

Puppy Buyer Etiquette

I am posting this specifically because there's a lot of confusion about the whole "proper" way to go about things. So, puppy buyers and anyone else thinking about maybe someday approaching a good breeder about a puppy, here you go:

1. **STOP LOOKING FOR A PUPPY.** The classic mistake puppy buyers make is saying "I need a cairn terrier puppy at the beginning of the fall" or whatever it may be. So they go out looking for litters due in August.

BAD IDEA.

Puppies are not interchangeable; one is not the same as the others. This is largely because every breeder has their stop-the-presses criteria for breeding or not breeding, and each has preferences for size, personality, etc. Breeder X's "perfect puppy" is not the same as Breeder Y's.

Stop looking for a puppy; look for a REPUTABLE BREEDER. Make a personal connection with a breeder you feel shares your top criteria, and then wait for a puppy from them. Maybe they even have a litter on the ground, which is wonderful, but maybe they're not planning anything for a few months. Could be they're not planning anything for a year; in that case, ask for referral to another breeder that shares those same priorities and has similar (or just as good) personality and support ethics. However it works out, screen the breeder first, and then ask about the puppy.

EXPECT TO WAIT FOR A PUPPY. It's VERY rare to wait less than a couple of months; four to six is normal. Even we breeders don't walk through the field, able to pick puppies like tulips. We ALL generally have to wait, and we ALL have to get matched up by the puppies' breeder.

2. **INTRODUCE YOURSELF THOROUGHLY.** The initial e-mail should be one or two paragraphs long; also, you will need to block out at least an hour of quiet time for the first phone call. When you initiate contact, clearly communicate, what you are looking for in a puppy, male or female and what you are looking for in a breeder. Specifically describe your plans for this puppy, be truthful.

The ideal first contact e-mail should go something like "Hi, my name is _____ and I'm writing to inquire about your dogs. I've been doing a lot of research on cairn terriers and I think they're the right breed for me because (list reasons). If you own or have previously owned a cairn, list reasons why you would like another one.

That's the kind of e-mail that gets a response, and usually pretty quickly. If I get something that says "I hear you have puppies; how much?" it goes in the recycle bin before you can blink.

Bring up price at the end of the first contact. It's nice to say "If you don't mind me asking, about how much are cairns in your area, if there a typical price? I just want to be prepared." You will usually get two pieces of useful information: my price and the median prices around your area. That way, if you decide to go a different way, you know about what to expect. If the second person you contact gives you a price that's double the median, try to discreetly find out why. A very difficult pregnancy, nationally ranked parents, a surgical A&I, c-section resulting in very few live puppies, those are some reasons a breeder could be asking more and it's reasonable. If there's no real difference from the other breeders except price, think carefully. Also, health testing and health guarantees can also be a reason for different prices as not all breeders health test or offer guarantees.

3. **BE WILLING TO BE TOLD NO.** Not every person is the right match for every breed. That's just fact. There is no way on earth I could make our home appropriate for a Malamute puppy, and I'd have to lie through my teeth to get approved for one. Please realize there will some dogs that are just plain wrong for you. If a breeder says no, ask why. If the answers make sense, don't keep calling people until you finally get one who will sell you a puppy of that breed. Go back to the drawing board and be very humble and honest with yourself about what kind of dog really would be right for you and your family.
4. **PLEASE DO NOT GET ON MORE THAN ONE WAITING LIST** unless you are VERY honest about it. You need to understand that we think our puppy buyers are just in love with my puppies as I am. I'm posting pictures, writing up instructions, researching everything from pedigrees to nail grinding, all so I can hand off this puppy, this supreme glorious creature of wonderfulness, with the absolute maximum chance that it will lead a fabulous life with you. I've built all kinds of air castles in my head about how happy this puppy will be and what it will do in its life with you, and so on. Finding out that you had your name on four lists shows the breeders your just puppy shopping, not caring where it comes from just that you get one.

Also, as soon as your name is on one of our lists we're turning away puppy buyers. If we've sent ten people elsewhere because our list is full, and then you suddenly say "Oh, yeah, I got a puppy from someone else, "it really toasts our bread". So just BE HONEST. If someone came to me and said "I'm on a list with _____, but she's pretty sure she won't have a puppy for me, and I'd love to be considered for one of your dogs and I'll let you know just as soon as I know, "I'm FINE with that". I understand how this goes. It's not a disaster for me to have a puppy "left over" at ten weeks because you ended up getting that So and So puppy: it's just frustrating to have the rug yanked out from under me.

5. PLEASE DO NOT EXPECT TO CHOOSE YOUR PUPPY. This one drives puppy buyers CRAZY. I know this, trust me. I have a lot of sympathy because I've been there. But the fact is that when you come into my house and look at the 10 week old puppies and one comes up and tugs on your pant leg and you look at me, enraptured, and say 'THIS IS IT! He chose ME'. I've been looking at people coming into the house all week, and every single time this same puppy has come up and tugged at them and every single one of them have said to me "THIS IS IT!".

WHAT YOU ARE SEEING IS NOT REALITY. You are seeing the most outgoing puppy, or you've fallen in love with the one that has the most different color or the one that has a different look from the rest of the litter. When I had one wheaten girl puppy in the litter of brindle boys, every human that came into the house wanted her; when I had 1 wheaten boy in a litter of brindle girls everyone kept talking about how much they loved HIM, or the one that's been (accidentally) featured the most in the pictures I've posted. Sometimes you have a very good instinctive eye and you're picking the puppy that's the best put together of the litter, that puppy, of course, is mine, and you're going to have to pry her out of my cold dead hands.

MY RESPONSIBILITY IS NOT TO MAKE YOU HAPPY. My responsibility is to the CAIRN BREED first. That's why my first priority in placing puppies is the show owners, because they are the ones that will (if all goes well) use this dog to keep the breed going. It's not that I like them better than I like you; it's that I have to be extremely careful who I place with them so that they can make breeding decisions with the very best genetic material I can hand them. My second responsibly is to the PUPPY. I will place each puppy where I feel that it has the best chance of success and the optimal environment to thrive.

I do care, and I will try and take your preferences into account. Do not expect to walk into my living room and put your hands in the box and pick whatever puppy you want. Do not expect to be given priority pick because you contacted me first; conversely, do not expect that because you came along late you somehow won't get a good puppy. Sometimes the person who calls me when the puppies are 9 weeks ends up with what I consider a "pick" for various reasons (sometimes because somebody called me up and said they'd gotten a puppy from someone else; see rule 4 above). I am going to try and do my absolute best to match puppies to new families as objectively as I can, not according to who called first. I UNDERSTAND waiting for a puppy is hard. But the rewards of waiting and being matched with the right puppy are greater than any frustration with having to sit on an empty couch for a few more months.

6. ONCE YOU GET YUR PUPPY, THERE WILL ONLY BE THAT PUPPY IN THE WHOLD WORLD. If you've been sitting around with your fingers crossed saying "Please, Molly, please, Molly, I only love Molly" and I say "I really think Millie is the one for you," you're probably going to feel disappointed. But take Millie and go sit on the couch, and let her try and find a treat in your pocket, I guarantee you by the time you're five minutes out of my driveway Millie will be YOUR puppy. And a year later you may remember that you thought Molly was so pretty, but Millie.....well, Millie could practically run the Pentagon she's so smart, and her face turned out MUCH more beautiful than Molly's did and so on.
7. PLEASE FINISH YOUR ENCOUNTER WITH ONE BREEDER BEFORE BEGINNING ONE WITH ANOTHER. If you end a conversation with me saying "Well, this just all sounds wonderful, and I'm going to talk it over with my wife or husband and we'll call you about getting on your waiting list," and then you hang up and call the next person on your list, that's not OK. If you don't feel like you click with me or you want to keep your options open, a very easy way to say it is to ask for the names and numbers of other breeders I recommend. That way I know we're not "going steady," and I won't pencil you in on my list. If you are on my waiting list and you decide that you don't want to be anymore, call or email me AS SOON AS YOU KNOW and say, I'm so sorry, but our life has gotten a little crazy and I need to be taken off your puppy list," and I take you off. If, then, you decide you want to get a different puppy, be my guest. Just keep me apprised and let me close off my commitment to you before you open it with another.

.....Which brings us to something that is super important and most puppy people don't realize:

8. EVERY BREEDER KNOWS EVERY OTHER BREEDER. Now of course I don't mean the bad breeders, but the show breeding community is VERY small and VERY close-knit, we all communicate with each other.

In the end, "Be excellent to each other," as Bill and Ted so correctly ordered us, is pretty much the paradigm to follow. If you err, err on the side of this being a relationship, not just a transaction. Try to act the way you would with a good friend, not with an appliance salesman. And the ending will be as happy for you as it is happy for me.