



## Finding a Trainer

Often people ask my thoughts about another professional's advice about training. For example, "My breeder recommended..." or "My vet told me to...". There are some pet care professionals out there who are also experienced trainers. But usually, this is not the case. Animal behavior and training is an industry unto itself. You need to be sure the person you ask for advice, or hire to help with your dog, is appropriately qualified.

**Research** – Before contacting trainers, you need to know what you are looking for. Do you have a puppy that just needs some socialization and good manners? Does your dog have a specific behavioral problem? Next, see what method of training your consultant uses. When you contact the consultant, be sure to ask for specific examples of how they apply their method. Does this method sound right for you and your dog?

**Ask for qualifications** - The U.S. does not have government licensing requirements for animal behaviorists or trainers. State laws vary. This makes it even more important to know where a trainer learned her craft. In order to understand the application of any method, trainers need a basic understanding of canine learning theory and operant conditioning (the use of consequences to modify behavior). Be sure to ask how long the consultant has been in business and how much hands-on experience they have.

**References** – Ask for a minimum of three references. At least one of these should be a former client. When speaking with former clients, ask for specifics about their case and the trainer's effectiveness. Other animal experts, such as veterinarians, may also prove acceptable references.

**Audit** – If a group classes are offered, ask to attend one without your dog. This allows you focus on the teaching style and decide if the group setting is right for your dog. It's a good idea to audit a class towards the end of the session. You can see how well handlers and dogs are performing as well as ask participants about their experience. If you are interested in private, in-home, training ask the consultant for an introductory meeting. Be sure this is someone both you and your dog are comfortable with. You should feel the consultant wants to be a mentor, not a drill sergeant.

**Look for changes** – Once you start training, carefully watch for changes in your dog. We want positive changes. Negative changes indicate a problem. Don't be shy about questioning techniques or even changing trainers if necessary.

Finally, ask plenty of questions before making any commitments. Make sure you understand all terms and conditions of any agreements requiring signature. Be wary of any "guaranteed success" claims. A good trainer will modify their techniques or defer to additional experts as needed. Remember that a trainer's job is not to train the dog, but to teach you to train your dog.