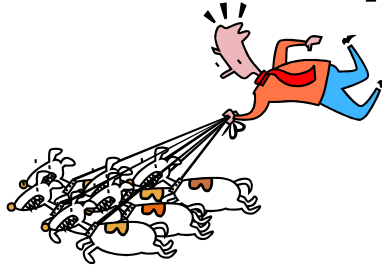


Why Hire a Professional Dog Walker?

By Jennifer Joyce



Let's face it; it's complicated to own a dog in the fast paced, urban environment of the San Francisco Bay Area. As well informed, loving dog guardians we know how important it is for our dogs to get regular exercise and an opportunity to socialize with other dogs on a daily basis. A well-exercised dog is less likely to display destructive behavior in our home. Providing a stimulating break during the day could help prevent separation anxiety, which can be pain staking to treat. Also, giving your dog the gift of time with other dogs will keep his social skills well oiled, thus preventing behavior problems involving other dogs in the future. Because most of us work full-time it is almost impossible for us to provide all of what our dogs need without some help. Seeking the services of a Professional Dog Walker is a great way to get the help we need.

Things to Consider

Dog Walkers come in all shapes and sizes. Some walkers are very detail oriented and give regular updates on how the dogs are doing, while others use the more casual "no news is good news" approach. There are also extreme differences in working styles, from the very meticulous to the extremely relaxed. Some offer multi-dog field trips called "play groups", and others provide private leash walks. At the very least the Dog Walker you choose should be safety conscious and trustworthy. Before interviewing walkers, decide what style you are most comfortable with. It is advisable to put in the time and effort researching, interviewing and checking references at the beginning to ensure a stress-free experience for both you and your dog.

In addition, consider your dog's strengths and weaknesses. If you have a high-energy tennis ball lover, make sure you find someone willing to keep the ball flying. If you have a dog that loves to roll on dead seals, beach outings may not be the best option for you



Where to Start

The idea of handing our house key to a complete stranger is nerve wracking enough, let alone handing over our furry family member! There are as many untrained walkers as there are trained professionals out there and it is easy to get overwhelmed while trying to decide who is the best match for you and your dog.

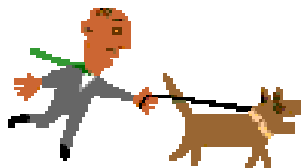
You could start your search at your local park. If you see a walker who seems particularly qualified (i.e.: good leash handling skills, in control of their pack, etc) approach them and ask for a business card.

Ask friends and co-workers about the experiences they have had with their Walkers. Get personal recommendations.

The San Francisco SPCA offers a free referral list of walkers and trainers who are graduates of the SF SPCA Academy for Dog Trainers located online www.sfspca.org.

Another free referral list can be found at www.dogtec.org, which is the first organization in North America to offer Professional Dog Walker training and certification.

Always conduct your own interviews and check references no matter how glowing the reviews!





Questions to Ask (And why you should ask them)

Business Related

- ★ **How long have you been in business?**
- ★ **Can you provide references?**
- ★ **Do you have liability insurance?**
- ★ **Are you bonded (dishonesty bond covers theft)?**
- ★ **Is your business registered with the city of SF (business license)?**
- ★ **What are your rates (current range is \$18-\$25 per outing)?**
- ★ **Do you offer discounts for multiple dog households?**
- ★ **Will you bill me?**
- ★ **What is the payment schedule?**
- ★ **Is Dog Walking a long-term venture for you?**
- ★ **Do you have a service contract?**
- ★ **What happens when you take a vacation or become ill?**
- ★ **Are you the sole dog walker or do you have employees or contractors?**

Logistics

- ★ **Please describe a typical walk**
- ★ **What park/s do you go to?**
- ★ **Are these parks fenced?**
- ★ **Do you take dogs to open, off leash parks?**
- ★ **Do you take dogs to any beaches?**
- ★ **What toys, games do you include in the outings?**
- ★ **What duration are the walks?**
- ★ **Does that include travel time?**
- ★ **What do you do on rainy days?**
- ★ **Do you provide water and treats?**
- ★ **Can I come out for a sample walk?**
- ★ **Do you offer boarding or pet sitting in my home?**

Safety

- ★ **Have you had formal training or are you self-taught?**
- ★ **Do you have first aid training/certification?**

- ★ **If group walks, how many dogs in the group?**

The industry standard recommended number of dogs per group is 6. You have likely seen groups much larger than this out at your local park. Basically the more dogs, the less individual attention your dog is getting, and the higher the risk of incidents and dogs getting lost.

- ★ **What size are the other dogs?**

When it comes to group dog walking size does matter. Whether to protect little ones from being stepped on during transport, or to avoid predatory "accidents", allowing your dog to only go with a group of like-sized dogs is extremely wise.

- ★ **Are there any dog breeds/temperaments that you don't accept?**

There are certain breeds that may be very loving with people, and animals most of the time, but have a hard-wired drive that leads to aggressive/dangerous behavior. These types include, but are not limited to:

- ♥ *Guard dogs: Rottweilers, Akitas, etc.*
- ♥ *Dogs historically bred for fighting: Pit Bull Terriers, etc.*
- ♥ *Dogs bred to kill vermin: Jack Russell Terriers, Rat Terriers, etc.*
- ♥ *Extremely intense herding breeds: German Shepherds, Border Collies and Cattle Dogs, etc.*

These breeds are ALL very wonderful, but need more management, structure and monitoring than dogs bred for retrieving, or for sitting on laps. Finding a knowledgeable walker who specializes in certain breeds, or temperament types is recommended.

Safety Continued...

- ★ **Do you accept puppies in your groups?**
- ★ **Do the other dogs in the group get along with puppies?**

Puppies need socialization, and it is very important for them to spend time with other puppies as well as adult dogs that will teach them the ropes. Keep in mind that puppies are extremely impressionable and while it is normal for adult dogs to "correct" puppies for over-the-top behavior, some adult dogs are very intolerant of puppies and will inflict emotional trauma and/or physical injury on the puppies they come in contact with. Some examples are lunging, biting or pinning the pup to the ground once it has rolled submissively. It is of the utmost importance that your puppy is in the hands of a professional who knows the warning signs and is able to prevent these incidents from happening. Long-term effects for targeted puppies can be fear, defensive/aggressive behavior.

- ★ **Do you accept intact (unneutered/spayed) dogs?**

An unneutered male dog is considered a threat to some neutered male dogs, which can lead to aggressive posturing and fighting. This type of targeting can lead to long term fear, defensive/aggressive behavior on the part of the unneutered male.

- ★ **How do you determine compatibility within the group?**
- ★ **How do you keep the dogs with you?**
- ★ **Have you ever lost a dog? If so, what did you do?**
- ★ **How would you handle an emergency, such as a dog being injured?**
- ★ **In what type of vehicle are the dogs transported?**
- ★ **Is your vehicle fully enclosed?**
- ★ **Does it have proper ventilation?**

Dog Training

- ★ **What is your dog training philosophy?**
- ★ **What do you consider a problem behavior (barking, digging, etc)?**
- ★ **How do you deal with these behavior problems?**
- ★ **What would be cause for dismissal from playgroup?**
- ★ **Do you use any special training collars or equipment?**
- ★ **Do you carry treats for training?**

Red Flags

- ★ **Large groups**
- ★ **Big differences in sizing/temperament within groups**
- ★ **Lack of experience and/or training**
- ★ **No safety measures in place**
- ★ **No liability insurance**
- ★ **Non-disclosure**

Additional suggestions

Have a back-up plan. Most Pro Dog Walkers run owner operated businesses with no employees. Having a back-up plan in the event that your Walker becomes ill or needs to take some time off can give you added peace of mind. Arranging to have a neighbor or family member as a back up is one option, or asking for permission to take your dog to work with you in a pinch is solution.

A Professional Dog Walker will not only take care of your dog's basic needs, but will be a good pal to your pooch and a great support to you.