

Why My Puppies Are Free (Also Known as “What Puppy Buyers Should Be Able to Expect from Breeders”)

by Joanna Kimball on January 24, 2009

One question that is always a little difficult to tapdance around, when you're a breeder or when you're a buyer, is the price of the puppy in question. It's considered bad form to publicly price puppies, because that implies that this is a straightforward transaction: You give me a pile of benjamins and I hand you this puppy, end of story. We instead try to communicate that it's hard to get a puppy from us and we want you to seek out and develop a relationship with us before we start talking business. It's also supposed to imply that you as a buyer shouldn't go shop around for the lowest price, because this is not a dishwasher and one does not equal another.

Unfortunately, this can sometimes lead breeders to adopt the “If you have to ask, you can't afford it” scheme; this was a pretty big problem in Danes. There were some breeders who decided that their show puppies were worth \$5000 plus two puppies back, even though other breeders using similar pedigrees and similar win records were pricing at a quarter of that amount. It can also lead owners into a kind of ridiculous secret-handshake routine where they are still trying to shop around but have calculated exactly how long a phone conversation they have to have with a breeder before they can delicately mention prices.

That's problem one.

Here's the other background problem: Every single prospective puppy buyer, without exception, is sort of pre-traumatized when they come into the relationship with you. Since the people who end up with good breeders are the ones who have taken time to research a lot about dogs, most of them already feel somewhat defensive about buying a puppy rather than adopting one. They've read a great deal about how the only good way to get a dog is to go to a shelter, pound, or rescue, and they intellectually disagree (or they wouldn't be calling you) but they feel either a little or a lot guilty about it.

Compounding this problem is that, again without exception, they know someone who has been “ripped off” by a breeder or they themselves have had a bad experience with a breeder. They want a puppy, often quite desperately, but they are not quite sure whether they need to set themselves up as our friends or our adversaries.

Here's the absolute worst thing you can do: After the long phone conversation tapdance, name the big number and then justify the price of your puppies by comparing what you have or what you've done to what your peer breeders (i.e., other Cardigan exhibitor/breeders) have and what they've done, making sure the buyers understand that your puppies are better than those breeders' dogs and DEFINITELY better than adopted/homeless dogs because of XYZ (I've even heard people use specific names, or criticize specific shelters, which is really uncool). Tell them that your dogs are expensive because they'll live longer and are healthier and better tempered, and they're prettier too.

Why is that a terrible idea? Because there is NO WAY ON EARTH you can guarantee that. You are giving them a live animal in its infancy, and 99.5% of what is going to happen to that animal has nothing to do with the good breeding decisions you may or may not have made (and, all too often, we don't find out until the puppies are five years old or even older that in fact it was NOT a good thing that we bred those two dogs because the now-grown puppies are metaphorically or literally dropping like flies).

DO NOT FOOL YOURSELF. Even in the best litter you've ever bred or will breed, there will be puppies that are less than stellar in appearance or health. I don't care what health tests you do—you WILL make puppies that are genetic disasters and die young, sometimes horribly young and horribly traumatically. And there are WITHOUT A DOUBT going to be temperament problems in some puppies or grown dogs. Sometimes it's because you convinced yourself that your bitch who tried to bite a judge, attacks all other dogs, and who violently shies away from anything red, round, less than two feet above the ground, or wearing a hat is that way because the neighbor from next door looked at her funny when she was three months old, instead of

admitting that her loose screw is being very predictably passed along to her kids. Far more often it's because the owner made a series of very bad decisions, as owners often do, and created a problem.

If you've pinned a dollar amount to health, longevity, or temperament, the new owner has every right to be furious and every right to call this a ripping off. You sold something that you did not deliver.

And these are the owners that will try to convince everyone they know that breeders are bad news, and the expensive ones are not only dishonest but greedy. No breeders can be trusted, so buying from the classified ads is just the same as buying from the breeder of the big winners and so you should just go save yourself some money.

And that's the GOOD scenario. In the bad scenario, you get sued for breach of contract and you never breed again.

So let me suggest an approach that I did not come up with—this is what my very wise and wonderful Dane mentor told me.

BE HONEST. That's all puppy buyers want. Aside from the very few genuinely bad ones, who are not going to be happy no matter what, buyers want to know the real situation. They want to feel respected and they want to know that you're not going to cheat them.

And the HONEST truth is that we cannot in any way guarantee that our puppies will meet or exceed the health, personality, temperament, or behavior of any other dog. We can say that we've done our absolute best to weigh things in that puppy's favor, and we can explain exactly how we've planned the breeding and how we've raised the litter and why we think those practices give this puppy a better chance than the people down the road with the "Yelo Lab Puppies: \$650" sign on their tree, but this is a living organism and all we've done is observed it until it's eight weeks old.

And so, again following the advice of a far wiser breeder than I, when people ask me how much my puppies are, I tell them "They're free. Or, if it makes you feel more comfortable, they're whatever the price of an average shelter adoption is in your neighborhood. When and if we decide that this is a good match and you decide to get a puppy from me, you'll be writing me a check for [whatever it is], but that check is actually buying ME. You are paying for the right to call me, any time of the day or night, for the life of this dog. You're paying for me to be your training assistant, your dedicated boarding kennel, your vet advocate, and your nutritional consultant. You are paying me a research fee for making an educated and smart decision about which dog to breed to which dog. And you're paying me a retainer so that at any time in your dog's life I will take back that dog, no questions asked, no matter the situation, and you're paying me to take some very difficult decisions off your hands."

I then advise them to consider the purchase price of ANY puppy in those terms. The only thing they can be sure of getting for their big wad of cash is a relationship with a breeder. If they are not absolutely comfortable with me, absolutely sure that they will get their money's worth of me, they should go elsewhere even if I have a puppy available. If they are not completely sure that whatever breeder they're talking to is a safe place to deposit that "wage," they need to run away even if the most adorable puppy on earth is staring at them.

It took me until my third litter to have been burned enough to add this, usually during the last big interview and contract-signing before they actually take the dog home:

"Look at this puppy. What I am giving you is what I have created. Don't take it home unless you are totally comfortable with everything you see, because once it leaves my house YOU are creating it. From here on out, you're the one shaping temperament and behavior, and aside from wholly genetic disorders you're on the hook for health too.

You're paying for my advice. That means you have to come to me IMMEDIATELY if there's a problem. You can't see a behavior you don't like, or a health issue you're not sure of, and wait around for five months until

it's a real crisis and then show up and ask me to fix it. I won't be able to. You need to come to me, even if it takes fifteen phone calls and a trip back here, when it's still something I can solve or can advise you on how to solve. If you make that effort, I will bend over backwards and devote every bit of time and energy I have to solving your problem and getting you back on the right path to happiness with your dog. If you do not come to me—and that's the first thing I'm going to ask you when you call: when did you first see this issue—there's a very good chance that it will be too late. And if it is too late, I'll still take the dog back because that's my commitment to you and to this dog, but I'll be sending the dog to heaven."

Being honest also means defining very simply and without ambiguity when a health or temperament problem is your fault and when it's their fault. If you screwed up and so the dog died young, replace it. Don't argue. If the dog has something very wrong with it and it cannot do its job, if the owners are good ones send them a new puppy. Be very clear with them BEFORE they take the dog home (and say it to their faces and make sure they're listening—when new owners were coming to sign the contract and take the dog home I used to put the puppies in another room so I was absolutely sure they were paying attention to me and not their new puppy) exactly what you do and do not cover, what actions will render your contract with them void, and give them the chance to back out if they're not comfortable.

And then, although this has nothing to do with your legal or ethical duty, maybe every once in a while replace a puppy that you didn't really need to, or that wasn't your fault, if you think the owners are worth it.

When we lost-and-then-found Clue, I called Betty Ann to let her know that Clue was lost. I was sobbing through most of the phone call, which I am sure she found at least somewhat off-putting, but she listened and gave me some good advice and then said "If she's really gone, we'll get something to you right away."

It blew me away. I PHYSICALLY MISPLACED MY DOG. If there was ever a situation that was not her fault, it was this one. For her to take any responsibility for making sure I still had a dog at the end of it was rather mindboggling.

Now I'm certainly not saying that we're like LL Bean for dogs (endless return policy, even if you lose it), but acting with that kind of commitment substantially raised the bar for me when it came to my own expectations of my relationships with puppy buyers.

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