**How to find a dog walker/pet sitter**

**Trust** of the pet care provider and **safety** of your pet are the two most important factors when it comes to choosing the right dog walker or pet sitter. It’s easy for people to say they love animals, but to be a professional dog walker (or sitter) you have to have experience working with animals of all types, breeds, sizes, and personalities. It takes more than having grown up with a dog to know the various nuances that make a walker/sitter exceptional.

This isn’t a decision to make lightly: who you choose to walk or watch your dog matters. Anybody can advertise or list themselves as a walker/sitter, but that doesn’t mean they have the experience necessary to keep your dog safe and happy.

Don’t give up if your first candidate doesn’t pan out. Keep doing your research and interviewing candidates until you find someone that works for both you and your pet. Take your time because your pet deserves to be safe, comfortable and happy while you’re away. Trusting your “gut” can be the difference between a good and not so good situation for your pet.

A recommendation is to go with someone that does this for a living (part or full time), rather than someone who is a student, retiree, in-between jobs or a kid that loves dogs. It is a huge commitment to show up at someone’s home every single day (or whatever the schedule) for months and even years. Once someone finds the perfect walker or sitter they go to great lengths to keep them. You want a pro – someone who is internally motivated and holds themselves accountable to the job they’ve committed to doing, no matter how cold, wet or miserable it is outside. And in this industry, you usually get what you pay for – dog walkers and pet sitters should be setting their rates according to their experience, credentials, reviews and overall reputation.

This is where you ask yourself, *“How much is peace of mind and the safety of my pet worth?”*

##### **Start your search early.**

With the health, happiness and wellbeing of your precious pet at stake, this isn't the kind of process you want to rush. Start your search for the right walker or sitter as far in advance as possible. Well-liked pet sitters get booked early (6 months to a year in some cases), especially during popular vacation times and the holiday season.

**What are your dog’s needs?** Determine exactly what your dog needs from a walker. Ask yourself some questions:

* Does my dog require just a pee break, a solo neighborhood walk or a group walk/hike.
* How many days a week do I need assistance and for how long?
* Short term (vacation/summer) ongoing (while you’re working) or sporadic (from time to time, i.e. gone all day occasionally, date nights, etc.)
* What’s my monthly budget for a dog walker?
* Ideal times for the walk – morning, mid-day, afternoon (most walkers will give a 2 hour time range)
* Walkers will assume all shots and immunizations are up to date but some may ask for paperwork.
* Special needs like un-neutered/spayed is a big item to discuss as they may not be able to walk with other dogs or even get near other dogs in the area.
* An advantage for YOU - walkers also can put packages/deliveries inside if they pick-up the dog from inside the house. Some may just take the dog from the backyard and return them there but can also move packages out of sight.

W**hat kind of relationship do you want and what kind of service does your schedule require?** To generalize in a big way:

*Solo dog walkers are like a locally owned store: highly personal relationships, flexible service, but with individual quirks and varying availability.*

*Dog walking companies are more like shopping at a large store: increased convenience but with more rules and less personalized service (and usually includes contracts).*

Frequently, people new to dog walking/sitting usually work with the larger companies first and slowly build up their own clientele and either balance both or eventually work for themselves exclusively. You just have to pick what works best for you.  And remember: there is little to no oversight in dog walking. The bosses rarely see their employees in action. So ultimately, the person who is walking your dog – whether they are self-employed or working for a service – is alone with your dogs almost all the time.

**Where to find a dog walker**

**Tap into your network.** The best place to start is through recommendations.

Talk to friends, family, neighbors, co-workers and other dog owners to see if they can suggest someone. Then try:

* Local shelter – Marin Humane has a list of reputable walkers/sitters
* Yelp
* Dog groomers
* Dog trainers
* Veterinarians
* Online search for websites – individuals that have a website usually means they are taking the venture seriously as a career. The larger companies almost all have websites but cross reference these with Yelp.

**Set up a meet and greet.** Once you weed out the dog walkers you are uncomfortable with, it’s time to arrange a meeting with the ones you like. It’s important to see how your dog interacts with them and potential dog walkers should offer this for free. The dog walkers I know show up with some kind of “New Client Checklist” that will collect the following information:

* Your contact information, including phone numbers and email addresses.
* Veterinary information
* If your dog takes any medication, make sure your walker is informed as to what it is for, and if there’s a chance he might have to administer it, leave exact instructions on how to do so.
* Feeding instructions in the event he will be the one to give your dog a meal.
* Location of supplies (leashes, treats, cleaners, pee pads, etc.)
* How the animal interacts with other dogs, people and other critters
* Any training they have had
* Personality/Idiosyncrasies – behavioral info, do’s and dont’s
* Special needs/conditions
* Alarm code and instructions

It may take a little time to find a dog walker that you and your dog feel comfortable with, and that’s OK - the goal is to make sure your dog is safe and happy in the hands of someone else. It is also smart to have one primary and one back-up sitter or walker in case one is unavailable.

If a **written contract** is offered, it should include:

* **A full list of services the pet sitter will provide:** Dog walking, feeding, overnight stays, and household chores like picking up the mail and watering plants.
* **The cost** of pet sitting broken down per day and per visit, plus any extra charges. For example, if the pet sitter charges $5 extra for holidays, make sure it is in the contract.
* **Number of visits:** Include the number of days you’ll need the sitter, plus the number of visits the sitter will make per day.

The bottom line: Hiring a walker/pet sitter can be stressful at first. It can be nerve racking the first time you leave your dog at home alone with someone else. But these steps will make the process go a lot smoother – and may even save you some cash. The dog walker/pet sitter’s goal is to create **peace of mind** while you are away from your pet.

**Here are some tips for meeting with a potential dog walker:**

**1. There should be a free consultation at your home, with no obligation to hire the dog walker.** This is the meet and greet. With larger companies, sometimes only the boss comes to meet you. Ask that whomever will actually be walking your dog – the primary walker – comes with them too.

**2. Watch them interact with your dog(s) during this initial meeting.** Unless your dog is fearful, they should pretty much love the dog walker right away. Dog walkers smell of other dogs – your dog should react accordingly. And the dog walker? You should see pure *joy* on their faces. Meeting new dogs is FUN for us. People that do this for a living love ANIMALS first and the money comes after. People that do this because they need the money first are not going to last or always be a good fit. It takes time to build up clientele and in this type of passion for animals is the driving force.

**2a. If your dog is fearful with new people, watch how the dog walker handles this.** Are they forcing themselves on your dog, insisting that they interact? Or are they hanging back, sitting on the floor, and calmly talking to you while your dog launches a covert exploration of their coat?

If your dog is uber-shy or has other serious quirks, it’s okay to ask for a second meeting. You’ll probably have to pay for it this time, but it will be helpful to have the dog walker meet your dog with you there again. Then, if you see that a little progress has been made and/or you trust that the dog walker is a good one, go for it. Sometimes shy dogs are less shy when you’re not home. Which leads to…

**2b. Remember that dogs are different when you’re not around.** This kind of thing happens a lot. Your dog(s) may be bolder or shyer in your presence. Friendly dogs might charge the door, growling and barking, when they are alone in the house and a stranger walks in. Shy dogs might opt to go for a walk with the stranger, now that mom isn’t looking. At some point, if you like the dog walker, you just have to let them show up alone and see what happens.

**3. If your dog has medical or behavioral issues, talk about them honestly.** You want to know if the dog walker/sitter has the skills to work with your dog and they need to be able to make an informed decision. A good dog walker knows their limits. It’s ok for them to tell you they aren’t skilled enough to work with your aggressive dog. In fact, it’s the responsible thing to do. So don’t hide anything from them. And don’t try to sugarcoat your dog’s issues so they’ll want to work for you. It’s not fair and it’s not safe. If you hire them, they will have to walk into your home – alone – and it can be dangerous if you fail to mention that your 110 pound dog will be loose in the house and has been known to pin strangers to the wall.

This is the time to be honest. Come up with a management plan for future visits, so that the dog walker can enter your home safely with minimal stress for them and your dogs.  For instance, if your dog is fearful, you can plan to leave their harness on, so that the dog walker doesn’t have to touch them too much on the first visit. Or if your dog is a nut with strangers, you can plan to crate or gate them away from the door. This is a good time to start talking about this stuff.

Some walkers may leave notes each time. I usually text lots for the first couple of weeks and send pics with the other dogs. Then it starts to trail off and once everyone is comfortable - no news is good news unless the owner likes to hear from me more often.

And don’t tell us your dog is great with recall when they are not that great at it.

**Questions to ask the potential walker/sitter**

This can be done in a phone interview before the meet and greet or during.

**Business Basics**

* How long have you been in business? What’s your experience with dogs? (You want a dog walker who doesn’t just love dogs but *knows* and *gets* dogs too.)
* Have you participated in any pet-care training, such as pet first aid/CPR?
* Are you experienced with dogs like mine?
* Are you licensed, bonded and insured?
* Do you have a business license? (some individual walkers will, some won’t – not the biggest deal. But, again, the more documentation they have, the more serious they take their business)
* Can you provide me client references? (they should be HAPPY to do so)
* What are your rates and payment schedule? What do you accept as payment (cash, check, PayPal, Venmo)
* What’s your cancellation policy? What happens if you are sick and unable to come on a scheduled day?
* If you’re out sick or on vacation, is there another dog walker who can cover for you?
* For walker companies: How does the pet-sitting business screen and train their pet sitters?

**The walks and logistical questions**

* Do you walk more than one dog at a time? And if so, how many dogs do you walk at once? (Experienced walkers usually will have 3-6 dogs at a time)
* Where will you walk my dog? How long is the walk?
* Will my dog be off-leash? (most walkers strive for the most playtime and tiring them out as much as possible)
* Do you go to a dog park? (I think this is “cheating” for a walker unless done for socialization)
* What kind of vehicle do you have for transportation of my dog?
* What is the time frame of the dog walk? (you should have a walk “window” of 2-4 hours)
* Will you send pictures/updates from the walk? (they should be happy to)
* What contingency plan does the pet sitter have in the event of inclement weather or natural disaster while caring for your pet(s)?
* What does the pet sitter do if medical care is needed for your pet? Arrangements should be made with your veterinarian and/or local emergency veterinary clinic to allow the sitter to seek medical attention for your pet while you are away.

These questions ensure that you can leave your beloved pets with the peace of mind knowing that they will be well cared for. That’s a win-win-win situation for you, your pets and your dog walker/pet sitter.

Additionally, here is a look behind the scenes for a dog walker:

* Dog walkers work almost every day, including holidays, and in any kind of weather (unless your dog chooses not to go out in the torrential downpour).
* We do avoid the really hot times during the day and prefer to take the dogs out as early as possible that fits your schedule in the summer months.
* We work when we’re sick, when we are injured, and when we have blisters the size of pancakes.
* Our biggest pet peeve is people who don’t pick up their dog’s poop – because we do and then some
* We also deal with dog haters (yes, there actually are some out there) on the trails
* We have dealt with dogs toileting and even vomiting in our vehicles; and mud and water after a rainy walk
* We have had family members, friends and neighbors stop by your home while we are sitting without a heads up. PLEASE give us a heads up if someone is coming by the house or even might stop by.
* Can you dig it? Dog walkers deal with all this, because we love being with the dogs. It’s a privilege to make a living being a dog’s friend.

Taking care of your dog walker

Once you’ve found a good dog walker hold onto them like they’re gold… because they can be! It’s not just about treating them kindly and paying them what they’re worth, it goes beyond that. Here are some things you can do to help your dog walker feel appreciated:

Respect their schedule. Make every effort to avoid last minute cancellations and try to book as far in advance as possible.

Know when their birthday is and give them a card and token of gratitude for the ease and peace-of-mind they bring to your life. And for an extra nice touch, give them a card and a “thank you” from your dog, too. (Who doesn’t love a gift certificate for coffee, movie or a massage)

When the holidays come around, don’t forget them on your holiday card (and perhaps gift?) list. Consider a nice monetary tip and thank you at the holidays, too.

If they have a website, Facebook or other promotional page (Yelp), give them a great review. Just like when you were searching for a dog walker—it helped to hear others' experiences and recommendations. Point out what makes them unique and/or what you love most about their service.

And, of course, a simple “thank you” goes a long way as well.

I have clients that send me “after” photos of their dogs pooped and napping – THAT is what we strive for – a worn out pup to make your life easier!

**Payment Schedules:**

Some individual walkers send official invoices, reminder emails of the weekly amount (lots of changes happen in a week), or just a text reminder each week. My clients know what the fees are and they just leave me cash, check, Venmo or PayPal me the amount each week (or before their trip for pet sitting).

Some payment terms for walking:

* Paid in full at beginning of month
* Pay weekly (leave cash, check, Venmo, PayPal)
* Pay every 2 weeks
* Invoiced at the end of each week (with a week to pay)
* Invoiced every 2 weeks
* Invoiced every month (usually the larger companies with employees/contractors)

Pet sitting:

* A check left at the house when the pet sitter arrives
* Pay half now/half when return (some like to do this so they can add extra when they return depending of the condition of their home and pet)

Tipping/paying extra:

* I have had clients ad $5-$10 each week for walks
* One client adds 20% to each pet sitting bill
* Some clients ask what I eat and shop for me before I get to their home
* Some pay me extra for food when staying there in cash or gift card

It is not necessary to do any of this but we do remember the ones that do.

Almost all of my clients give some kind of bonus at the end of the year (cash, gift cards (VISA, coffee, movie tickets, massage) and I am very grateful.

I treat the animals as if they are my own and I don’t want any of my clients to feel uneasy while they are away from their pets.