

# Teaching Bonds

*By offering dog owners advice and products to aid in training, pet specialty retailers will not only create loyal, satisfied customers, but they will also help keep canines in loving homes.*

At some point in their pet's life, most dog owners are confronted with unwanted behavior. Pet retailers are in a unique position to help dog owners solve these behavioral problems by offering training classes, selling books and products, and by offering good advice. If this conciliatory role is taken seriously, a pet store can protect and promote the human-animal bond while helping to reduce the number of pets turned into shelters each year.



PHOTO BY BONNIE NANCE

In a recent study conducted by the Capital Area Humane Society in Columbus, Ohio, and published in the Journal of the American Veterinary Medicine Association, it was reported that bad behavior was the top reason why dog owners relinquish their pets. According to the study's co-author, Ohio State University professor Sara Staats, about one-third of dog owners who gave up their pets to animal shelters perceived their animals to have behavior problems. The most commonly reported behavior problems included hyperactivity, followed by housebreaking problems, destructive chewing when the owner is away, fearfulness and barking. In most cases in which biting was a concern, Staats noted that the dog owners misunderstood playful puppy biting for aggression. She also noted that more than half the dogs (53 percent) were surrendered when they were less than a year old. She concluded that most new dog owners were unprepared for their dog and should have anticipated these behaviors. Staats was quoted as saying, "The problem often isn't with the dogs, it's with the owners' expectation."

## COMMON PROBLEMS

Mordecai Siegal, author of 33 pet books, including *When Good Dogs Do Bad Things-Solutions To 30 Common Problems*, agrees. Siegal remarks that pet owners have to realize that when animals live with us, they are not living in

their natural environment. "Chewing, digging, barking and eliminating are all normal behaviors for animals, and as pet owners, we have to deal with these unwanted behaviors in an effective manner. In order to have successful relationships with our pets, we have to teach them how to live with us," says Siegal.

He uses house soiling as an example. "In the wild, a wolf or wild dog will eliminate wherever it chooses, though generally not near his sleeping or eating areas. In most cases, an animal will mark its territory, identifying to other animals what is his. When your dog chooses to eliminate on your living room carpet, it becomes a serious problem for the owner, but it's perceived as territory marking for the canine. A dog owner must teach his dog where it is appropriate to eliminate, whether it is outside or inside on paper in a designated location."

Moreover, Siegal believes that by understanding dog behavior, pet owners can train their dogs to live successfully in our world. He concludes, "Good dog training is about controlling the dog and the situation."

"The first hurdle that most dog owners face is housebreaking," says New York dog trainer, Andrea Arden. Arden recommends these helpful tips to her clients:

1. Create a realistic schedule;
2. Use a crate to housebreak a dog;
3. Apply an effective odor neutralizer to soiled areas; and,
4. If necessary, hire a dog walker during the day, when no one is home to care for the pooch.

If clients are resistant to using a "cage" to train their dogs, she reminds them the crate is an essential training tool that not only helps with housebreaking, but also helps prevent destructive behavior such as chewing. It also contributes to teaching dogs how to spend time alone.

### TRAINING WITH TOYS

West Palm Beach dog trainer, Jennifer McCarthy also enjoys the challenge of helping clients solve their dog's behavior problems. She notes that many owners are unprepared for the realities of having a dog.

"Hyperactivity, chewing and digging are big problems for many dog owners, especially when it comes to ruining expensive shoes and furniture," says McCarthy. To combat these problems, McCarthy encourages clients to exercise and play with their dogs according to their natural tendencies. "Playing, exercising and stimulating your dog with toys greatly reduces the stress that is due to confinement, isolation and/or boredom. Today, pet stores have so many diverse toys that can be used as effective training tools."

She suggests very hard, rubber toys in a variety of shapes for carrying around and chewing, as well as toys that pet owners can fill with broken treats, cheese or peanut butter mixtures for a distraction. Busy box toys are also good for distractions. By moving around the box with their noses, mouths and paws, dogs eventually access the goodies inside.

For dogs that like to shake and kill, like terriers, she encourages owners to buy a toy that resembles prey. For younger or older dogs that need comforting, consider stuffed animals that could be put in dirty laundry, so they smell like the dog owner. If a dog likes to dig, as many dachshunds do, hide toys in a sandpit and encourage the dog to dig for the treasure in the appropriate location. For dogs that need a lot of outdoor activity, like border collies, use Frisbee-type toys. Finally, for retrievers, consider adding the training basics of come, sit and stay to make a game of fetch—either on land or in the water—more stimulating and exciting.

### GOING HIGH-TECH

"Although crates and toys are useful in the training process, extreme behavior situations call for different tools,

and this is where high-tech training aids have been invaluable," says, Chris Hood, national sales manager of High-Tech Pet in Ventura, Calif. Hood remarks that high-tech training aids such as automatic doors and pet containment systems have helped to promote good relationships between dogs and their owners.

He mentions, for example, that bark collars have prevented problems with neighbors and landlords and have made surgery an unnecessary option for dog owners who can't get a handle on their dogs unwanted barking. "In the past, many dog owners were turned off by the shock factor of bark collars, but today consumers have more choices."

Bark collars now employ sound as the basic stimulus because it is established that animals learn quickly and retain better memory when the desired behavior is associated with sound. More advanced models of bark collars increase the sonic stimulus as the barking persists, while others also employ increasing electric shock to stop the most stubborn barkers in a humane manner.

According to Contech's Erik Djukastein, pet owners are now willing to spend more and try advanced high-tech options. He feels that this trend completely coincides with the trend towards humanizing pets, and he notes that as pet owners make their dogs a more integral part of the family, they are willing to try whatever they can to care for dogs in the best manner possible.

"Some home-grown methods, such as using a shaker can full of pennies cannot keep a dog off a couch very long. Pets are smart and eventually become resistant to these measures. In the right time and place, specific high-tech training options guarantee an appropriate level of control for longer periods of time. In this way, the animal learns what is expected," says Djukastein.

Djukastein also notes that is very important for manufacturers of high-tech pet products to educate the retailers on how to operate these products.

"It's the trickle-down effect. The manufacturer educates the retailer and store staff and the store employees can immediately have a viable option to present to a distressed dog owner."

### OUTSIDE HELP

Storeowners can also educate their staff about how to solve problem dog behavior by bringing in a dog trainer to conduct free seminars on how to choose an appropriate dog/puppy and how to solve problem canine behavior. With the holidays around the corner and more individuals buying pets as gift, the fall is an excellent time to organize a seminar. Patrons and potential clients who are considering purchasing a dog could learn the needs and the cost of having a puppy. As an incentive for attending the seminar, offer a discount for buying items such as books, crates, house-training pads, odor neutralizers, shampoos, brushes and combs, leashes and collars, and toys.

A few weeks after the holidays, have another seminar emphasizing how to solve problem behavior. Introduce additional equipment, toys and training classes to help new dog owners deal with their problems. If handled properly, a free seminar serves as an excellent public-relations opportunity that can introduce a pet store as the canine resource center within the community. To generate exposure for the store, send press releases with the time and date of the events to the local newspapers and other media outlets.

Once the store staff can confidently discuss canine behavior problems and recommend appropriate items, advertise the store as a canine problem-solver. In the store's advertising, ask potential clients if they have house-breaking, chewing, biting, digging and other behavior problems, and tell them that the store's staff can help them by offering advice and products to help solve their problems.

Steven D. Strauss, author of *The Small Business Bible*, encourages storeowners to create compelling offers and vivid descriptions of the benefits from



using the store's services or products. A pet retailer who helps pet owners to solve unwanted behavior problems also contributes to the success of a healthy and long-lasting relationship between a pet owner and his dog. **PB**

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