

## Promoting Sensible Selection – Select An Owner

B. Luxton, Executive Officer, Dog and Cat Management Board, South Australia

### Introduction

How often do we hear about “the wrong dog, the wrong background, the wrong history, in the hands of the wrong person in the wrong environment?” The Board’s research into incidents of dog bites (Thompson, 2008) has indicated a general lack of understanding of the requirements for particular breeds or breed mixes by potential dog owners. The Dog and Cat Management Board have for the last ten years collected and researched dog incident/ hospital admission statistics. The toll of injury from dogs which result in hospital admissions has not altered in the last 10 years. Analysis of incident histories reveals clear support for a campaign promoting the importance of appropriate selection when it comes to dogs and breed choice.

Select An Owner is an on-line interface designed to assist the process of research and consideration when it comes to determining compatibility between prospective owners and their breed of choice.

### Methodology

As an established registered breeder of pugs and basenjis, I appreciate the requirement to ensure that potential new owners have acquainted themselves with the fundamental characteristics of my breeds. Whether it be the simple fact that pugs shed an insidious hair, which works its way into the fabric of the house, car, clothes and suffer from heat stress or that basenjis love to destroy things and will watch you bury the irrigation hoses for the garden so they know where to dig to destroy your handiwork when you are not looking. People need to know this before acquiring one of my puppies and risking a situation of incompatibility.

Having personally completed 16 years of study to attain an All Breeds Australian National Kennel license to adjudicate conformation show dogs, I was taught the breed history for every dog breed in Australia and its conformational requirements to deliver its required function. Research supports the fact that appreciation of natural breed specific tendencies and behavioural idiosyncrasies is largely lost on the pet owner of today who simply consider the morphological components of a breed, leaving the breed specific tendencies largely unexplored (Sharp and Hartnett, 2010<sup>2</sup>).

Select An Owner is an innovative, web-based interface where the dog breed determines if the prospective owner can provide for its needs - essentially turning pet selection interfaces around the other way. In studies conducted by Mars Petcare and the Pet Industry Association it was identified (Sharp and Hartnett, 2010<sup>1</sup>) that prior experience as a child is one of the influencing factors when selecting a dog later in life. When approaching a breed selection exercise, people generally have a preferred breed or breed group in mind and prefer to identify the breed of choice as the first step in undertaking a compatibility exercise.

Developing the database of breeds to support the Select An Owner interface commenced in 2008 using information obtained from registered breeders around Australia. Supplementing this list with additional breeds identified through the Thompson, 2008 injury surveillance report as having been responsible for dog related injury and breeds which are commonly interbred, determined the initial breed list of 50 for the interface.

Telephone surveys were conducted with more than 150 registered breeders of the identified breeds, with 3-4 breeder perspectives acquired for each of the breeds. Surveys of breeders were also conducted during the Board’s attendance at the 2008 Royal Adelaide Show and a copy of the survey appears as Appendix 1. The resulting data set was smoothed to develop a mean response for each of the questions against the selected breeds together with a range of acceptability for answers.

Identification of the most pertinent questions to be asked of potential dog owners came out of the breeder surveys and answer acceptability was weighted according to the range of acceptability ascertained from the breeders. For example, if breeders identified the breed to be unsuitable in houses with children under the age of 5, the answer to this question was weighted to indicate a very low level of acceptability in the final scores.

### Discussion

Supporting the AIAM Dogs 101 initiative, promoting the 5 fundamentals for the right start with your dog, the Board considered that promoting sensible selection was a fundamental step towards establishing positive and safe human/ pet relationships. Encouraging potential dog owners to stop and think before purchasing is considered critical to the success of an ongoing and safe relationship with any pet. In 2009, a Council reported incident involving an Akita dog attacking a 10 year old girl, revealed this was the third Akita owned by the family. The first was euthanased because it attacked the son, the second was euthanased because it continually escaped and attacked and killed another dog and the third, the current dog, had just attacked the daughter of a family friend. Is an Akita an appropriate breed for this family?

The performance indicators against which the Board intends to measure the investment made in the design of an online dog breed compatibility interface are:

- Reduction in shelter admissions as a result of incompatibility
- Reduction in dog related injury where breed choice is cited as the causative factor.

The science behind Select An Owner not only relates to the database of weighted answers which underpins the online interface, but appreciation of the educative value of indicating why the question is being asked.

For example, why ask the question about "How long am I to be left on my own each day?" without providing indication as to why the answer to that question is relevant. In each of the 14 questions, the reason for asking the question is provided.

The appearance and functionality of the web site has been developed by experts and presents an appealing and informative interface, accessible to everyone, through the Board's [www.goodownersa.com](http://www.goodownersa.com) website. Development of the interface with the current 50 breeds cost ~\$14,500, however the upgrading of additional breeds has minor expense implications and is an ongoing project for the Board.

Select An Owner is the first online pet selection interface which will actually indicate an incompatibility. While the "computer doesn't actually say NO!" the final summary of answers will indicate where incompatibilities exist between the potential new owners' answers and the "needs of the breed". Identifying the elements of incompatibility provides opportunity for the person to either reconsider their breed of choice or address the incompatibility.

## Conclusion

Research commissioned by the Dog and Cat Management Board (Sharp and Hartnett, 2010<sup>2</sup>) and a range of industry partners have determined that user investment in the pet acquisition process is critical to child safety and responsible management of pets in the community.

Appropriate research into the requirements of any breed or part breed of dog can never be underestimated in assisting the development of long term relationships. Review of the performance indicators, once the media plan for Select an Owner has run its course, will indicate a measure of success for this approach to promoting the importance of investment in sensible choice.

## References

- Thompson, P (2008). Dog Attack Investigation. *Consultancy report for Dog and Cat Management Board.*
- Sharp, A and Hartnett, N<sup>1</sup> (June 2010) Dog Ownership and Purchase Decisions: Royal Adelaide Show Research 2009. *Consultancy report for Dog and Cat Management Board.*
- Sharp, A & Hartnett, N<sup>2</sup> (June 2010) Market research report on dog ownership and dog attacks in South Australia. *Consultancy report for Dog and Cat Management Board.*

## Appendix 1

Select An Owner Questionnaire

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ben Luxton  
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Ben commenced his career with the University of Adelaide after graduating with a degree in Zoology and Botany, working on Australian Research Council funded projects relating to the conservation of three species of native Australian rodents.

Before commencing employment with the Department for Environment and Natural Resources as Community Education Officer, managing environmental education delivery at Cleland Wildlife Park, Ben was employed by the University of South Australia with the School of Environment and Recreation Management. He commenced with the Dog and Cat Management Board in February 2008 in the role of Communications and Project Officer, accepting the role of Executive Officer in 2009. Ben has a strong communications and research background based on more than 20 years of employment in these areas.

Ben has been a keen and successful exhibitor of conformation show dogs for almost 30 years and attained his Australian National Kennel Council conformation license to judge all breeds, in 2008, having completed 16 years of study to attain it. He has completed assignments in most Australian States and Territories in addition to overseas appointments in South Africa, New Zealand and Thailand, with assignments pending.

Ben is at the front line on all issues that concern dog and cat management and continues to provide support and advice to the Dog and Cat Management Board and responsible Minister.

## APPENDIX 1

## Select An Owner Questionnaire



Research indicates that people sometimes lack realistic expectations of the dog breed they are considering purchasing. Lack of research, misinformation and failure to understand the elements involved in caring for and living with a dog can all contribute to incompatibility.

Select An Owner is an interactive tool designed to encourage potential owners to undertake a selection process against the requirements of the breed they are most interested in acquiring.

We would like to add your breed to the next instalment of breeds available through the Select An Owner interface.

We invite you to provide your knowledge & experience to help build a realistic picture of your breed.

Your answers will be held in confidence and will not be forwarded to third parties. Please lodge your form with one of the staff at the Dog and Cat Management exhibit, trial the Select An Owner interface and ask any further questions to receive a gift, courtesy of the Dog and Cat Management Board.

Breed: \_\_\_\_\_

Name (optional): \_\_\_\_\_

Phone no. (optional): \_\_\_\_\_

If further information is required we may contact you.

**01** What is the minimum yard size you recommend for owners of your breed?

- inside all the time  
 courtyard/ small yard  
 city block  
 acreage

**02** What is the minimum height fence you recommend to ensure the safe containment of your breed?

- requires very high fences over 2 m  
 standard fences required 1-2 mtrs  
 low fence is ok, up to 1 mtr  
 no fences required as dog should be kept inside

**03** How important is it that your breed spends time inside their owner's house?

- not important  
 important dog is allowed in part of the time  
 dog should be kept inside most of the time

**04** How much exercise does your breed require each day for optimum physical and mental health?

- none  
 30 mins  
 60 mins  
 more than 60 minutes

**05** How much training does your breed require? CAN SELECT MORE THAN ONE

- none  
 basic manners training at home  
 regular training at home  
 attendance at obedience school

Additional comments:

**06** How would you best describe the energy levels of your breed (both physical and mental)?

- really mellow  
 short bursts of activity  
 reasonably active, needs more mental stimulation  
 very energetic, needs a lot of mental stimulation

**07** What behaviours does your breed exhibit when excited? CAN SELECT MORE THAN ONE

- barks
- chases other animals
- jumps or runs around a lot
- wants to play with toys

Additional comments:

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**08** For how long each week can your breed be left without human company?

- do not like to be alone
- 10-20 hours per week
- 20-40 hours per week
- okay for more than 40 hours per week (ie owner that works FT)

**09** How would you classify the suitability of your breed for families with young children?

- suitable for children 0-5 with close supervision
- suitable for children 5-12 with close supervision
- suitable only for children older than 12

Comments:

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**10** What natural breed-specific tendencies does your breed exhibit? E.g. Rounds things up, runs fence lines etc

Comments:

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**11** How much time each week should be spent on grooming your breed for coat health?

- grooming not required
- up to 30 minutes
- 30-60 minutes
- more than 60 minutes

**12** What is the average cost per week to feed an adult of your breed on your recommended diet? Please include the cost of treats if you recommend these (eg bones for dental health)

- up to \$10 per week
- \$11-25 per week
- more than \$25 per week

**13** Does your breed like meeting new people?

- loves to, happiest at social gatherings
- takes a little while to warm to new people
- prefers not to, happiest with their immediate family

Additional comments:

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**14** Does your breed respond well to meeting new dogs?

- no, does not like to meet new dogs
- socialises well once comfortable
- loves to, initiates contact

Additional comments:

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**15** Does your breed have any specific care considerations or any other important requirements? Please explain

Explanation:

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**Thank you!**

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