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Don't Leave Home Without One

How to find and identify a trustworthy pet sitter (hint: a snappy business card does not a pet sitter make)

By Eileen Mitchell

Last year, just four days before my mother was scheduled to leave for a two-week Mediterranean cruise, the pet sitter she'd hired four months earlier dropped a bombshell. "I'm not comfortable watching Sabrina," the woman announced in a curt phone call, adding that she thought the dog was aggressive. "Sorry, but you'll have to find someone else." Click.

Mom was so panicked that she considered canceling her vacation. Who could she possibly entrust with her two babies—Sabrina, a Shepherd mix, and Holden, a Boxer/Shar-Pei/Chow mix—at this late date? She didn't want to subject them to the stress and unfamiliarity of a boarding

kennel, nor did she want a neighbor just dropping by at feeding time. Fortunately, a close family friend stepped in, but it was a lesson learned. So the question is: How can you be sure that the pet sitter you've hired is reliable?

Conducting my own informal survey,

I posed this question to several of my friends, and the stories I heard made my hair stand up. One couple hired someone to stay in their home for 10 days to watch their two Bichon Frises. Their neighbor became suspicious when she heard the dogs barking round-the-clock in the backyard. After observing that the sitter was just occasionally dropping by, she tracked down the vacationing couple and alerted them to the sitter's negligence. They cut short their Mexican holiday and returned home to take care of their neglected dogs.

Another man left his three cats with someone he hired through a pet-sitting agency. "Agency." Sounds official, doesn't it? But when he returned two weeks later, he found empty food and water bowls, and wondered how long his cats had been without.

Then there was the friend who hired a woman who worked in her veterinarian's office. Only later did she learn that the man the sitter had introduced as her husband was actually a new boyfriend, and the couple had used my friend's house as Rendezvous Central. When she discovered this deception, she immediately changed the locks. Good thing—though it may have been coincidental, she later found scratch marks on the door, indicating that someone had been trying to get in, probably using a copy of her old key.

Vital Signs

Anyone can call him- or herself a pet sitter. Create a snappy website, choose a catchy title, print smart-looking business cards, ask friends to provide references and voilà! Instant pet sitter. Heck, under those conditions, even Beelzebub could launch a successful service. My mother blindly hired her sitter based on a friend's recommendation. And when the sitter presented her membership letter from Pet Sitters Associates, LLC, Mom was confident that she had hired a reliable person. Well, turns out that my mom's friend, who works in a bank, had never personally used the sitter; she only knew her as a customer. And I later learned

that Pet Sitters Associates simply provides insurance. They do not license or certify pet sitters, nor do they monitor members or provide any type of training.

Other groups go further. The voluntary nonprofit National Association of Professional Pet Sitters (NAPPS) offers tools and support to foster the success of members' businesses. Founded in 1989, NAPPS provides its 1,800 members with access to monthly teleconferences, an annual conference, a virtual library, and discounted promotional and educational tools. As Executive Director Felicia Lembesis notes, "These benefits promote professionalism in addition to the 'Pledge of Professional Conduct' that members must sign when joining the organization. NAPPS also offers members a certification program based on pet-care issues and business management. To maintain certified status, members must complete continuing education credits."

However, like Pet Sitters Associates, NAPPS does not monitor or evaluate its members. The organization's website notes that certification does not guarantee quality service, only that the member has "met certain objective criteria through a course of study and/or testing as a professional pet sitter." This is why they strongly

urge guardians to carefully interview candidates first.


"Hiring a pet sitter is a serious process," Lembesis agreed. "Make sure the person you choose is trained and professional. He or she will not only be responsible for your pet, but also will have regular access to your home."

Mom's first mistake was skipping the face-to-face interview. Her second was ignoring the red flag that popped up when the sitter declined to meet Sabrina and Holden before accepting the assignment. "You're not leaving for months yet," she assured Mom. "We have time." Then, just days before the trip, the sitter finally squeezed in an hour to spend time with her future canine charges. That was when she decided that Sabrina was aggressive and had a change of heart.

A legitimate reason? Absolutely. However, barring a genuine emergency, a professional pet sitter won't cancel at the eleventh hour. He or she will meet you and your pet well in advance, before an arrangement is agreed upon, and address any issues that may be identified at that time.

The HSUS suggests that during your initial meeting with a potential pet sitter, you should be prepared to get answers to a list of questions, including:

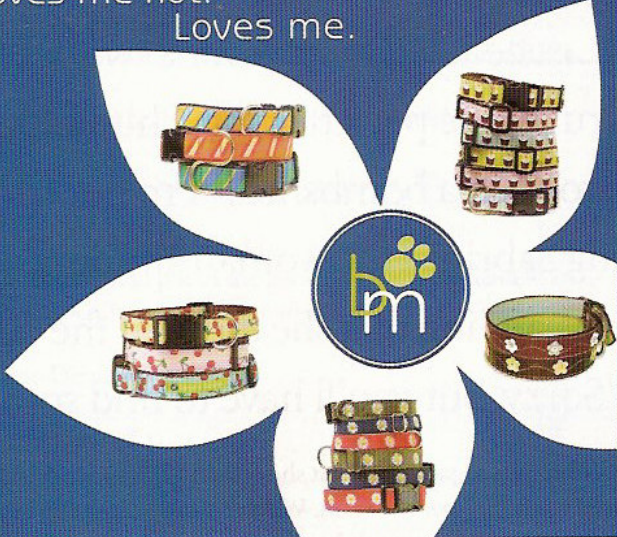
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- Will you provide a written service contract spelling out fees and specific services (such as exercise, grooming, playtime)?
- If you provide live-in services, can you specify the amount of time you will actually spend with my pet? Is this detailed in the contract?
- Will you provide written proof of commercial liability insurance (to cover accidents and negligence)? Are you bonded (to protect against theft)?
- What training have you received?
- Do you take notes about my pet's particular issues and needs (her fears, medical conditions, medications and routines)?
- What if an emergency prevents you from fulfilling your duties? Do you have a backup?
- Will you provide phone numbers of other clients who have agreed to serve as references?

And you shouldn't be the only one asking questions.

It's a Two-Way Street

"I [use] a two-page questionnaire to make sure I have all the information I need," says Tracy Timmer, a professional pet sitter and chairperson of East Bay Pet Sitter's Association (EBPSA) in Oakland, Calif. The nonprofit organization was

founded in 1994 when a group of East Bay pet sitters thought they might benefit from banding together and sharing their collective wisdom. Currently numbering 70 members, EBPSA (ebpsa.com) strives to foster camaraderie, further education and enhance skills through monthly meetings, during which they share experiences and listen to guest speakers.

"Clients can avoid problems by paying attention while we're going through the checklist," Timmer continues. "I've had people handling screaming babies or taking phone calls [while I was meeting with them]. They think pet sitting is easy, but there are so many things that can arise while they're gone that they just don't think about." Among them, unexpected visits from repair people and housekeepers, medical emergencies, and household accidents. Even small oversights can add up to a frustrating pet-sitting experience.

"Like leaving enough food for their pet or providing the code or phone number for their alarm service," Timmer offers. "People don't think to leave things where I can find them, like paper towels and cleaning supplies. On one job, I carried a bag of cat litter across the kitchen before realizing the bag had a hole. There was cat litter all over the floor, but for the life

TIPS

- Schedule your sitter well in advance, especially if you're hiring someone for the first time or are new to the area.
- Pay attention to the sitter's questions and consider what s/he might require in your absence.
- Provide the sitter with a list of essential information, including phone numbers for the vet, security alarm company, local family or friend contact, and, of course, a number where you can be reached; security codes; routine service calls (housekeeper, gardener, repair person); potential visitors (for example, does your brother have a key to your house and tend to drop in without calling first?); location of cleaning supplies, pet's medications.
- Be sure to have enough of your pet's food on hand to last through your anticipated absence—if in doubt, buy extra (and tell the sitter where to find it).
- Do NOT cancel at the last minute; pet-sitting is a business and last-minute cancellations can deprive a sitter of work opportunities elsewhere.

of me, I couldn't find a broom! Clients need to think ahead to determine what the sitter might need."

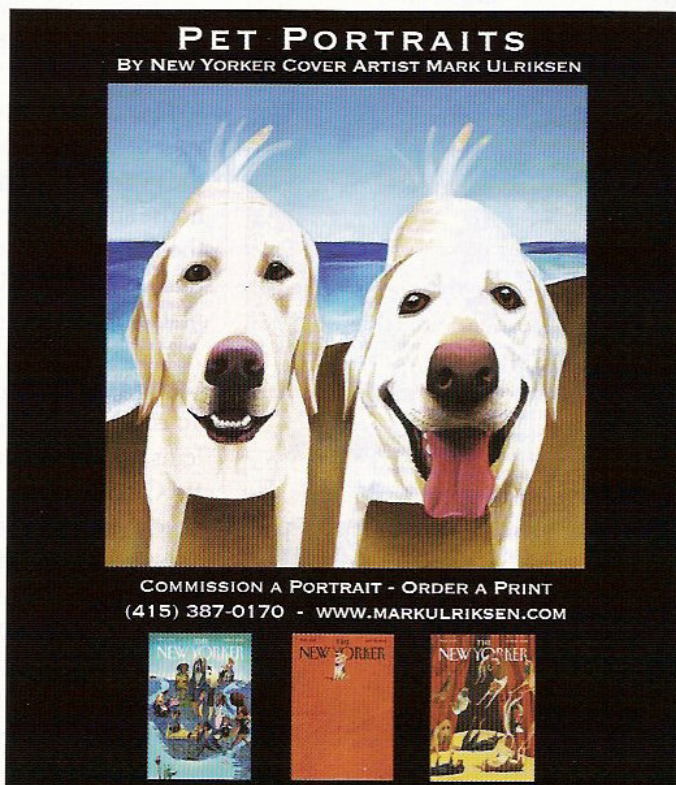
One pet sitter (who prefers to remain anonymous) adds that most people in the



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business have a genuine love and concern for their charges, but they receive little in the way of protection.

“Pet sitters have no unions or protection of any kind,” he points out. “I wish I had [had] a union when one client called me from Europe to request that I show someone into his home for an appraisal. I felt like saying, ‘That’s not in my job description,’ but that’s the problem: I don’t have a job description! We’re at the mercy of our clients. Interview any pet sitter and you’ll hear stories about how owners write us bad checks, short-change us, treat us like underlings or forget to alert us to their pets’ maladies—the list goes on.”

A little due diligence before hiring a pet sitter can pay future dividends. You don’t want someone who will drop in just long enough to refill Rocket’s water bowl. The ideal sitter will spend quality time with your dog or cat, provide the amount of exercise you have requested, and be sufficiently familiar with animals to know when veterinary care is needed. If arranged in advance, a sitter may also handle minor household duties, such as watering plants and collecting mail.

So how do you find this trustworthy soul? It makes sense to start with a referral from someone you know and respect—a friend or veterinarian, for instance—preferably, someone who has personally used the individual’s services. After all, this is a person to whom you are entrusting your beloved companion. Not to mention the person who will have the key to your house and access to everything within. All the more reason to take steps to ensure that you’re not rolling out the welcome mat for Lizzie Borden or Ted Bundy.

Cover Your Tail

To cut down on potential security problems, a relatively new company, Fetch! Pet Care, conducts thorough background checks on individuals applying to work as pet sitters. Founded in 2002 by a former IBM executive, the nationwide franchise is one of the first of its kind and the largest in the nation, serving cities coast to coast. The company is methodical in its screening process, which includes

phone interviews followed by in-person interviews and criminal background checks. Reference checks, training sessions, written tests and on-the-job observations with senior sitters are also part of the protocol. Once hired, the company monitors its employees through the use of client evaluations.

“We have processes, systems and procedures in place that every franchise is required to follow,” says Fetch! Pet Care founder and president Paul Mann. “In 2005, people spent over \$35 billion on their pets, yet there’s very little that is professional or standardized about the pet-sitting industry. That’s surprising and scary, which is why I started this business. Our goal is to systemize and streamline all operations, and think of everything that needs to happen to ensure everything goes smoothly.” Chuckling, he shares the company’s tag line: “We’ve got your tail covered.”

Pet-sitting services can also be found in the yellow pages of the phone book and through organizations such as your local humane society, shelter or rescue groups. I found a wonderful sitter for my Greyhound, Elvis, through the referral program of Golden State Greyhound Adoption (goldengreyhounds.com). My sole concern is that sometimes I suspect my dog prefers the sitter to me.

Which, when you think about it, is the ideal worry to have. ☺

Heads Up

We all know no one can take care of our furry companions as well as we can. But sometimes we just can’t take them with us. Here are resources that may help make leaving a little easier.

Fetch! Pet Care

866.338.2463 (866-FETCHME)
fetchpetcare.com

National Association of Professional Pet Sitters

800.296.PETS
petsitters.org

Pet Sitters International

336.983.9222
petsit.com