



## Trainer Etiquette

Just as a friendly, knowledgeable phone manner will impress clients, a professional in-person presentation will continue the good impression.

### *Punctuality*

Wear a watch, and always arrive at your in-home appointments and group classes on time. While being delayed by traffic or other unavoidable circumstances is understandable, if you are going to be more than five minutes late, call to let your clients know. If you are teaching a group class, apologize when you arrive. If you have a day with more than one consecutive in-home appointment scheduled, try to end each session promptly so you can stay on schedule. One session that runs twenty minutes over can delay your appointments for the rest of the day.

### *Appearance*

In the dog training business, no one expects you to show up in a three-piece suit. However, appearance and personal hygiene are the first things people notice. Let's take two trainers, Mr. A and Ms. B. Mr. A is roughly forty pounds overweight. That's no crime, except that the way his dirty T-shirt rides up over his belly, you'd think he was proud of the fact. His jeans have tears at the knees, and his hair is perfect...that is, for an off-Broadway production of *Grease*. As Mr. A leans forward to shake the client's hand, it becomes obvious that he prefers his cheeseburgers loaded with onions. What an impression, and the training hasn't even begun! Ms. B, on the other hand, arrives wearing a clean T-shirt and jeans. Her hair is washed and tied back neatly. Her breath is fresh. She appears

friendly, alert and ready to work. Which trainer would *you* want at your home? Don't be lazy. First impressions count. (Personally, I'm so paranoid about bad breath that I always pop a breath mint before walking into a client's home!)

*Note:* The majority of in-home clients will offer to shake your hand at the door. While in human language this clearly conveys, "Pleased to meet you," to a dog who is protective of his owner, it might mean something else entirely. In fact, the dog might take your reaching toward his owner as a serious threat, and you could get bit. I'm not suggesting that you never shake anyone's hand, but that you be well aware of the dog's body language before you do. There is nothing wrong with saying, "Please don't think I'm being rude, but I would just as soon not shake your hand, as I can see that it might make your dog uncomfortable." Rather than being offended, the person will probably be impressed that you are so observant of the dog's body language.

### *Keeping Track of Time*

If you find the big hand inching past the hour mark on a scheduled hour-long in-home appointment, call the client's attention to it. No one wants to be surprised by extra charges. When a session is in danger of running into overtime, say something like, "I'd love to show you that exercise we discussed, but we will end up going past the hour. If we go another extra half hour, the fee will be \_\_\_ total. Is that okay? If not, we can pick up where we left off at the next session." Always give the client the choice. If you have trouble keeping track of time, set a watch alarm for ten minutes before the scheduled end of the session.

### *Be Polite*

It is good practice to be polite to clients, whether in a group or one-on-one. But trust me, there will be clients who even Miss Manners would be tempted to strangle (though she'd probably use a freshly pressed tie to do it!). Though the majority of clients you will deal with will be pleasant, inevitably there will be some who will be argumentative, rude, ignorant, annoying, or any combination of the above. Remain polite. Do not allow yourself to be drawn into an argument. After all, you're the professional.

Read up on dealing with difficult people. In any customer service industry the same client types exist, and some wonderful books have been written on the subject. (Also, see *Resources* for a few that are specifically geared toward dog trainers.) Regardless of how hot-headed a client gets, keep your cool. Many argumentative clients, when faced with your cool composure, will calm down themselves. Just as you would not respond to an aggressive dog by countering with force, don't do so with an angry client and risk escalating the confrontation. Use positive reinforcement techniques! Sometimes just reiterating what the person has said can be helpful: "I can understand how frustrating it must be to come home and find urine on the carpet. So, instead of continuing to rub your dog's nose in it, why don't we talk about crate training and management. That way things will become much less stressful right away." Of course, this should be said in a calm, soothing voice. Calm and soothing is helpful when responding to stressed and unbalanced, plus you have let the client know that his concerns have been heard. Call a friend after the appointment or group class and vent if you need to!

If a client's rudeness involves something like responding to one phone call after another during an in-home appointment, politely suggest letting the machine pick up the calls. After all, you want the client to get the most out of the session (and for you not to want to tear out your hair). If the problem involves kids who are throwing tantrums or constantly interrupting, suggest that the parent give them something else to do, like coloring or playing a video game in another room. After all, you'd give a puppy who was chewing on the carpet something else to do—dog-training and kid-training aren't all that different.

Another aspect of being polite is remaining quiet and listening while someone is speaking. Many of us are already thinking of the next question we want to ask as the client is answering the current one. As time is always an issue, it's hard not to interrupt. You may find this especially challenging if, like me, you are a high-energy, stay-on-track sort of person. If necessary, jot your next question down so you can concentrate on what the client is saying and not feel that you have to interrupt; you might just catch a piece of information that is crucial to solving the dog's problems.