Why are cats so...
difficult?

By: Nancy Rawson, PhD

Nancy Rawson , PhD
nrawson@afbinternational.com
www.afbinternational.com

We hear all the time that "cats are finicky". In this article we will ask "why?"

The term 'finicky' encompasses several things, but all definitions include the notion of being demanding and difficult to please. 'Finickiness' may refer to an individual cat's variable responses to the same product over multiple exposures, or to the observation that while dogs will eat many different products with apparent excitement, there are few products that appear to satisfy 'most' cats. Are cats truly wired by evolution to be more finicky than dogs? Or is 'finicky' just another word for 'different'? Is the concept of finickiness a result of incompatible owner expectations? Have pet owner's feeding habits driven cats to finickiness?

Is it biology?

The standard response to the question of why cats are 'finicky' posits that cats are biologically wired to be particular about what they consume. The cat evolved as an obligate carnivore, requiring nutrients that can only be supplied from animal protein. This requirement has honed cats into superior prey hunters who, unlike canines, rarely select fruits or nuts. Dogs have had at least 14,000 - 100,000 years to adapt to a domestic diet and to 'train' humans to provide for it, whereas cats have been domesticated for a much shorter time. Canines, also carnivores but with diets resembling omnivores, evolved to select a variety of foods and flavours to maximize the likelihood of meeting their nutritional needs.

It has been observed that first choice is more predictive of intake ratio for dogs in paired preference tests. This may reflect a higher 'bar' for acceptability for a cat than for a dog due to the need to insure nutritional adequacy from a smaller repertoire of dietary options. Further, the cat's unique genetic makeup drives distinctive anatomical adaptations, nutritional needs, metabolism and sensory biology. While cats clearly use odour and taste in their dietary decisions, their taste experience is distinct from other species. They lack a functional sugar receptor, have about half as many bitter receptors as humans, do not exhibit preferences for salt or sucrose, and prefer amino acids and certain sour stimuli at concentrations that humans find undetectable or unpleasant!

In addition, cats are metabolically distinct, unable to easily digest lactose and other sugars and lacking salivary amylase, an enzyme that digests starch. This distinctiveness alone could result in the perception of 'finickiness' when compared to our human experience of food.

Is it perception?

Another perspective is that cats are not finicky but we perceive them as such because their food behaviours do not fit our expectations, nor do they provide feedback like dogs or human infants. In this scenario, we need to consider cat behaviour and owner perceptions. 'Cat people' often report appreciation for cats' independence, including their ability to fend for themselves during owner absence. Yet when this same independence and lack of owner-directed behaviour occurs at feeding time, we call it 'finicky'! Do cat owners secretly wish...their cats acted more like dogs?

Is it environment?

Finally, one might argue that the way we feed cats triggers this perceived finicky behaviour. Many cat owners feed ad lib. This may allow the cat to notice subtle differences it might not note when food availability is limited, as in the wild. When food is less available, the cat may be less selective, and their ability to discriminate may take second priority to satisfying nutritional needs. In attempting to 'please' our cats with varied and plentiful food options, we may actually be setting them up to exhibit finicky behaviour.

Regardless of which scenario(s) turn(s) out to be true, the challenge is to create products with a flavour profile that satisfies a cat's preference while matching – without exceeding – their nutritional needs. ■

References are available from the author