

A TOUR OF YOUR FEED STORE: More Things That Your Feed Store Wants You to Know

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I recently received an electric toothbrush as a gift. All right...I can see some of you rolling your eyes, thinking “So what? What does that have to do with feeding horses?” Hang with me...we’re getting there. I know how to brush my teeth; I’ve been doing it for over five decades. And I’ve brushed my kids’ teeth and taught them how to do it themselves. But I know how to do it with a regular old toothbrush, not an electric toothbrush. I had to learn something new about what I thought I knew.

We can apply this to your feed store. You may think you know all that it offers, but I’ll bet you don’t. Today we’re going to take a tour and show you some things that may surprise you.

First, the most valuable resource in the feed store is someone who has horses, knows horse nutrition, and can answer your questions correctly. Don’t be put off if they ask you for a lot of info up front. They are just trying to get a sense of where you and your horse are currently and how they can help. And don’t be insulted if they ask if you have had your horse’s teeth checked regularly, and if you have dewormed recently. That’s all part of the overall picture they are trying to build. The more info you give, the more help you will receive. Be honest about your budget: if you want your horse to look like a million bucks but can’t afford the high-end feeds, make that clear up front.

Obviously, your feed store has feed; probably more of it than you realize. Many stores carry more than one brand. Just because your store is named ABC Feed Store doesn’t necessarily mean that they carry only ABC’s products. They likely have feed by XYZ and others too. If you don’t know, ask. Don’t rely just on the price board behind the counter. Those boards usually aren’t big enough to list all the products. If your senior horse doesn’t like ABC’s senior feed, ask about other options.

It’s your responsibility though to remember which feed your horse eats. If you ask for a bag of senior feed and you don’t remember which one it is, be prepared for questions. I’m using senior feed as an example because there are so many different ones: there are low calorie, high calorie, low NSC (non-structural carbs), complete feeds, and non-complete feeds. With that much variation, the person at the counter wants to make sure that they send you home with the correct feed. And please don’t expect the clerk to remember which feed you got last time. Your horse, your responsibility.

Feed bags have manufacture dates on them. No, that isn’t an expiration date. And you won’t find a “best by” date on bags either. The general rule is that textured feed is good for three months before it starts to lose nutritional value, and pelleted feed is good for six months. Of course, storage can be impacted by temperature and humidity, so here in the Northeast we have a longer window during the winter months. If you find that you’ve purchased a bag of old feed, bring the bag back to the store. They will want to see the bag with the date.

Be aware: feed companies change their bag designs from time to time. That yellow bag with the jumper on it? Now it’s green, and a Palomino graces the front. This is another good reason you should know the name of your feed. If you can’t remember, take a picture of it with your smartphone, or better yet, ask for one of the store’s business cards and write it on the back. Now when you send someone else to pick up your feed, they will know what to ask for and where to get it.

Some things such as oats, hay replacement pellets, forage pellets, and cubes may come in bags that seem to change weekly. This is because feed stores may get them from multiple sources. If ABC feed company can't ship them but XYZ company can get them to the store in a couple of days, then XYZ timothy pellets are what you'll get. Don't let it concern you too much though- any reputable feed mill is going to test all the ingredients that come in and will reject ingredients that are sub-standard. Will the nutritional value vary? Yes, but that is due more to the nature of the ingredients. While mixed feeds, such as super high-calorie complete senior feed, are manufactured to a specification, grains and forages aren't. That is why you'll find so little nutritional info on the bag tag, incidentally. The manufacturer is going to list the minimum nutritional values.

Remember, feed stores carry the feeds that people want. If they don't have a feed that you want but they carry other items in that company's line, it may be because no one else has asked for it. They will probably consider getting it for you if you ask. Be prepared though to give them solid information on how much you will need. No one- you, your horse, or the feed store- wants to have several bags sitting in the warehouse for months. If you decide that you are not going to use the feed anymore, give them a heads-up so that they don't keep ordering it for you.

If you are interested in feed from a company that your store doesn't carry, that is a different story. It costs a lot of money to ship feed, and feed companies want to sell feed to stores by the ton, not just a few bags at a time. If you want your store to carry Perfect Pony Pellets because you saw an ad in a magazine, your store may not be on board with that because there aren't enough people asking for that product.

Ask about loyalty programs. Many of the large feed companies offer coupons for free feed, merchandise, or dollars off your feed purchases. I have one customer who regularly turns in coupons worth \$50. Yes, that's fifty dollars. Some companies allow the purchase of other animal feeds to count also. There are also loyalty programs for some horse care items. Yes, you will likely need to give your email address, but those emails contain helpful information and coupons too. (You can always unsubscribe if you don't want to receive a \$5 coupon!)

You can also ask if the feed store has measuring containers that correspond with your feed. Some feed companies give out cups or scoops that accurately show how much you are feeding...in pounds. Remember though that the scoops are specific to that company. A scoop that shows you are feeding one pound of ABC's Pony Pellets won't work for XYZ's senior feed. I know I've related this story before, but I'm going to tell you again. I had a customer assure me that they were giving a pound of feed because they were using a one-pound scoop intended for pool chemicals. Turns out that it held two pounds of horse feed!

That's another thing that your store can do for you...weigh your feed. Most stores have an electronic scale that is checked yearly by the State. You can bag up some of your feed and bring it in. You can also bring in whatever container you use to measure and tare the scale so that you are getting an accurate reading.

Your feed store likely has resources to have your hay analyzed. Get that done. Hay is the largest part of your horse's diet in the winter, and knowing its nutritional value can help you make better feeding decisions (and possibly save you money.) Many places will offer it for free and can help you interpret the results too. When I say free, I mean that they won't charge you a lab fee. Your part in this is that they will want to make suggestions to help you with your feeding choices. Give them a few minutes of your time. You may learn something new.

If you buy your hay from the feed store, ask if they have had it analyzed. Understand though that they may be getting hay from many different sources: locally, throughout New England or even into New York, and possibly from Canada too. If their turnover is fast, they may not test it.

Perhaps your horse can't eat hay, or hay supply is scarce (again.) Ask your feed store for advice on forage alternatives. They can help you to determine an appropriate product. Remember, the largest part of your horse's diet should be forage, and if grass is unavailable or not suitable, then you need to find a quality replacement.

Let's take a tour down the horse care aisle now. There are probably dozens of supplements. Again, as with feed, stores carry what people ask for. If you don't see "Superhorse Superior Joint Supplement" and you must have it, ask. Stores work with distributors that will allow them to order one or two items. As with feed, let your store know if you decide that you aren't going to continue using it, so that they don't have an unwanted item sitting on the shelf.

Remember too that if you are feeding the correct amount of concentrated feed or a ration balancer, you may not need all those expensive vitamin and mineral supplements. This is a good conversation to have with both your veterinarian and your feed store.

This looks like a good spot for me to share my passion for shopping small, local businesses. Yes, you may find that items are cheaper online, and you may score free shipping. But how does that help your local economy? Check the prices at your feed store first and you may be pleasantly surprised. When you shop locally, you are helping to keep people in your community employed. You are helping to keep roughly 60 cents of every dollar in your neighborhood. Local businesses advertise in show booklets and donate prizes to horse shows and allow 4H groups to set up bake sales and help support youth teams. Try getting that out of the online businesses! Small local businesses also tend to have fresher feed than warehouse stores, and more knowledgeable staff.

As we continue down the aisle, I'll bet that you see a large selection of horse treats. We talked about treats in a recent article, and you'll hopefully remember that not all treats are the same. There are healthy treats, low sugar treats, treats that are all sugar, ones that contain probiotics and joint supplements...the list is endless. You should not rely on treats to provide your horse's daily nutritional requirements. If your horse has dietary concerns, you should choose your treats accordingly. As with feed, it's a good idea to read the bag, look at the ingredients and nutritional analysis, and check out the serving size. Your feed store staff can help you with selections.

Now let's consider salt. You will likely see several choices. There are white and red salt bricks and blocks. Bricks typically weigh four pounds and blocks weigh 50 pounds. There may be Himalayan salt blocks or chunks in different sizes and colors. There may be large blocks that contain both vitamins and minerals and are labeled specifically for horses. You may also see bags of loose salt and minerals. Why so many choices? It's because not all are the same. The white bricks or blocks are pure salt. The red ones, also known as trace mineral salt blocks or bricks, are mostly salt (96%-98%, depending on the manufacturer) and contain very small amounts of other minerals. Both of these are likely derived from seawater, which is evaporated and then pressed into the familiar brick or block shape. True Himalayan salt comes from salt mines in Pakistan. That is not the only source though, as we have mines in this country that yield this rock-shaped salt also. It may be pink, red, or black depending on the other minerals that are bound within it.

Most people don't realize this: the red salt bricks and blocks are actually intended for cattle. Will they harm your horse? No, as long as they are just salt and minerals. If they are labeled as a cattle block, stay away from them and find something else. No mineral block can supply all the minerals that your horse needs, so please don't rely on it to do so. Make sure your horse's feed is balanced so that he is getting proper nutrition through his forage and feeds.

Which one you choose will depend in part on your horse's ability to access the salt. Do you want to leave it in his stall? You can mount a brick in a holder on the wall, but make sure that it is comfortable for him to reach it without causing neck strain. A large salt block or a mineral block can be left on the floor. Be aware though that both will crumble over time, as pressed salt doesn't have the same strong bonds that mined salt does. When a salt brick breaks up, I like to put the smaller chunks in the feed buckets to slow down the fast eaters in the barn.

Himalayan and other mined rock salts are much stronger and last longer. Of course, they are more expensive. They can even be put outside, as they don't dissolve as fast in wet weather. Many come with ropes threaded through them that you can tie to stall bars. Again, make sure that your horse doesn't have to be a contortionist to lick it. If you have mounted any kind of salt on his stall wall, check it frequently to make sure that he is licking it. If you see no signs, then it's likely that he can't reach it comfortably. You may wish to consider a different height or location, or you may wish to put a block in his stall instead.

So which one is better? There don't seem to be any studies that compare health benefits of pressed salt with mined salt. All horses need salt, and all are likely to take it free choice, as long as they can comfortably lick it. Why not let your horse choose? Offer him a white salt brick and a Himalayan brick and see which he prefers. Some horses may prefer loose minerals in a special salt feeder. The better one is the one that he will actually use.

So far, we've covered things that horses eat, but we could go on and on talking about dewormers, fly sprays, buckets, fencing...you get the idea. If you have questions or want to explore options, ask your feed store. If you think that your horse is no longer doing well on his feed and you wonder if there is a better choice, ask your feed store. If you are wondering about supplements, ask your feed store. They have a wealth of information. If they don't have the answers at hand, they have access to the feed companies and can get a solid response for you. Make use of this great resource and remember to shop at local small businesses!