

**"My pet has a problem and you were no help!"**

## **Concerns With Relying on Internet Advice**

By Karen Peak

### West Wind Dog Training

The message from the distraught woman went something like: "My dog is acting aggressively and biting for no reason, I need it fixed." I replied that there are many reasons why her dog could be acting like this – it could be medical, it could be due to lack of socializing and confidence, something could be triggering it externally that the owner is not aware of. I suggested she contact a good trainer or behaviorist near her as well as a vet to rule out medical if the behavior change was sudden. I gave her ways to increase safety until she could get a consult somewhere. It would mean work but she had to do it. Next thing I knew, the woman blew up stating that I was no help and obviously did not know what I was talking about. If I did know dogs, I could have fixed the problem for her instead of telling her to spend money on trainers. The woman went with a person's advice that insisted she punish the dog every time it acted out. A few months later there was a follow up, the dog had killed another pet of hers and injured a child. The dog was given away to another family. She had sought an easy as well as a cheap way out and the results were horrific. I can only hope the dog did not repeat the performance in the new home.

Another message was along the lines of: "My Bruno has been vomiting a lot in the past hour; he seems uncomfortable and acting sick. What is wrong?" My response was: "The dog needs to get to a veterinarian immediately. There could be many things causing this from Bloat (Gastric Torsion or Dilation), poisoning, illness, etc. The dog could be in danger of dying soon – especially if torsion or poisoning - and veterinary assistance must be sought now." Again, another nasty response that I did nothing to help or fix the problem and he would wait to see what happened. If he thought it was serious, he would have called the vet first. I never heard back and hope the dog survived.

The Internet is a wonderful as well as a dangerous place. You can get great guidance. You can also get dangerous advice. The average pet owner appears to want to use the Internet to solve all problems as opposed to getting out there and doing work. I see two main areas people come to the Internet for pet advice: medical and behavior. Let us look at both of them and see why the responsible online advisor will often advise seeking professional assistance. Since I work primarily with dogs, I am using them as my main examples; however, what I am writing goes for just about all species we keep as pets (I do not think fish can have behavioral problems, but most species can and all pets can have medical problems). First, online medical advice:

Your dog is losing hair in spots on his body. He scratches and digs endlessly it seems. His is visibly miserable. His skin seems a bit funny but you forget to mention this assuming it is caused by the scratching. You go online and ask what could be wrong. A

few people suggest seeing a veterinarian as scratching has many causes from minor to serious. You feel that the veterinarian route is too expensive and want a cheap fix. There must be an expert on-line who will know what is wrong! One reply says it must be mange and to get Shampoo X. It will take a couple treatments, maybe three. Weeks pass and the dog is no better. You go back on-line; someone else says it must be fleas and flea allergies. You have never seen fleas but hey, you head out and buy a cheap flea spray. You read you need to treat in fourteen-day intervals and it may take three times before all the fleas are gone. Another month has passed. Your dog has worse hair loss and still scratching. The skin is worse and you finally mention the cruddiness you are seeing. Another person says ringworm causes this and cures with a topical athlete's foot product. The cream says four weeks to cure. Four weeks pass and still no improvement in the dog, actually, he is worse. You go back online and someone suggests dry skin: try oil and a better food. However, it can take a few months before you see results. Hey, still cheaper than that vet. You will try anything to save money and a trip. A few months have passed and your dog has mutilated itself scratching, secondary skin infections have set in and he smells due to them. The dog is a wreck. You finally break down, do what others suggested, and seek the vet.

The vet states your dog has the worse case of seborrhea he has ever seen and there is a serious secondary infection due to chronic raw skin. This is nothing that all the suggested treatments you followed in order to save money and hassle would have helped. However, since you decided to take the "easy way" out and avoid the vet, your dog now has multiple issues relating to lack of treatment. The poor animal has spent not only months in misery but is going to cost a lot more to treat due to complications. You cannot afford the treatments and decide the dog is so miserable it should be put down. Sadly, the people on line who suggested the vet in the first place as there can be so many causes of itchy skin – some serious, some not – were right. The dog required medical intervention months earlier. You also missed other symptoms that were indicative of Thyroid problems since you were focusing only on the scratching and not the total dog. Had you listened to those who knew that many things cause itchy skin and to have the vet determine the cause, the dog would still be with you. Often the longer health issues are let go, the more complicated and expensive they can become to treat.

Many health problems have similar symptoms. Some of these health issues are not serious but some can be fatal if untreated. Is that increase of water consumption due to the dryness of winter or diabetes? Dryness of winter is not serious but diabetes can be fatal if untreated. Is that sudden urinating in the house due to poor houstraining or is it a bladder infection or stones? Is that diarrhea for the past few days due to something eaten or illness? Without being able to see the pet, all people who give advice on line are doing is guessing based on their own experiences and not observation. They cannot run tests, they cannot diagnose. They can only give you things to consider and to discuss with your vet. Even an online vet cannot diagnose without seeing the dog. Relying solely on online advice to diagnose your pet is irresponsible. You can get ideas about things to ask a veterinarian but he must do diagnosing.

Relying solely on online training can be just as dangerous. Over the course of a year, I must spend hundreds of hours helping people over the phone and online. Things like crate training, house training and simple things, online advice can be fine IF and only IF the person advising is using positive methods and outlines them. The person who suggests isolating a barking dog or keeping a pup in the crate all day so it will not potty in the house are not addressing the issue and teaching how to train. They are giving cruel Band-Aids to cover the problem and not work it out. However, the average dog owner (and pet owner in general) often does not know about the humanity and cruelty of certain things and takes the advice as gospel. For example, Bunny-boy chews everything when out so they are told to keep the rabbit caged. Rabbits enjoy being with the family. Caging all day masks the issue and deprives the rabbit of interaction with the family. Bunny proofing a room as well as providing toys is a more humane way of working with the bunny. What type of advice is being given? Does it sound humane or cruel? Does it try to help resolve or just mask? Aggression, fear, other potentially serious issues, etc. should not be dealt with online. Why? Well, a picture is worth a thousand words; being able to see the problem in action is PRICELESS! "Why? I can describe what my pet is doing just fine!" you may say. Let me give a recent example that I worked with locally.

"Ann" called me worried that her small breed dog was showing dominant aggression and he was terrorizing people and other dogs. She was seeking advice on how to fix it. I wanted to see the dog to evaluate him. Ann lived nearby and I could see the dog as opposed to referring her elsewhere. Her dog was not neutered and this is the first thing I told her to have done. It would not cure him but would help *if* combined with work. He was also an adolescent and this can be a great period of limit testing in many species. There were many things going the equation of working with the dog. I could not get solid information without observing him. I suggested I come out and observe him on his own territory. However, Ann seemed reluctant to have him looked at and had a bunch of excuses why she had to fix this over the phone. I explained to her that without observing the dog at the house and seeing how they interacted, I could not give a fair evaluation. I told her in the interim, the dog was to be on leash at all times with her and never given the chance to be in a position he could go after anything. I took several calls from Ann over the weeks. Each call I explained why the dog needed to be seen in order to properly help. This was not a simple housetraining question; this was a serious problem and a dog that was a risk. At last, Ann relented. Her dog was a real danger now.

Within five minutes of observing the dog and Ann, I had my answer. The dog was NOT dominant as she thought. He was fearful. I had her contact the breeder and there was no history of bad temperaments in her line as far as she knew. The breeder sounded reputable. Therefore, I discounted genetics as the underlying cause. That and Ann started the dog was quite confident and outgoing when he was a youngster. However, something happened. It was not difficult for me to figure out. The dog was poorly socialized and Ann was doing things to encourage the dog to be afraid of the world. This dog had no confidence at all. Had I gone solely by Ann's description of how her dog was dominant and given her advice over the phone, I could have made the situation far worse. This would have been irresponsible for me to do. The dog needed intervention and Ann needed to learn how to read him and how her body language affected his development.

She was the reason he was fearful and snapping, she needed to learn to fix the problem. In an hour of working intensely, I had already noticed a different. The dog was approaching me and showing more confidence, but he had a very long way to go and Ann a lot of work ahead of her. Sadly, after the consult, she never called back for follow up and more work. Nevertheless, I did what I could and the decision to continue was hers to make. At least I got her to understand the importance of working a problem one-on-one with a trainer and not over the phone or Internet.

There are many things a trainer or behaviorist needs to see in order to help work out issues. I need to see the dog's behavior in action. I need to see how the family reacts to the dog. The dog's environment and how humans interact with him are two. I need to see how the owners are reinforcing and redirecting various behaviors. I need to see timings of reinforcement and redirection. These are things I cannot see in an email, message board post or over the phone. This is why a responsible trainer will suggest finding someone to work with dog and owner for many problems. Moreover, this goes for other species as well. Take horses: how do you work with the horse and are you doing things to bring about undesired behaviors without realizing it? How do you build confidence or do you punish? It is vital for someone who works with animals – regardless of the species – to observe things first-hand.

You can get guidance and ideas through the Internet and this is all the internet should be. There is so much that can go wrong medically and behaviorally. Without having someone see your pet first hand to give a proper evaluation, the end results could be devastating. Remember, that a picture is worth a thousand words but seeing the problem in person is priceless!