

Training dogs for fundraisers

With bell ringing season approaching, it's helpful to have some guidelines for our dogs' interactions with John Q Public. The most important aspect of meeting the public is that of assessing a dog's appropriateness.

If your dog is uncomfortable or reactive around people or other dogs, he's not a candidate for the job. It's a good idea, also, to "test drive" your dog at strip malls, or pet stores where he/she will be exposed to things like shopping carts, automatic doors and foot traffic. Your dog will usually let you know how it's feeling by its body language and demeanor. It's up to you to pay attention.



A tucked tail, laid back ear carriage, and what I call "stress wrinkles" on a dog's face are all signs that it is not coping well with a situation. Barking, excessive "wiggleness" (is that a word?) or no interest in treats are also signs of stress. The first step is to get your dog out there and see how he/she does. If you take your dog to the strip mall and it's able to focus attention on you and follow commands in spite of distractions, you're off to a good start. If your dog isn't able to pay attention, he/she probably needs some more exposure before you consider including him/her in panhandling. Specific things that you should expose your dog to: children of all ages, shopping carts, dangling scarves and floppy sleeves. Even the noise of the Salvation Army bell may be new to your dog, so make sure to practice ringing a bell and treating your dog.

One of the most important aspects of taking our dogs out to interact with the public is to be proactive. By that, I mean that we need to prepare our dogs for those interactions by training a specific greeting behavior.



An important behavior to teach your dog is one that I call "Go say Hi". That cue tells the dog to go up to a person and sit in front of the person. I like to have my dogs sitting when they meet people. It demonstrates that they are under control.

It's easy to teach. This is how it goes:

Enlist friends and family to be "greeters". They should have some really good treats, like chicken, hot dogs or cheese (basically, whatever treats your dog likes best). You have your dog on leash, and walk towards your "greeter". As you do, the greeter will ask your dog to sit. If Fluffy sits, the greeter will treat and pet/praise your dog. If your dog doesn't sit, or jumps up, acts rambunctious, etc,

the greeter will turn and walk a few steps away. Don't say anything--your job is just to hold the leash. After a few seconds, you can again try to approach the greeter. Repeat this until your dog is automatically sitting when he/she approaches the greeter. At this point, you can begin to attach the cue "go say Hi" (or whatever cue you like) as you approach the greeter.

Once the dog is responding to the "go say hi" cue by walking up to the person and sitting, the greeter no longer needs to ask the dog to sit. When your dog is reliably sitting for your greeter (say 9 times out of 10) you need to change greeters, locations, etc, so that your dog learns to generalize the behavior to all situations. In your training, be sure to expose your dog to children as well as adults. You also want to begin to add distractions such as hats, packages, umbrellas, etc, that you may encounter in the real world. If at any time your dog quits offering the behavior, you've probably tried to progress too fast. In that case, back off and make it a little easier so that your dog will be successful. You can always increase the difficulty when your dog is working more reliably. With sufficient practice, it should become fairly automatic for your dog to sit to greet strangers, even without a cue.

Although I train the greeting behavior using treats, I usually don't allow people to give my dogs treats when we're out in public. You never know when a person will get "freaked out" by your dog's mouth or teeth touching them, no matter how gently your dog may take the treats. The attention is usually rewarding enough for the dog.



It's important to control how people approach your dog. Dogs are usually more comfortable if they can initiate contact, even if that means just moving slightly towards the person. You can help by moving slightly forward with them as well. If a person is rushing up to your dog, it's best to step in front of the dog and ask the person to stop. I am usually fairly blunt, saying things like "Please stop right there. Teaser gets worried when people run up to her. Just stand still and we'll come to you."

It's also helpful to give people things that they CAN do, rather than focus on what they shouldn't do. When people approach to pet my dog, I ask them to put out their hand so my dog can "get to know them." When they reach to pet your dog, you can tell people something like "Fluffy loves to get her chest scratched" or "Scratch Fido behind his ears, he really likes that!" With children, I tell them to pet my dog's back/shoulders. It's a way to keep them focused away from the dogs' potentially scary mouth and teeth. It can also be helpful to have your dog lie down, so that they are less threatening. If there are a group of children, I will ask them to take turns. Even small kids understand the concept of taking turns, and will keep track of who's next!

Some important comfort considerations related specifically to bell ringing:

Most dogs can only handle an hour or two of this type of intensive interaction. It's helpful to give your dog a break from "working" every 45 minutes. Keep an eye on your dog, and stop immediately if you see signs of stress. During the winter, you may encounter salted sidewalks and parking lots. Salt can be very irritating to a dog's feet, so make sure you bring a towel to wipe their feet. It can also be very cold for both dogs and people. Wear lots of layers, and bring a blanket or rug for your dog to sit or lie on, especially if your dog has a short coat. Don't forget water...and poop bags!