

How to choose a professional dog walker

by Suzanne Gould, Owner of Edinburgh Holistic Dogs.

A few weeks ago, it was reported that a professional dog walker had been prosecuted for hitting a dog in her care. As a dog mum, dog lover and professional dog walker I was shocked, appalled and upset for the dog and his family.

I have been a professional dog walker for almost two years, operating in the North East of Edinburgh. I am very busy and a typical day may involve walking between 12 and 18 dogs. That is a lot of miles walked, a lot of poop scooped and lots of dog biscuits given out. I know what it takes to work with and handle dogs; the truth is not everyone can do it.

In reality, anyone can call themselves a dog walker, at the very least all they need is a Facebook page and then they can start working as a professional dog walker. When you think of it like that it is very scary.

I have written this to help you choose and select a dog walker, hopefully it will help you pick the right dog walker for you.

You Need A Dog Walker, now what?

Decide exactly what you need for your dog. Is it morning walks, solo walks or daycare? Are they going to be happy traveling in a van, or would they be happier being walked from your front door?

Next, do your research – ask friends and other local dog owners who they would recommend.

A quick search in Facebook should throw up some local dog walkers along with their reviews. Google will also show you

reviews from Facebook, Yelp and Google. Find someone you like the look of and add them to your short list.

Once you've made contact and found a walker who can meet your requirements, they should be happy to come and visit you.

Here are good questions to ask, from the answers you should find out everything you need to know about the walker.

Always ask the dog walker about themselves. What brought them to dog walking?

This answer will provide you with great insight into them personally. Are they a dog walker because someone told them they should be one, or did their own dogs inspire them to become a walker, or do they have a lifelong love of dogs? Decide for yourself what makes a good answer.

How many dogs will they walk in a group?

A very important question. According to Edinburgh's Code of Conduct no more than 8 dogs should be walked together at any one time. The dog walker's insurance will also specify the maximum number of the dogs they can walk too. Generally, 6 dogs are a good number as the walker must watch, clear up after and control them all.

Where will your dog be walked?

Are they going to be taking your dog to the nearest park every time? Or is it strictly pavement walking? Think about how the location will suit your dog. If they are nervous of strangers, is the local park suitable for them?

How will they be transported?

Another very important question. Does the walker use a car or a van? Does each dog have their own space/crate, or do they travel together? Ideally, your dog should have their own space/crate in the walker's vehicle.

Does the walker work alone?

If they do walk with another person, then how do they ensure the dogs remain their center of attention? Anyone who is walking with a friend will be chatting and is always never going to have their attention on the dogs.

How long is each walk going to be?

Is the walk going to be 60 minutes? Does that include time to transport your dog to and from the walk OR does the 60 minutes start as soon as they leave your home?

Will your dog be off lead?

You need to decide if you would like your dog kept on their lead or be given freedom off the lead. Your walker should follow your instruction especially if your dog isn't allowed off. If your dog is allowed off lead will they be off for the full walk or only part of it?

What training methods do they use?

While the walker isn't there to train your dog, they will still expect your dog to walk nicely on lead, come when called and even do basics such as sit, down, wait etc. Every time your dog walker asks your dog for one of these behaviours they are practising training, it's important to know how they do it.

Do they use positive reinforcement, do they just shout/repeat themselves or do they act like an 'Dog whisperer'? (Top Tip – the answer is positive reinforcement – no fear, no force and no dominance should ever be used).

What will happen if your dog becomes ill or injured while out with the walker?

Accidents can and do happen, your dog may become injured on a walk what procedures does the walker have in place to deal

with these situations? Do they have a Canine First Aid qualification? This is essential to any professional dog walker and you should check this.

Go walking

Any potential dog walker should come to your house to see you all. They should ask and want to know everything about your dog too as they need to ensure that your dog is suitable for group and walks. Be wary of any walker that is happy to just take your dog out in a group, no questions asked.

Another way of finding out more about your potential dog walker is to ask to join them on a group walk to see for yourself what they do. Ask to accompany a walk that your dog may become part of so you can see the other dogs that your dog could be out walking with.

You should also be very honest about your dog and their behaviour. Do they bark a lot, are there certain dogs they don't like, is their recall any good. The more you can say about your dog the more you will help the walker decide if they can walk your dog or not and it doesn't leave room for surprises on their first walk together.

It is also perfectly acceptable to ask for a trial walk for your dog before fully committing to a dog walker.

How Can You Identify A Professional Dog Walker?

On a very basic level any potential dog walker should have Dog Walkers Insurance. This is to ensure that should anything happen while your dog is in their care both your dog and the walker are protected. They should be able to show you their insurance certificate.

Ask to see their Disclosure Scotland Certificate, this is a police check and it will show if they have any convictions.

In Edinburgh there is a Code of Conduct for Commercial Dog Walkers. It was set up by the council and while it is a voluntary scheme, every dog walker should be signed up to it. It is a pledge to say that the dog walker will behave positively and respectfully towards the public, green spaces and other animals in the parks.

Do they have any Canine Qualifications?

While this isn't necessary, to see it is always a helpful way to see what the walker knows and what they can offer. Canine Communication, Canine health and care, Canine First Aid are all good basics. If your potential dog walker has the above, ask to see the certificates.

All the above will help you weed out the have-a-go dog walkers from the serious professional dog walkers.

Last Thoughts

In my opinion, being a dog walker requires specialised knowledge and skill sets, I myself walk up to six dogs at once, and it is not always easy but with the right knowledge I am able to handle every situation I come across.

A dog walker should also use ethical business practices that are necessary to ensure the safety of the dogs in their care, as well as the safety and enjoyment of other dogs and humans who share the walks, parks, and pavements.

You will be most likely be handing over the keys to your house along with your dog, to your chosen dog walker so ensure that you feel 100% happy.



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