

# Engaging a New Generation of Pet Parents

*Understanding the  
shifting consumer  
preferences shaping  
the pet category*

A consumer insights report by

**Highlight**<sup>🐾</sup>

# Pet ownership has changed, especially in recent years

The perfect storm of conditions has led to the explosive growth of the pet and pet care categories in recent years.

On the one hand, consumers and the world they occupy have changed. Pet ownership has not just been normalized; attitudes on pet ownership have evolved to include a responsibility for a pet's physical and emotional well-being. Consumers want—indeed are even expected to—spend the money necessary to give their pets both healthy and fulfilling lives.

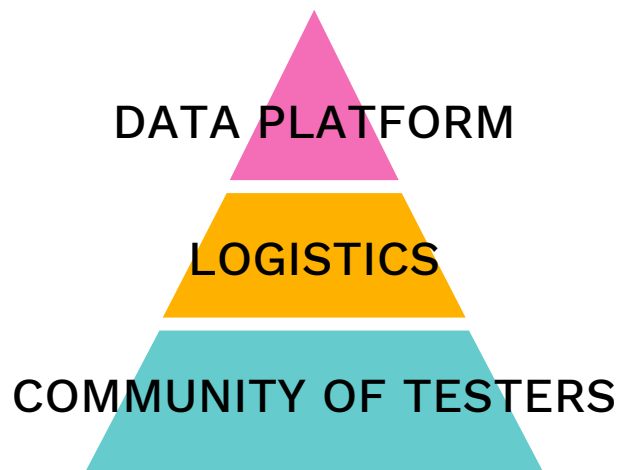
A growing number of CPG brands perceived this cultural shift early on, and acted quickly to meet consumer needs.

**Highlight's product testing solution integrates:**

## About the study

Highlight is a three-part physical product testing solution: an owned community of nationwide testers, a logistics and shipping solution, and a [technology platform](#) that delivers consumer and sensory data in real time.

For this trend report, Highlight polled our proprietary audience in October 2024 with a 14-question survey for dog and/or cat owners to gather both quantitative and qualitative data. In total, 1,694 respondents from across the country weighed in with their pet purchase habits and sentiments on their pets.



# Can other CPG categories learn from pet's growth?

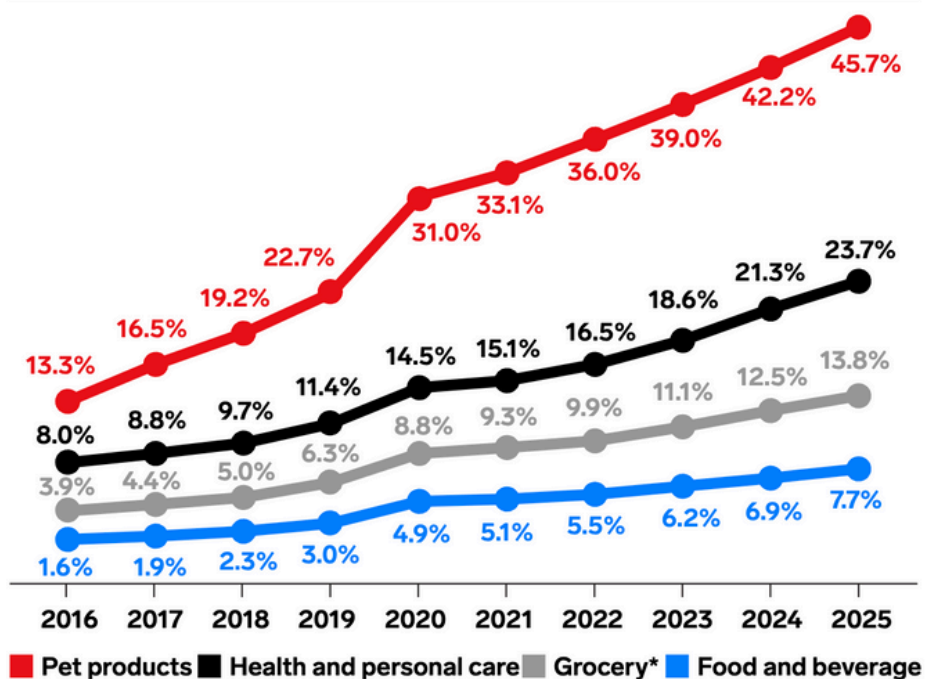
Notably, Mars was among the first major CPG manufacturers to transform its pet food business into “pet care.” McKinsey calls this expansion into new business building a “second leg,” and names it as one of the six key steps CPG industry players must take if they are to resuscitate top-line growth. Most recently, General Mills followed suit with their

acquisition of Whitebridge Pet Brands in November 2024, their fifth acquisition in the pet space since 2018.

From enterprise to emerging brands, pet category players have also made smart investments in omnichannel, winning spots on brick & mortar grocery shelves and expanding through digital channels in online marketplaces like Amazon or pet-dedicated ecommerce sites like Chewy, efforts in which food & beverage and grocery still lag behind (eMarketer).

**Retail Ecommerce Sales Penetration of Grocery Products, by Category, 2016-2025**

% of total retail sales in each group



Note: includes products or services ordered using the internet, regardless of the method of payment or fulfillment; excludes travel and event tickets, payments such as bill pay, taxes, or money transfers, restaurant sales, food services and drinking place sales, gambling and other vice goods sales; \*Aug 2022 forecast  
Source: eMarketer, June 2022

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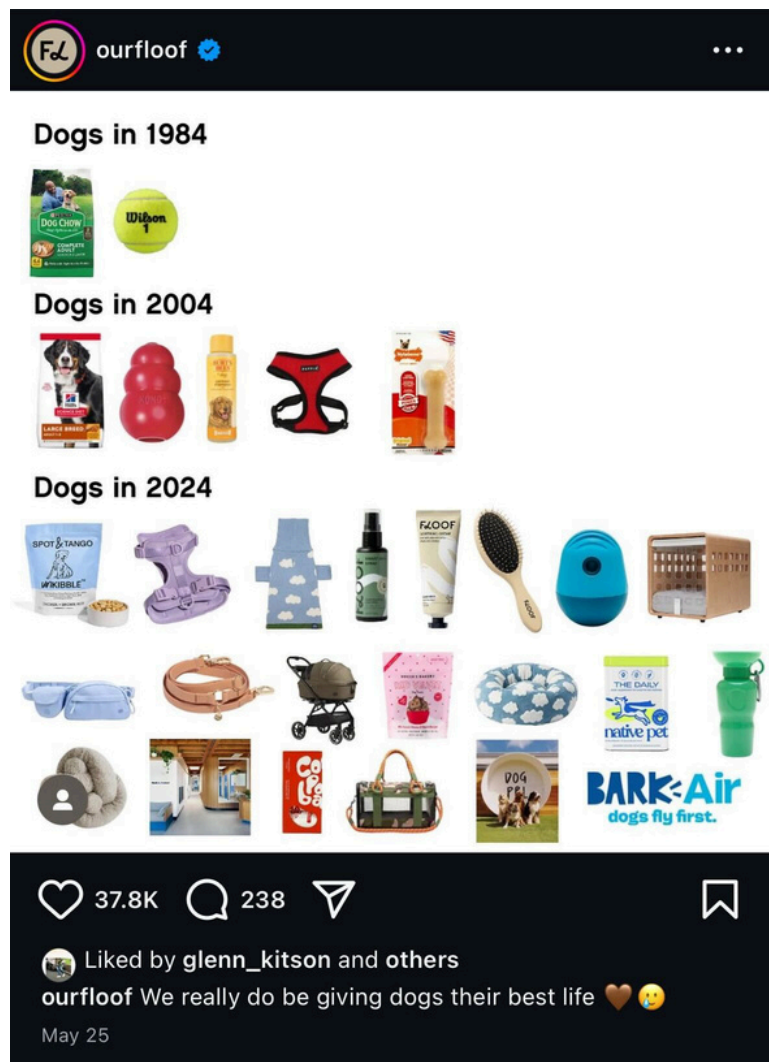
eMarketer | InsiderIntelligence.com

# Consumer-led product innovation is the unlock

While category expansion and the right omnichannel strategy have no doubt contributed to the pet category’s success story, it all comes back to the product. As pet owners evolve, so do their needs, and the most successful brands have stepped in to innovate products that meet those needs.

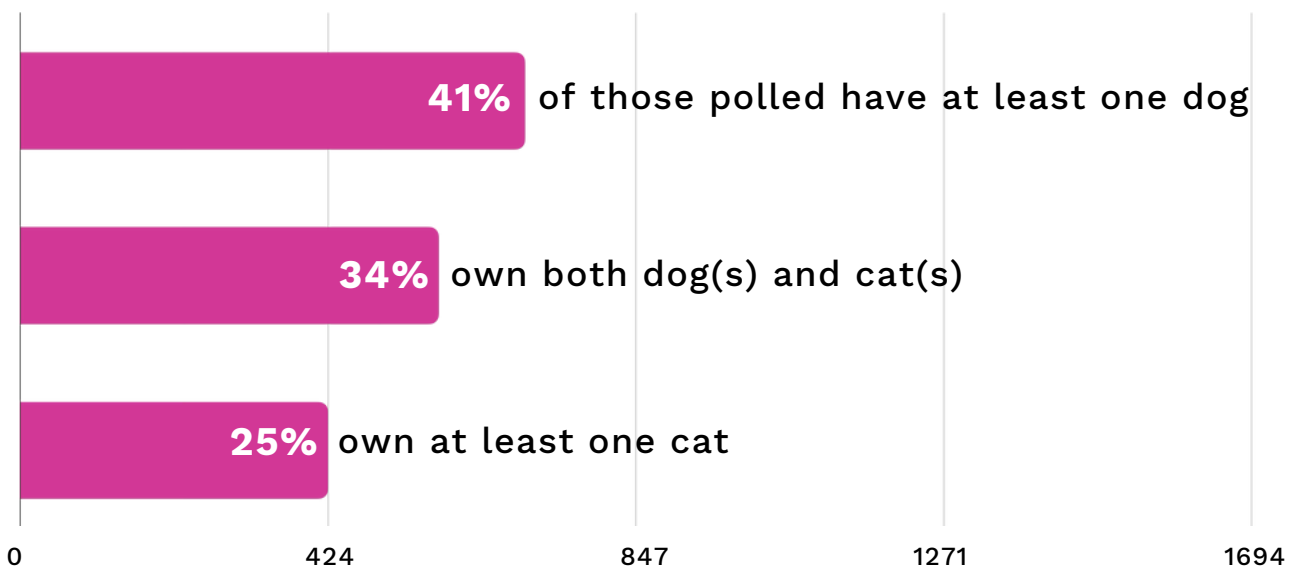
We share this [Instagram post](#) from emerging pet care brand, [Floop](#) (bottom left), not just to entertain. This visualization of the impact of product innovation on the pet category’s growth is not only a testament to how far the category has come, but it’s also indicative of the growth potential for other CPG categories with the right investments in product research and development.

The path to category expansion and top-line growth is rarely clear. That’s why companies need insights derived from consumer testing to act as their North Star for building products people (and their pets) will love.

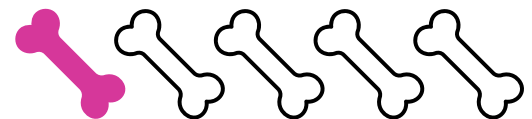


# A look at the pet owners we polled

Highlight surveyed our nationwide proprietary panel of pet owners to understand their sentiment, budget for spending on their pets, and the purchase drivers that motivate them. We filtered our audience to those who own cat(s) and/or dog(s).

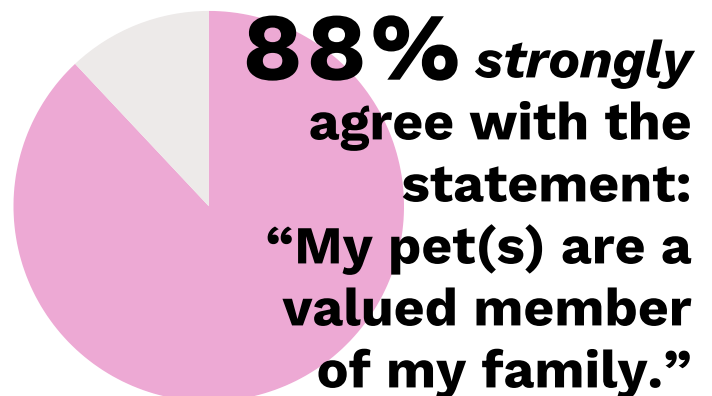


**1 in 5 of those surveyed have become pet owners since 2020**



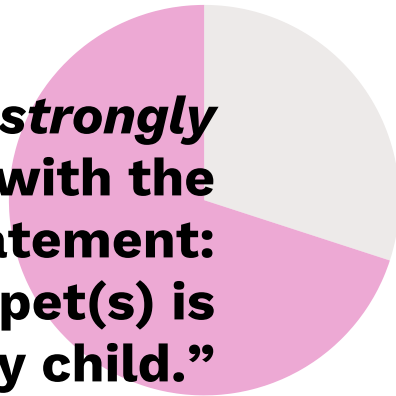
With very little variance across ages, the sentiment was clear: People really love their pets.

Even if Millennials and Gen Z led the way in “pet obsession,” they have normalized these attitudes towards our pets.



# For pet care consumers, pets are part of the family

**70% strongly agree with the statement: “My pet(s) is like my child.”**



Even in response to more strongly worded sentiments such as “My pet(s) is like my child,” 70% of respondents strongly agreed and another 20% agreed, while only 5% were on the fence, and another 5% either disagreed or strongly disagreed.

At the end of the survey, respondents were given the option to answer two open-ended questions. The first asked, “What role does your pet(s) play in your life?” A whopping 97% of respondents felt motivated to answer, with an average response length of 82 characters. Within these in-depth responses, 30% contained the word “family,” and 23% contained the word “love.”

*“My pets are a great comfort to me, and I pride myself on being a good pet parent.”*

- 30M, Ohio

*“My pets play a huge role in my life. They are my family, friends and companion all in one. Life wouldn't be the same without them.”*

- 44M, Pennsylvania

With answers like this, it's no wonder that pet owners are looking for products that enable them not only to keep their pets healthy, but happy as well.



# Pet owners of all ages & types want to splurge on their pets

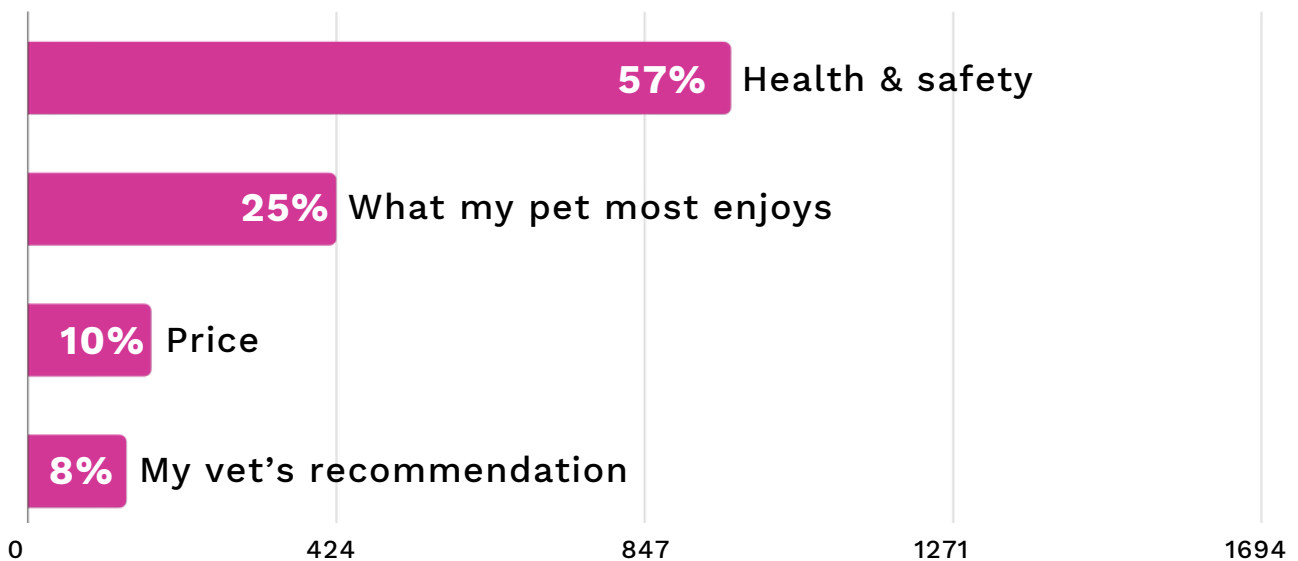
Even as headlines attribute major societal shifts to Millennials and Gen Z, our data demonstrated a relatively consistent desire across generations to spend on one's dogs and cats. We asked respondents, "How often do you purchase 'just for fun' products for your pet like a 'puppuccino' or new toy?" then compared answers by 1) generation and 2) pet type.

	<b>Overall</b>	<b>Gen Z + Millennials</b>	<b>Gen X + Boomers</b>	<b>Cat owners</b>	<b>Dog owners</b>
<b>Daily</b>	4%	6%	2%	4%	3%
<b>Weekly</b>	30%	30%	30%	24%	28%
<b>Monthly</b>	53%	50%	56%	52%	58%
<b>Annually</b>	13%	13%	13%	20%	11%

While Gen Z and Millennials are more likely to make "just for fun" pet purchases daily, "monthly" was by far the most common response across generations and pet type. Variance between dog and cat owners shows somewhat higher frequency for these purchases among dog owners, which could be due to the fact that dogs can more easily "tag along" while most cats prefer to stay home. But with overall willingness to make frequent "just for fun" purchases for their pet, could there be opportunity to innovate more regular "take home" options for cat owners?

# Products aren't just for pets —owners have needs, too

*What is your top priority when considering what food to give your pet?*



While these responses may not come as a surprise, the prioritization of health and safety with a significant minority selecting “What my pet most enjoys” demonstrates an important tension that those developing products for pet owners need to consider: how to balance the emotional needs of pet owners while developing functional products for pets.

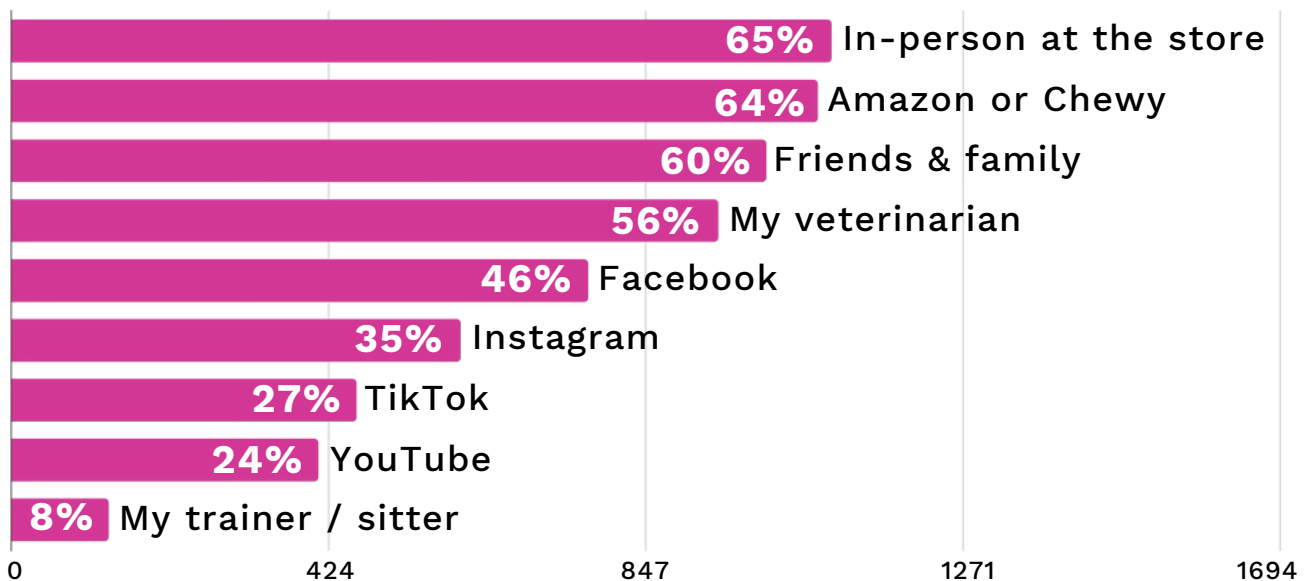
As any pet owner who has had to switch their pet’s food to a “kidney friendly pate” or a “healthy weight kibble” can tell you, it’s painful to watch your pet refuse food, even when you know it’s best for their wellness.

In [December 2024's edition of the Highlight Reel](#), pet care brand Floof founder and CEO Michael Kim talks about this discovery when it comes to developing their line of dog shampoo. [Watch the full episode](#) to learn more about how they resolved that tension through consumer product testing-informed innovation.



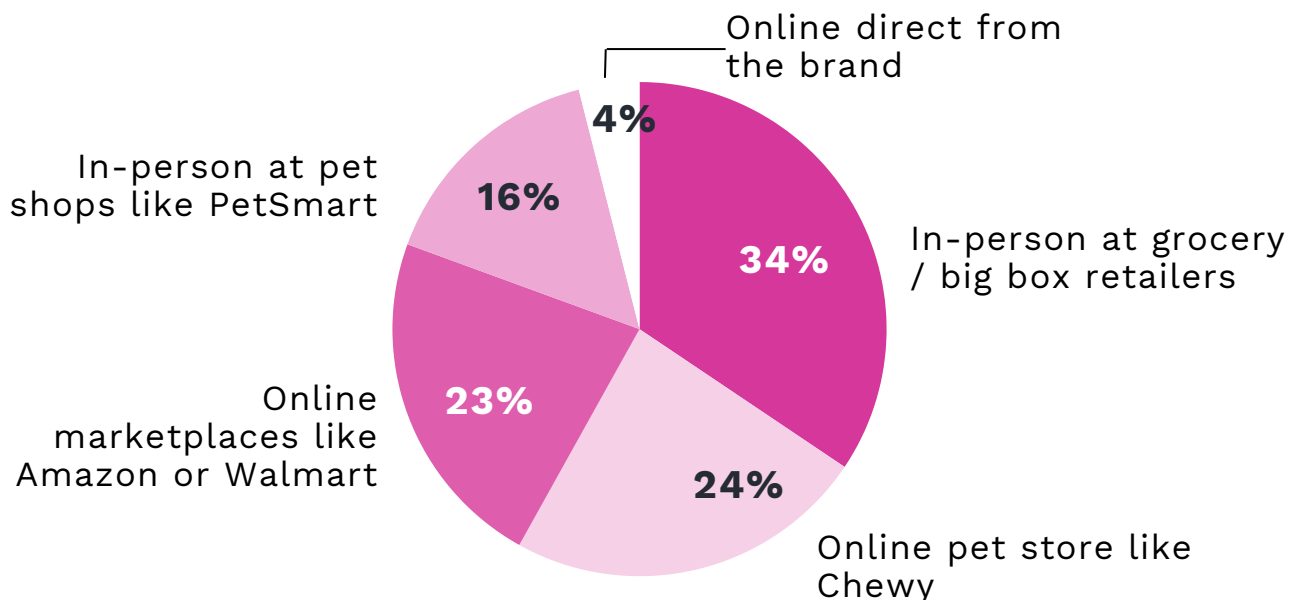
# Pet owners are learning about new products across channels

Where do you learn about new products for your cat and/or dog?  
(Select all that apply)



Likewise pet consumers make their purchases through a wide variety of channels:

Where do you purchase the majority of your pet needs like food, litter, treats and more?



# 3 key takeaways for CPG product innovators

## **Invest in the right omnichannel strategy**

The data could not be clearer: Pet consumers are discovering new products and making their purchases from a variety of online and offline sources. Further consumer testing can reveal where your brand's specific demographic prefers to shop.

## **Balance your consumer's functional & emotional needs**

Welcoming a pet into your home is an emotional investment. Just as for children's products, products for pets should safeguard their pet's health, safety, and happiness. Product researchers, therefore, should implement ways to measure the product purchaser's perception of their pet's enjoyment of a product.

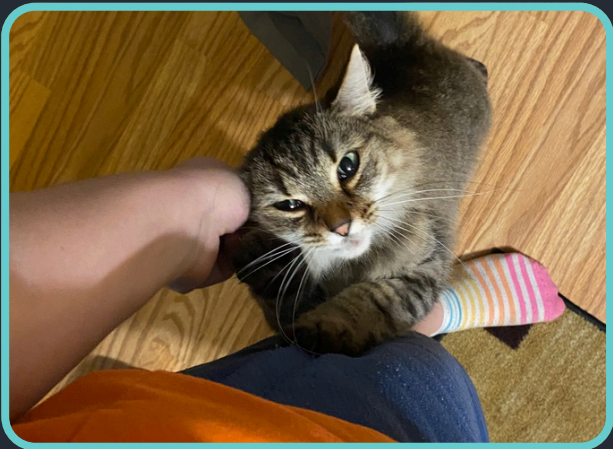
## **Relentlessly pursue your category's "second leg"**

Whatever category you play in, look for expansion opportunities adjacent to your core business. Product research methodologies like qualitative video or diary entries can uncover unmet needs or occasions in daily routines where your brand could make an impact.

## **About Highlight**

Highlight's in-home product testing platform helps CPG brands innovate, test, and successfully launch (and relaunch) better products for people and the planet. Ship your product to Highlight, and our logistics team repackages for our owned community of testers. Quickly field IHUTs (in-home usage tests), concept tests, sensory evaluation and more, then watch results as they come in. Highlight's customers have tested products in early development, blind-tested products against the competition, and benchmarked in-market products for category insight.

Learn more at [letshighlight.com](https://letshighlight.com).



*Thank you to our amazing Highlighters for their study participation!*

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