

THE TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS OF FINDING A GREAT

Pet-Sitter

by Lisa Dubé Forman

THIS TOPIC HAS WIDELY VARYING SENTIMENTS BUT I HAVE TO IMAGINE THAT FOR THE MAJORITY OF US OUT THERE, IT IS OR HAS BEEN ONE VERY BIG HASSLE.

You can call them whatever you want – kennel help, house sitter, dog sitter, pet sitter. Speaking for the majority of us, I feel these service providers, many of whom are caring, loyal, responsible, devoted individuals, are downright indispensable. What they impart is invaluable.

They provide freedom. They provide freedom for us so as not to be held hostage to our dogs. They allow us freedom to travel, to go on vacation, to attend dog shows, to go to work to earn the money to pay for their services. The latter is always a sense of amusement for me as I liken it to a working parent with children in daycare of which much of their salary is appropriated for daycare expenses.

For this freedom, our pet sitter responsibilities will vary. Some of us employ kennel helpers to tend or caretake the dogs on a daily basis while we are working. Others are employed on a part-time basis every week to manage the upkeep of the kennels or home. Some of us have assistants come in on a part-time basis to groom and bathe the dogs. Most always, we all employ pet sitters when we travel away from home. No matter how you use their services, the great ones, for me at least, are absolute necessary. We depend upon them, confident that they will maintain, keep healthy and happy our beloved companions in our absence. We ask earnestly of ourselves that our trust is not misplaced.

Many of us have spent countless hours, weeks, months, and possibly years finding the absolute best pet caregiver we can find. We seek out such ideal person by way of word of mouth, questioning friends, neighbors, acquaintances, business colleagues or just about any person we strike up a dialogue with to inquire if they know of a good pet sitter.



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Some, including me, have placed advertisements in the local newspaper classifieds albeit carefully worded as not to give out too much details that nowadays an animal rights activist may hit upon.

The time that most of us have invested in obtaining a long-term pet sitter is incalculable. If you have ever journeyed down this path you know exactly what I mean. It is not exactly as if there is a labor union of pet sitters across the country all with a shingle out on their door reading "Dog Sitter." The process of finding the best one is dreadful for me and I have to assume for quite a few people. On behalf of my husband and I, I'll sum it up by saying, "Wow, what a long, strange trip it's been."

You see for us our only recourse is to advertise since we live in a small resort community with an equally small population. Our ads are concise as to our needs. Since we do not require a full-time assistant, we ideally require a long-term relationship with a retired or semi-retired person who has a flexible schedule permitting availability 24/7. We do travel frequently, though, and our policy is that our dogs and home are never left unattended or unoccupied. This requires such dog sitter to live in our home, 24 hours daily. Suffice to say that our ad specifies this flexibility and availability because, frankly, why develop a long term relationship with a pet sitter who is not at our disposal when needed? Fast forward to the day the ad runs and the phone rings off the hook. It is almost surreal looking back at the several times we were forced to travel down this path.

After Day One of our ad, I received upwards of 50 calls over the course of 16 hours or two business days. Perhaps there are those of you who have the time in the day to answer or return all these calls. I do not, however. The frustrating part was the quality of the responses. At the risk of sounding unsympathetic, I screened calls from one or more girls in their early 20's with newborn babies! I had calls from young mothers with toddlers holding down full-time jobs. I had calls from students that were off on break and available only for 2 to 3 months before returning full-time to school. I had calls from men who not only worked full-time but also held down weekly part-time jobs. Almost unanimously did they all recount a familiar scenario. In the past or present, they have pet sat for others and the fulfillment of their responsibilities was to come in, let the dog(s) out, throw some kibble into a bowl, water, bring the dog back in the house and off they went. The time of day they visited varied but it seemed to be a pattern when they indicated only morning and evening. They felt compelled to add, perhaps due to my incredulous tone,

that this schedule was sufficient for other people. Shocked but almost never at a loss of words, I gently inquired if they felt it was humane to cause a dog to hold their urine for 12 hours without relief? I could envisage them shrugging on the other end of the phone based on their tone and delayed responses. When dealing with people like this my favorite rhetorical question is to tell them to try it during their daily routine. I tell them to go about eating and drinking as normal and then hold their bathroom urges for 12 hours to experience the feeling.



I then asked how could you possibly consider that you have a flexible schedule when you work a full-time job, or have a new baby or toddler, or not only a full-time but a part-time job as well? Most replies indicated they were free to come over before and after work. This, it seems, was their definition of a flexible schedule. As far as the young moms with a baby or toddler, they were almost unanimous in their replies that they would bring their babies with them. Sadly, there is simply no talking sense to these young mothers. Notwithstanding, we would never agree to having infants or children in our home while we were away. The risk and liability being foremost in our mind, making the very idea inconceivable.

An even more disturbing conversation was with a woman who worked at the local animal shelter. I was given this woman's name after I was told that she was interested in pet sitting for us. After explaining my requirements of having my dogs' caregiver live in our home while we traveled, I inquired if her schedule was flexible so she could take a leave of absence from the shelter when I needed her. She indicated no and in a perfunctory manner stated she could stay overnight

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however, she would leave by 8:00 AM and would return by 6:00 PM. How alarming I thought to myself. This woman is part of a team of workers caring for abandoned, rescued dogs and cats at the local animal shelter and, I am told, also interviews potential adopters. In this case she is tasked with determining the suitability of such potential homes and, incredulously, she felt it perfectly acceptable to leave a number of dogs locked inside their home for 10 hour stretches. This statement surely brings into question her credibility and highlights her poor judgement skills. I dearly hope that she is not representative of the countless volunteers and paid workers across the country caring for animals in the shelters. Yes, I understand one bad apple does not make the whole bunch rotten, yet I find it interesting that amongst those callers interested in the job mostly all of them felt this lengthy duration between potty breaks was acceptable. Even worse, it was an acceptable manner in which to provide care for dogs.

Let's talk about the other concerns when you seek an animal caretaker. Number one, you know very little about these strangers. Ultimately, you are inviting a stranger into your home, your private domain, so you better be careful. My policy is to thoroughly interview first via the phone. I never invite any interviewee over to my home until such time I have thoroughly cleared them by phone and I always request references. I ask numerous questions in a non-invasive manner. I may chat about a nebulous subject which will result in my obtaining information pertinent to my discovering if the applicant's judgment skills are sound. This also permits me to screen perspective sitters as to their lifestyle, behaviors and hobbies. All of which are very important, however the latter became a sticking point once.

I'll never forget the time I interviewed a potential pet sitter who on the outset was very interesting. I screened him over the telephone and we had an enjoyable conversation for 45 minutes as he told me all about his interesting employment

that allowed him the freedom to work for me. Upon passing the first interview, I invited the gentleman over to my home to meet the dogs as I am a firm believer that our dogs are very good judges of character. People can tell all the stories they want in a very convincing manner but if our dogs do not like a person, then I know something is wrong. Well, in this case the dogs appeared comfortable with this man, however, over the course of our conversation he reveals some new, important information. He stated that during the day, in season of course, he would need to leave the house daily for approximately 4-5 hours to go kayaking! He further stated this was his passion and he hoped we would be agreeable.

My husband and I compensate our petsitter very well as we feel it is the utmost importance to make it worth their while. The topic of comparing compensation comes up frequently amongst dog people and the amount varies throughout the country. Some people pay per dog, some people pay a salary for kennel help, some pay hourly, others pay their pet sitter a negotiated amount based on the total days the owner is away. My husband and I pay our pet sitter per diem regardless of how many dogs are in our home. We also pay our pet sitter a full day's wage regardless if we are gone only half a day. We do not have kennels with runs that need to be washed down and disinfected daily. All our dogs live within our home and enjoy their own living room area with sofas, television, and music. I will share that in my region we typically pay \$100.00 per day. So at this going rate, a petsitter taking off 4-5 hours daily from our home to kayak does not fly with me. If this man were to interview for part-time work one or two days per week in a local business he certainly would not be granted daily leave to fulfill his kayaking passion. He also would not earn nearly the same amount of money we would have paid for his service. Suffice to say, you can imagine what I told him. The moral of my experiences--people will never cease to amaze you.

There are other important things to consider if you advertise. When fielding calls from perspective pet sitters, caution is your best policy. You do not invite any stranger over to your home until you have thoroughly interviewed them over the phone. You are the one to be asking all the questions and not vice-versa. Foremost your opening statement is that you require references from either past or current employers, other pet sitting clients or in the case such applicant does not have prior animal experience then references from upstanding members of the community. If they inquire how many dogs and cats you have, rather than answer, you redirect or answer with a question, "Please tell me what experience you have and what responsibilities did you undertake while providing your services?"

It is not advisable to reveal how many dogs you have when interviewing over the telephone. Do not provide in-depth details regarding how often and when you anticipate traveling from your home. Use this time to probe, ask questions of the perspective dog sitter's length and type of expe-

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rience. Do they have any obligations that limit their availability? Try to find clues about their personality. Engage them in conversation to have them divulge what they enjoy as a leisure pursuit. Some of their answers most likely will eliminate their potential. If someone replies that they are obligated three days per week to carpool a group of their children and friends to soccer games then you have your answer to if they have kids. This not only limits their availability but I can assure you that even if this were acceptable to you initially, inevitably issues will arise. For instance, on an important day that you are to leave town the sitter will call to tell you they cannot come to work because their child is home sick or the other carpool mom is not available to drive the kids to their “away games.” If you are a breeder-judge like me and are heading to the airport for your flight to fulfill a judging assignment this excuse will be a huge problem. As for leisure pursuits, I already provided the ideal example of what can create a time conflict when I was informed of a kayaking hobby. You’ll be amazed at the answers you receive and even more amazed, if you are like me, that most applicants feel that it is normal.

Your probing cannot end here. You must, although it may be uncomfortable, inquire if they have ever been arrested. If so, you’d better ask what for. You also should always check to see if their name is on a sexual predator list for your county or region. You need to casually inquire if they drink alcohol. This is also critical for me and my husband. I will never, ever forget the time many years ago where I had a petsitter who sat for me when I attended an out-of-town specialty and I was gone for three days. I returned home unannounced and early to find the pet sitter was not at my home. My dog living room’s commercial tiling was filled with urine and feces. Horrified and livid, I phoned the sitter who was supposed to be living in my home and she was so inebriated she could not speak. I was utterly heartbroken for my dog and I swore from that day forward I would interrogate all future caregivers regarding their alcohol consumption and it was to be forbidden on my property.

I have learned to ask other pertinent and consequential questions over the years which seem out of the ordinary. For instance, I inquire if a person is a vegetarian. Believe it or not if you feed an all natural diet of raw meat you can run into a situation with a vegetarian. Our natural diet incorporates not only organic grains and vegetables but, importantly, several types of fresh, raw meat served off and on the bone including Offal. I learned quite awhile back to ask if one is a vegetarian and, if so, would they have a problem handling raw meat. You’d be amazed at the responses.

Other subjects to probe into are if the individual is unable to function and perform duties normally or are their movements restricted. Again, I was utterly amazed with calls from people who had hip replacements and were unable to navigate stairways. I have had people call and only after chatting with them did they reveal they had herniated disks or chronic back

pain which on occasion has been incapacitating. I also spoke with a woman with bad knees. You cannot hire someone like that for a job requiring physical labor. While on the subject of health, in 2010 my husband and I had a long, arduous search and finally found a suitable candidate for our position. After one month of training and two months of service, we received a call from our caretaker’s adult daughter. She was phoning from the hospital bedside of her father, our caretaker, in his early 50s, who just suffered a major heart attack. His recovery time with the triple by-pass surgery and stint scheduled plus subsequent physical therapy would be at least 3 months. Indeed we were deeply concerned for his health, however, there was no worse time for this to happen. It was three weeks out from the beginning of a pre-paid, 10-day international vacation. You just can’t make this stuff up!

Once you finally acquire the services of a person you trust that possesses some modicum of dog sense, you then pray they will not leave! However, it is certain to happen that after entering your life, your inner sanctum of your home, and after all the training and perhaps years you spend with them, you hear the dreaded news. They are moving on. I wage that we all, at one time or another, uttered a gasp followed by a low moan of, “Oh no!” Most all of us can sympathize. For many of us, this news is as upsetting, equal and measurable to the other leading external causes of stress listed by mental health experts who define and categorize major life events. Those are to include death, divorce, moving, and job change. All your time, your effort, your in-depth training, all for naught and then one must go back to square one. Here we go again!

