

The Virtually Indestructible Ball made by Hueter Toledo Inc. is one of many dog toys manufactured to last through even the strongest chewers.



Toys from Bionic Pet Products are manufactured out of robust, nontoxic rubber and are guaranteed by the company.

## Tough Toys for Active Dogs

From classic styles to brand-new varieties, you can offer your customers lots of tough toys to satisfy even the most destructive doggy. By Karen M. Alley

Anyone who's been around dogs very much has heard a story about a dog that chews and destroys anything in sight. Steve Luhrs, founder of Bionic Pet Products (Minneapolis), experienced it firsthand. "Five years ago, I came home from work and my dog had chewed through the wall, down to the studs. I was at a breaking point," said Luhrs. No matter what kind of toy he bought, his dog, Raney, would just chew it up and move on to something else.

Luhrs, who has an engineering background, was working for a rubber manufacturer at the time, so he went to the chemists there, told them his story, and together they worked on a

formula for a toy that would withstand the toughest chewing.

In 2011, after four years in development, Bionic Pet Products launched four toys made with a proprietary, "virtually indestructible" rubber: Bionic Bone, Bionic Ball, Bionic Stuffer and Bionic Toss-N-Tug. All toys come with a 100 percent guarantee: The company will send a new toy to customers who send them the destroyed toy with the dog's photo. Any dog that can manage to destroy three toys in one year will join Raney—currently the sole occupier—on the company's "wall of champions" and become a beta tester for the company's new toys.

"We believe in our product so much

that we're willing to stand behind it," said Luhrs.

Despite the economy, dog owners are still looking to buy toys and fun things for their pets, and they want toys that are well worth the money.

"With the recession, we're all trying to buy things that are a little less disposable," said Jill Nazimek, president of Katie's Bumpers (Golden, Colo.), whose company makes toys out of the same sturdy material used for fire hoses. "People who have a dog that really likes to chew are looking for something that will last through some tough play and are even more likely to spend a little more money on it."

People also are paying more attention to their dog's personality, said manufacturers. In fact, size and breed have less to do with whether a dog is a chewer than its temperament. If pet owners understand that their dog likes to tear into things and work its jaws for exercise, they will be prepared to look for an appropriate toy that's strong, durable and challenging.

Bottom line: Whether your customers have a big Newfoundland or a small dachshund, they very well could be looking for a toy that can last through some serious play. Thanks to all the new and revamped products on the market, as well as some proven favorites, it's easy to offer your customers a wide assortment of tough toys to satisfy even the most destructive doggy.

## The Classics Branch Out

Some tough toys have been around the industry for years. Kongs are a case in point: Introduced to the market in the late 1970s, the original classic red Kong is synonymous with the brand and is what many people automatically think of when looking for a tough toy.

The Kong Co. (Golden, Colo.) now has over 300 SKUs, including a new small toy for its Extreme line. "We found that even in the category of small dogs there are extreme chewers," said Chuck Costello, senior product manager.

The Extreme toys are made with a rubber formula that's more puncture-resistant than that used in the company's Classic line, which is made for average chewers. Kong also has puppy and senior lines to meet the special needs of young and old dogs.

Similarly, Premier Pet Products (Midlothian, Va.) recently launched a

Busy Buddy Senior line. "It's an extension of the Busy Buddy line in that some of the toys are the same as the regular Busy Buddy line, but the rubber is softer," said Michelle Mullins, manager of Premier's training and behavior education department. The senior toys are made with the same rubber used in the existing Busy Buddy puppy toys, but are adult-sized.

Another brand with longevity is the Tuff line from Petsport USA (Pittsburg,

Calif.). The company has offered Tuff Balls for more than a decade. Tuff Balls look just like tennis balls but are created especially for dogs. For example, the outside is covered in polyester, not wool, because wool wears down dogs' teeth, according to Eden Hass, chief financial officer.

Tuff Balls differ from tennis balls in another important way: "Tennis balls are pressurized to give them extra height when they bounce, but that pressure

## A Growing Opportunity

**FROM TOUGH TUG** toys to balls that can take a beating, toys that will last more than a matter of hours are in demand. Even the slow economy hasn't hurt toy sales: Just as many dog owners are buying toys now as before the recession. And with more households owning dogs than ever, the potential continues to grow.

Consider these statistics from the "2011-2012 APPA National Pet Owners Survey":

- Of all types of dog toys, hard/solid rubber toys saw the most growth from 2008 to 2010, increasing 11 percentage points (from 28 percent to 39 percent). Balls are still the most popular type of toys purchased by dog owners (58 percent).
- The number of people buying toys for their pets has remained relatively stable at around 63 percent since 2004.
- The number of households owning dogs increased 1.5 percent from 2008 to 2010 (from 45.6 million to 46.3 million).

—Karen M. Alley

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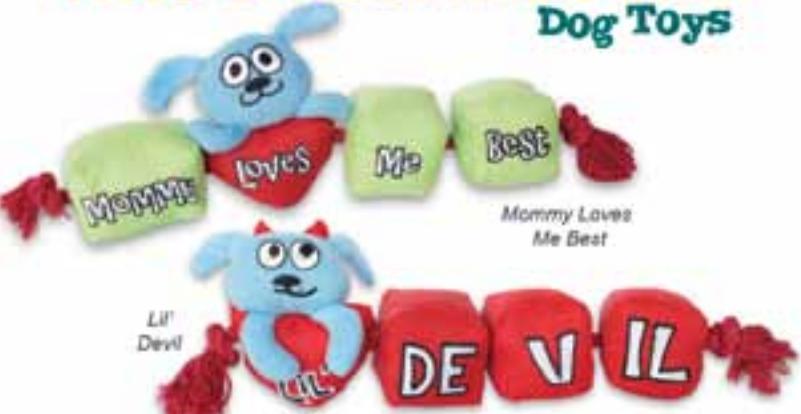
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pellet used in their manufacturing is toxic,” said Hass. “We made a ball without a pressure pellet, and while it still bounces because it is made of rubber, if a dog happens to tear it up it is completely safe.”

Tuff Balls come in three sizes—junior, regular and giant—and the two smaller sizes are available in mint and peanut butter flavors as well as plain.

Over the years the Tuff brand has

expanded to include Tuff Squeaks, made of durable ballistic fabric and reinforced stitching. Instead of the typical vinyl squeak toy, which can be easily punctured, these are harder to chew to pieces and last longer as a squeak toy.

Other old favorites are being relaunched with new characteristics and/or names. Take, for example, the Virtually Indestructible Ball, formerly known as Best Ball, from Hueter Toledo

Inc. (Bellevue, Ohio). This 20-year-old classic is made of a high-density polyethylene that’s manufactured in the United States, as is the ball itself. New tooling makes the ball even tougher. “It’s a hard plastic and the wall of the ball is also very thick, which makes it hard to puncture,” said company president Carey Stiles.

Last year the company extended the line to include five additional sizes: 3-,

## Tough and Green

**MANY MANUFACTURERS OF** tough toys make products that are nontoxic and recyclable. Some are even made in facilities that use solar and wind energy to minimize their impact on the environment. For example:

- Toys from Bionic Pet Products (Minneapolis) are made from nontoxic rubber that doesn’t contain phthalates, lead, BPA, asbestos or latex. They’re also 100 percent recyclable.
- Toys from Katie’s Bumpers (Golden, Colo.) are made out of recycled material whenever possible, and use very little packaging. Tags are printed on recycled paper with soy ink. The company also uses wind and passive solar energy.

—Karen M. Alley



In addition to making durable toys, Katie’s Bumpers uses recycled materials and environmentally friendly energy sources.



The Squirrel Dude for senior dogs is part of Premier Pet Products’ Busy Buddy line extension.



Extreme Kongs are made with a puncture-resistant rubber formula.

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Petsport USA’s Tuff Balls and Mojo toy now are available in different flavors, scents and sizes.

4.5-, 6-, 10- and 14-inch. “We added the small, 3-inch ball because people like the toy but were looking for something for their small dogs,” said Stiles.

Finally, the newly relaunched Mojo from Petsport USA is made out of thermoplastic resin instead of 100 percent rubber, which is not as pliable, said Hass. “Dogs would lose interest; it doesn’t give very much. They need something they can chew on, [that’s] more interactive.”

The Mojo comes in a variety of scents and colors.

### Tough Tugs

Many tug toys also are designed to withstand the ripping and pulling that active dogs like to engage in. These toys are best used under supervision or when dogs and owners are playing together.

Many of the toys from Katie’s Bumpers fit into the interactive tugging category, such as the colorful Sqwuggies and Double Tugs. The long-lasting toys are made of fire hose material, which won’t rip when it’s stretched or tugged on.

The company’s newest toys are shaped like the letters X, Y and Z. Owners can throw the toys, tell their pet to go look for the X, for example, and reward the dog when it brings the right one back.

Knotted ropes are another sturdy interactive toy. PetRageous Designs Ltd. (Burlington, Mass.) offers a variety of ropes with tennis balls in the middle, including KaleidoRope, DivaRope and KarmaRope. “Our rope toys are made of a cotton-polyester blend, and each is hand-knotted to help increase their durability,” said Gretchen Seitz George, president. “They are a great toy for dogs who love to chew.”



PetRageous Designs makes colorful, durable tug toys. Each rope is made out of a cotton-polyester blend that’s hand-knotted for increased durability.

Rip ‘n Tug toys by Premier Pet Products feature a resealable pouch that can hold treats.



The Rip ‘n Tug, a new line introduced by Premier Pet Products in 2011, offers a new twist on the rope tug with the addition of a resealable pouch fastened to the rope. Owners can put treats in the ball to reward the dog after it rips open the pouch.

“The inspiration behind the toy comes from a dog’s innate desire to rip things open, so this provides them some satisfaction,” Mullins said.

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**Marketing Tough Toys**

When it comes to marketing tough toys, there are two basic principles to keep in mind. First, each employee on the sales floor should know what all the toys are made of and the type of play they're designed for. The best thing you can do is give each employee samples to take home and use with their dogs, so they can fully understand the benefits of each toy, said Hass.

"Every dog is different, just like people are different, so by seeing how their own dogs react to the toys, and talking with other associates about their experiences, each employee will have a greater depth of knowledge to share with customers about why dogs like a particular toy and will be better able to make recommendations," Hass said.

Secondly, it's important that employees on the sales floor talk with customers about their dog's temperament and behavior so they can make an appropriate recommendation. It's also good to provide plenty of variety

**tip**

Looking for a humorous diversion to help your customers through a tough time with a chewing dog? Stock some copies of Howie Schneider's book, *Chewy Louie*, from Cooper Square Publishing. It's the story of a puppy that basically chews the house down, with a happy grin on his face the entire time.

for customers to choose from.

"Dog owners are becoming more knowledgeable about their dog's personality and how they like to play, and they're looking for more options," Mullins said.

Just like toys that are built to last, the tough toys category is here to stay. "As long as there are puppies this is a growing market, because puppies love

to chew, and everyone who gets a puppy needs a toy," Hass said.

Add to that the dogs that don't outgrow their tendency to chew, and you've pretty much got a permanent, ready-made market for life. Chew on that! ■

*Karen M. Alley is a writer and editor from Elkin, N.C., who has done her share of shopping for tough toys for a very chewy dog.*

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