

CommunityCatsPodcast_Ep417_Nassar_210817.mp3

Kristen Petrie [00:00:03]

You've tuned in to The Community Cats Podcast. Ready? Let's go.

Stacy LeBaron [00:00:13]

Welcome to The Community Cats Podcast. I am your host, the Stacy LeBaron. I've been involved helping homeless cats for over twenty years with the Merrimack River Feline Rescue Society. The goal of this podcast is to expose you to amazing people who are improving the lives of cats. I hope these interviews will help you learn how you can turn your passion for cats into action. Today, we're talking with Basel Nassar. Basel is a serial entrepreneur and the two-legged creator of Boss Nation Brands, a line of pet products that promotes gut health through probiotic and prebiotic nutrition. He spent years creating a popular line of human yogurt now sold all over the world. One day, after getting out of the human yogurt business, he noticed his dog Kelby would pick at his food and look at him like what's this? Being knowledgeable about yogurt, Nassar decided to create frozen yogurt for his picky pup, who also had some digestive issues. That began the Boss Dog line of products. Now, two years later, the businessman wants to help felines too, with the help of his cat, Frankie, an eleven-pound Siamese Lynx, Boss Cat is now a reality. Frankie runs the show in his family, which also includes three dogs and a rescued tortoise. Frankie is the primary taste tester for Boss Cats brand new frozen, raw cat food line, which was specifically designed to help support feline gut health. The Seattle-based businessman is a staunch supporter of animal welfare nonprofits and has sponsored adoption events all over the United States, which has helped hundreds of cats find new, loving homes. With the creation of Boss Cat, Basel hopes to learn even more and support the hard work of cat rescuers and community cats. I'd like to welcome you to the show.

Basel Nassar [00:01:53]

Thanks for having me, Stacy.

Stacy [00:01:55]

So, first and foremost, we ask all of our guests when we first kick it off is, you know, how did you become passionate about cats?

Basel [00:02:00]

Well, I tell you, I think it started with just an overall passion for pets initially. In the last five years, I've gone through somewhat of a transformation. We had very few pets in my previous life, as I like to say, and then last five, I've just become more aware of the value that they bring to the home, just a whole variety of different things. So, I would say to update the profile that you gave me previously. We've gone from three to four dogs and now Frankie has a partner in the house, Sissone, that's another Siamese Lynx community cat. She was feral and so, she's taking some time, but my wife was insistent that we give it a try. And to be honest, my wife is really driven a lot of the community cat involvement. She literally had me pull over on the side of the road and, you know, that's I think, kind of generated a lot of that awareness for me. So I think a combination of things, Stacy, but just my overall love for pets.

Stacy [00:02:57]

You sort of referenced a little bit about a previous life before you had pets. As an entrepreneur, were you doing something different before you started the Boss Dog and Boss Cat brands, Boss Nation?

Basel [00:03:08]

Yeah, you know, I think you sized it up correctly. I'm a serial entrepreneur, but most of my focus, the last twenty-plus years has been in digestive health. And so I, you know, took just a massive amount of knowledge specific to the human digestive system and thought, what can we do to help translate into pets? You know, initially it was dogs and then now we're making a swift move into the cat segment. So, I think that kind of sums up my background and why the overall interest in bringing quality and wholesome products with a digestive health angle.

Stacy [00:03:39]

So we're going to talk a little bit about that. Tell us specifically about the product and you know, why is it important for us to really worry about our digestive health for our cats?

Basel [00:03:49]

I think it's important to point out, Boss Nation has only been around for just two years. So we started shipping our first product in January of nineteen. We are now in nine product segments in both dog and cat. Cat is the newest evolution to the brand

but what we like to focus on specifically is product that has value added components. So I often like to use this analogy. If you sit ten cat advocates around the table and you add the variable raw advocates, all ten of them are going to have a differing opinion, even though slight, as to how they should feed. You should feed our cats and so on and so forth. So what we've done is we've taken a lot, lot of that common knowledge. And there was a lot of common information that we got in terms of ingredients, the amount of the ingredients, where the calcium was being derived from, the type of taurine, where the taurine was being sourced from. And we culminated that into what's launching in about four weeks. And that's our new Boss Cat raw frozen entrée. But prior to that, we had already introduced a couple of concepts that were actually, are good for dog or cat. Our greek-style frozen yogurt entry, which was January of two thousand nineteen. That seemed like the obvious segment entry for me at the time because I had twenty years of Greek yogurt experience so I had a lot to support it but that item was actually designed for both dog and cat. What's unique about it is, we incubate the product for about twenty-four hours to let the probiotics develop. And during that time we also have the ability to extract the lactose. So it's very gut friendly and it's a great spring/summertime treat. Shortly after that in March of nineteen, we introduced raw goat milk, which has a tremendous number of benefits, whether it's absorption or helping to promote overall digestion. We added some additional value to a pure commodity and introduced DHA for omega-3 and taurine, which, as you know, cats require about point two percent of taurine in their diet regularly to be healthy. So that currently sizes up the overall cat, it's our raw frozen entry, the Greek style frozen yogurt, the raw goat milk with added taurine. And then we're playing around with some real fun concepts that consumers like, treat trays where we have little fish and BPA silicone trays that people can make treats using recipes on our website for their cats. And so we're, we're moving into different segments that we think all add value to the cat's well-being.

Stacy [00:06:11]

So, the products that you have, are they secondary to primary food or is this a primary food source for folks to use?

Basel [00:06:18]

So the first two items that we launched were treats. So initially the Greek Froyo was considered a treat with supplemental value with the probiotic. The raw goat milk is pure supplement. So we would recommend you introduce that to any of your regular complete meal systems, to get the added DHA and taurine benefit, but our frozen raw meal line will be complete and balanced. And that comes out in about four weeks. That's AAFCO approved all the way around. Very wholesome ingredients, extremely short list. So you're dealing mainly just with protein, vegetables and fruits, taurine, DHA, calcium from eggshell, which we found to be critical, and then a few other key components that make it proprietary to Boss Cat.

Stacy [00:07:00]

All of your products have to be refrigerated or is there anything that's shelf-stable?

Basel [00:07:05]

Currently all the Boss Cat consumable products are frozen. So the Greek Froyo, you would serve, store and serve frozen. The raw goat milk, you would thaw it and then utilize it over the course of a few days as it's thawed. And then the raw frozen entree, you would, you would thaw that out and keep it thawed in the refrigerator and just serve it accordingly. So, we have two different sizes. A eight-ounce raw entree for a single cat household and a sixteen ounce, for a two or more cat household.

Stacy [00:07:31]

So if you wanted to adapt your cat to the products that you offer or else, even like, if you're feeding a colony of cats that, you know, who knows what they're eating at other places, how would you recommend, you know, transitioning them to this food or, you know, are we okay offering this food to our community cats?

Basel [00:07:51]

Yeah. I'll tell you with respect to transitioning when it comes to raw, we always start with slow transition. So we'll do a little bit of whatever they're accustomed to mixed in with the raw typically in quarter, twenty-five percent of whatever the recommended serving is for the size of the cat, and then slowly increase that over time. You'll see, very quickly, whether or not your cat's going to be able to, will reject it or not. I would say by and large, there's usually a process where there's the finickiness that goes on, whether or not they'll, we haven't had any cats, by the way, turn away straight protein in both our chicken and turkey format, but usually within about four days, I'm

up to about 100 percent feed. All of the animals in our house now, on one hundred percent raw diet. And I'm comparing that to the way we're on a traditional kibble, standard diet about two years ago. And then as we continue to evolve the brand, we've moved to one hundred percent raw and the differences are tremendous. Just an overall coat, the mouth, the amount of waste that they produce in the yard. It's pretty significant and we're firm believers in raw because of that.

Stacy [00:08:52]

Yeah. I mean, I think what goes in the mouths of our pets, as well, as what goes in the mouths of ourselves too. I mean, I don't know if you are a low-carb guy, but, you know, reducing grains in a human's diet is probably not a bad idea either. So, you know, I can imagine you'll see the same results with regards to your pets too. And there's so many grains involved in the commercially processed foods that really impacts, you know, their digestion and that kind of thing.

– *Start mid-roll advertising*–

Stacy [00:09:19]

Give your feline friend protein-packed meals they'll crave with Smalls. Smalls is fresh, human-grade food for cats, delivered right to your doorstep so you too can embrace your inner house cat. All cats are obligate carnivores. They need fresh, protein-packed meals. Conventional cat food is made with profits in mind, using low quality, cheap meat byproducts, grains, and starches coated in artificial flavors. Smalls, on the other paw, is made with cats in mind. Smalls develops complete and balanced recipes for all life stages with leading cat nutritionists. Starting with human grade ingredients like you or I would find at the market, Smalls recipes are gently cooked to lock in protein, vitamins, minerals and moisture. No room for fillers. No need for flavoring. Better quality ingredients mean a better healthier life for your cat. Since switching to Smalls, cats have experienced improved digestion and a less smelly litter box, softer and shinier coats plus better breath. Try Smalls today for your cats in your household. Hooch loved it.

Kristen [00:10:20]

Use offer code COMMUNITYCATS at checkout for a total of thirty percent off your first order at Smalls.com.

Stacy [00:10:26]

Are you ready to be part of the solution for feral and stray cats in your neighborhood? If so, then make sure to sign up for our next Neighborhood Cats TNR Certification Workshop. A new workshop is held online each month, generally on the first Saturday of the month, but please check our website for exact dates. For just ten dollars, expert instructors will teach you best practices for trap-neuter and return, TNR. Learn what TNR is and why it works. We'll cover getting along with neighbors, preparations for trapping, trapping itself, including entire colonies at once, feeding, providing winter shelter and more. Take advantage of the interactive format, extensive handouts, and video footage of actual projects. Attendees will receive a certificate of attendance and gain access to an ongoing Facebook group, for networking with other TNR activists. The two-and-a-half-hour workshop is led by Susan Richmond, the executive director of Neighborhood Cats, and Brian Kortis, Neighborhood Cats National Programs Director. To find out the date of the next workshop and sign up, just visit communitycatspodcast.com.

Stacy [00:11:29]

As we emerge from the global pandemic of COVID, fostering is emerging as the new normal in the animal welfare industry, but shelter management software doesn't provide the tools or the workflows for communicating with fosters at scale. So many organizations struggle to maintain hundreds of animals in foster homes. If only there was a system that was custom built specifically to solve this problem. Introducing Fosterspace, powered by our friends at Doobert. Fosterspace was custom built to allow you to manage hundreds of foster relationships and to communicate with them via text, email, and even Facebook Messenger. Your fosters have a portal where they can upload videos and photos and updates on their animals and organizations can schedule fosters for meet-and-greets, adoption days, or anything else they need. There's so much more to check out. Sign up for free at www.doobert.com and go to the Fosterspace tab to get started.

-End mid-roll advertising-

Stacy [00:12:23]

Is there anything else you want to share just from a standpoint with regards to food, transitioning food, importance of food? How about or feeding, if you did have a colony of cats outside, you know, is it okay to put some of this outside just for them to nibble at it? That kind of thing.

Basel [00:12:50]

Yeah, since this is a complete meal, with the Froyo or the raw goat milk, I would introduce that at any point in time. The Froyo is a great treat comes with a convenient cap so if the cats can't finish it, you can pop it back in the freezer. I can't think of a reason why you won't want to start introducing raw goat milk with added benefits to their everyday meal now anyway. So if you were looking at transition steps, I'd probably start that way and then start introducing the frozen raw meal system. So now they're being, you know, you've got a full circle of all the products. One thing to point out, when it comes to probiotics specific to Boss Cat or Boss Dog, is not all concepts are alike. From the human world, there are certain standards that you have to meet with respect to probiotic content at the end of shelf life. We haven't seen a lot of those established standards here in pet. And so what we're trying to do is front-load a lot of our products so that they have sufficient survivability to last the shelf life, so you are getting that benefit. And one of the best stories that I have to share is with a customer in the Midwest. And I apologize for this not being a cat story but a dog story. Cat stories will develop very quickly over the next few weeks. She has a dog that was adamant that they had a freeze-dried complete balanced meal system because of the digestive benefits and didn't think her animal would make it through the weekend because the store was out. So, we took liberty to overnight product directly to that customer's house because of that. So we are seeing people that are saying, what a difference in, in the survivability probiotics versus just making a probiotic claim. Because quite frankly, anybody can introduce one sachet to their product and say it has probiotic content but with no real, empirical benefit.

Stacy [00:14:26]

And my understanding too is, at least on the human probiotics, you know, it says it has so many live, you know, whatever at the bottom. But that number is not always constant, it changes. So it can start out very high but then over a period of time it gets a lot lower.

Basel [00:14:44]

I think you summed it up perfectly. To give you an example, our Greek-style Froyo for Pets has close to nine billion colonies per CFU at the beginning of shelf life. We only make a claim to three billion. That's because we can support that over the course, of the life of the product because we know the consumer is likely not going to purchase it on day one. So what you do is you establish a standard and then you fall typically within about sixty to seventy percent of that standard so there's no room for deviation in your claim, is typically how we do it. So our counts are actually much higher than what we are claiming during the first 12 months of shelf life.

Stacy [00:15:22]

Yeah, that make's sense. Let's talk a little bit about your charity work. You have a program called Boss Cares. What's that about?

Basel [00:15:28]

You know, I'll tell you the Boss Cares charity platform came on about three months after I founded Boss Nation in late two thousand eighteen. Originally, I had started off with let's focus on two or three groups that we can work with very closely and make a difference. Initially was, you know, TNR and trying to help cats return back to society. We strongly believe in that and how that helps control population. And in addition, I wanted to create something that was a little unique and this came from my social media experience of which I had a zero digital footprint up until about three years ago. And I said, look at all these different animals that are popping up that need help, you know, and so I started saying asking my marketing team, what can we do to create an open source charity? And so, what they do is they challenge our street reps and internally, every thirty days, to come out and make some impact at a charity, whether it's dog cat or animal, and whether its product or monetary. We try to make an impact, make a big deal. Even if it means partnering with, here's the most recent one we did in Canada, partnering with a group that actually went in to help train animals so that they're more adaptable when they're adopted. So, a lot of things that we're doing through this open-source methodology that seems to be working well. And so, you know, our head of marketing will get probably twenty calls a month. now from people saying, hey, we noticed you were helping PACC last month and Oregon Humane Society prior to that. Can you do anything for us? And so we like the way it's evolving and snowballing on its own.

Stacy [00:17:00]

Yeah, that's exciting. It's really very cool that you're able to help and is that coming from the profits, from the organization, or, you know, is it the more we buy, I guess I would say, the more it helps the charity?

Basel [00:17:13]

What is that word profit?

Stacy [00:17:13]

Profit for good I guess we say right?

Basel [00:17:15]

I tell you what, when I started this company, I didn't want to curtail the growth by not doing it correctly, which meant creating great products, finding the distribution channels and working with great retailers, but it also means closing the message which was adapting the Boss Care platform. So I'm spending money regularly to help support these things, you know, the company is continuing to grow. It wasn't my objective on day one, Stacy, to be profitable. It was my objective to make an impact on the market and add value in a very stale me-too pet industry and if you can't see the premiumization of the specialty channel in pet is what I call it, and what millennials are looking for, for their pets, then you're going to miss it completely. So, you know, we like to focus on that particular mix of products.

Stacy [00:18:03]

Well and as an entrepreneur, you have to invest to grow and you know as an investor, an entrepreneur and an investor in a company, you know, companies take off and companies don't and you know what you need to do in order to make them take off. So, you know, you've got that experience in your background so, you know what it needs to take in order to get there. So as a business owner and with a lot of successful business experience in your background, those of us, we have a lot of nonprofit folks that listen to us, but I still think of them as business owners too. They're still running a business. They still have to do all the things that they need to do. They report to a board which is very challenging in many cases. Do you have any advice for folks that are managing businesses as well as, many times, they're also the folks that are out there doing the trapping for the TNR and they're doing the

doing as well as managing the business. And you know, since you've worn a lot of different hats, do you have any advice for our listeners?

Basel [00:18:58]

Persistence. You know, I think over the last thirty years, I've learned a lot about sticking to your execution plan and then executing. Unfortunately, it's a pitfall that a lot of entrepreneurs will fall into very early on as bills mount and costs, you know, tend to exceed revenue. Surround yourself with a tremendous team. I've had the same group of people with me for about fifteen years and I think it's indicative of the way we treat our group and vice versa and so that's critical. And, you know, to get down to the pragmatics of what really happens, it's getting through the financial gaps, you know, it's finding a way to cover those gaps and grow your business. And a lot of times I know that there are ways to do that and I think a lot of times people quit too soon. And then the other one, I think the last one would be, you know, fail fast to win big. Sometimes you're wrong and you need to recognize that, get out and do something else. And so, there's a fine line between quitting too early and not recognizing a dead vehicle or dead product.

Stacy [00:20:05]

Right? Right. Understanding when to get out and find that exit plan pretty quickly.

Basel [00:20:07]

Or accelerate when you have something good.

Stacy [00:20:08]

Right, right. Exactly. And I mean, we've all had to be game changers with regards to COVID. Business has changed dramatically. Opportunities have opened up as well as many doors have closed, unfortunately, but I'm going to segue back to your team because this is a big question I get a lot from folks, which is, how do you find good team members? I mean, how do you find these people and then how do you hold on to them? And I mean, it may be holding on to them, we treat them with respect, we treat them with care, with clarity maybe, those kinds of things. But the finding seems to be an incredible challenge. Do you have any tips on that?

Basel [00:20:45]

For me, it's less about finding and more about cultivating the right person. I have a couple of people that were managing millions of dollars in the office in our last concern, that had no college degree. Twenty-year house persons that hadn't worked and, but had the right idea, the right attitude and came in and, you know, we took what we call our entrepreneurial spirit which isn't, you know, nine to five corporate. It's very flexible. We like to pivot and we just developed people. And so I think for me, it's just, it's finding the right person that supports your cadence. I mean, I move extremely fast. So to have any individual that can't keep up with that tempo typically won't work. So the first thing is, can you multitask, can you rationalize things? And if you can, you know, you develop people like that, but we haven't had a lot of trouble finding persons. You know, there are utility players and then there are the people that move the needle and finding the people that move the needle is obviously a lot harder than finding the former.

Stacy [00:21:47]

That's great. Excellent. If folks are interested in finding out more about the Boss Nation Brands and Boss Care, how would they do that?

Basel [00:21:55]

We actually have a universal website now. It's bossnationbrands.com or go to bossdogbrand.com or bosscatbrand.com., it'll take you to the site. You will see the website develop dramatically in the next two weeks as we roll out our entree for cats. And so, I would ask you to watch for that evolution as that comes out. We don't like to put things out too prematurely but I will say you are getting the first teaser for the Boss Cat entree that anyone has heard outside of our distributor network. So we're excited to share that with you today.

Stacy [00:22:26]

That's great. Is there anything else you'd like to share with our listeners today?

Basel [00:22:30]

Just, you know, buy the right foods for your cat and your dogs, you know. I think it's imperative that you read the label. Look at what's in there. Look at what claims are being made. And you know, I think every product that's out there should have a lab analysis to support content because just, you know, I'm not saying things happen,

that shouldn't happen. It's always nice to have full transparency and know what your animals are eating. I expect the same thing when I put food in my mouth. So other than that, continue to support the brand and we appreciate the time with you today.

Stacy [00:23:02]

That's great. I want to thank you so much for being a guest on my show, and I hope we'll have you on again in the future.

Basel [00:23:08]

Thanks, Stacy.

Stacy [00:23:11]

That's it for this week. Please head over to Apple podcasts and leave a review. We love to hear what you think, and a five-star review really helps others find the show. You can also join the conversation with listeners, cat caretakers, and me on Facebook and Instagram. And don't forget to hit follow or subscribe on Spotify, Apple podcast, Google podcast, YouTube, Stitcher or wherever you listen to podcasts, so you don't miss a single show. Thanks for listening and thank you for everything that you do to help create a safe and healthy world for cats.

Kristen [00:23:41]

The Community Cats Podcast would like to shout out a few of our online event sponsors. Did you attend the United Spay Alliance Conference in March? The incredible content and educational opportunity were brought to you in part by Marion's Dream and Humane Network. If you or your organization would like to sponsor content that you care about and that saves feline lives, go to communitycatspodcast.com/sponsor and learn more about how you can turn your passion for cats into action.