

Top dogs

In Brazil, dogs are not just part of the family – they also highlight important cultural observations, such as respect for hierarchy and status symbols, as ethnographic research by Ipsos Mori found



Pets are becoming more prominent across the developing world – especially dogs. They are increasingly considered a status symbol in countries such as Brazil, Mexico, Russia and Argentina, where owning a pet is a sign of wealth; it signals that the owner has enough time and money to care for it. Dogs have made the cultural transition from strays to members of the family, and from public nuisance to personal status symbol.

Yet the way in which pets are fed has remained the same; the data tells us most dogs in these countries eat human food, rather than pet food. Mars Petcare came to

Ipsos Mori with one of its biggest challenges across the developing world: how to introduce pet food as a necessary part of the middle-class, pet-owning lifestyle.

The dogs of Brazil: a cultural bellwether

Anna Rodríguez warmly welcomed us into her home in São Paulo, allowing her dogs to jump all over us as we entered. The barred windows showed us how close the house was to the neighbouring favela, even though Anna was recruited for our research as a person living in a ‘middle-class suburb’.

A classic Brazilian mother of the household, Anna was a generous host, who was always cooking. Her dogs are very much part of the family – she told us she “has eight children, not three” – and, during our day with Anna, we soon found the way she runs her home was a wonderful depiction of Brazilian society.

Brazil’s explicit social hierarchies

When conducting research in Brazil, you quickly realise that it has some interesting, complementary value systems.

First, like Anna, Brazilians are kind and inclusive, which often means caring for the weaker and older members of society. Social care does not really exist, and care homes for the elderly are not common, as people often look after their ailing parents. At the same time, however, it is entirely accepted that social hierarchies exist, and these are maintained for the smooth running of society – as demonstrated by Brazil’s remarkably high tolerance of racism and poor social mobility.

Of course, every society has social hierarchies. But it’s the way in which people achieve social status that’s most interesting, and Brazil is a fascinating case study. Social niceties prevented us from seeing these hierarchies in everyday life, but they were demonstrated beautifully by Anna’s behaviour towards two of her dogs, Bella Maria and Feia.

Bella Maria – the importance of beauty

Bella Maria (note the Catholic reference) is a pedigree Maltese. She is a beautiful, white fluffy-cloud of a dog, frequently taken to the grooming salon in Anna’s handbag – she is definitely ‘the top dog’.

In a country where beauty is a marker of success – epitomised by high levels of plastic surgery and make-up routines that take hours – Bella Maria’s beauty is a status symbol for Anna.

She gets special treatment. Bella Maria is the only dog allowed to sleep on the bed; she is first to be greeted when Anna returns home (even before Sandro, her son); and she receives a freshly cooked meal twice a day. Anna really does mean ‘fresh’; she took us to the butcher to buy

mince and, when we returned, she cooked it with onions, garlic and herbs, and combined it with boiled rice. The final part of the ritual? Lovingly laying it down as a gift for her beautiful dog – the apple of her eye.

In a culture where good looks help you get ahead in life, this apparent objectification is entirely acceptable – and actually very normal in Brazil.

Feia (translation: ‘ugly’) – the respect for those that have struggled

In contrast to Bella Maria, Feia is an old, stray mongrel that sleeps in the shed on the porch, and is the last one to be fed at mealtimes. He doesn’t get a fresh meal every day; instead, he gets the leftovers once the (human) children and the other dogs have eaten.

We immediately felt sorry for Feia, as he sheepishly sniffed around our feet, as if he had been excluded from family life.

Interestingly, however, Feia had been taken in from the street, something we did not see when doing research in Mexico, Argentina or Russia. He is also respected in the family for two reasons: he is old, which means he should be looked after, and he has struggled in life, signified by the scars and scratches on his body.

He was certainly not a dirty street dog, as he was living in the family home and had been given his jabs. However, Feia didn’t need fresh food or a soft bed. He had struggled and overcome adversity on the street, and was now a strong, healthy and respected member of the family.

The story of ‘struggle’ is intrinsic to Brazil’s complex social history – one in which every ethnicity has a story of how they’ve struggled for inclusion in a multicultural society. Showing strength through struggle is part of every Brazilian’s personal and family story, and something brands also try to embody.

Culture affects every category

Some crucially important cultural observations emerged from the research in Brazil, which Mars Petcare was able to use as part of its strategy: respect for hierarchy is observed through physical

attributes (beauty, nice products), as well as through social attributes (struggle, age) that are part of one’s life story – all deeply embedded aspects of Brazilian culture.

Translated to pet food, this insight told Mars Petcare about the importance of certain ingredients as status symbols within the family – particularly the use of meat. The freshly cooked meals could not be replaced by pet food, because they are a reciprocal offering showing respect and inclusion in the family.

Mars Petcare owns brands such as Royal Canin, Pedigree and Cesar. The strategy the company has adopted in Brazil taps into the cultural norms that we observed with pet owners by:

- Not trying to change behaviours, but rather adjusting them slightly with an improved routine
- Understanding the meaning of a ‘meal’ in Brazil, knowing that it is imbued with mutual respect – which is the same for pets and humans
- Realising that cost is always a secondary issue when a pet is truly a member of the family.

The insight challenged and reoriented the Mars Petcare strategy from promoting a mass-market product to accepting that a premium proposition was a better strategy – despite it being a low income, developing market.

By using insight gleaned from pet-owners such as Anna, with her dogs, Mars was able to increase sales by \$10m in Brazil in the first year alone.

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