentation is often needed as one product may work great on one horse and be ineffective on the next. The ability to buy a supplement in just a month's supply through SmartPak is a nice alternative to buying a whole bucket.

Affordability is another SmartPak priority. The new Barn Buddies program enables clients to save substantially in shipping costs by grouping their orders together with those of friends. And the company's own line of supplements, SmartSupplements, enables customers to get the best for less. "These are not generic versions of existing products," Gisholt clarifies. "These are completely unique formulas in categories where we saw a need based on conversations with our customers."



For more information on SmartPak Equine, visit www.SmartPakEquine.com or call 800-431-4126.

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