



How Much is That Doggie (Kitty) in the Window?

I am often asked what is the best way to acquire a pet. The problem is that there isn't one. Oh, there are do's and don'ts, shoulds and shouldn'ts, but ultimately most people make choices based on the "wanna principle." This is a well-known phenomenon among several types of people, including car enthusiasts, techies, and pet owners. In the latter case it goes something like this (often in the voice of a five-year old): I wanna puppy !!!! I wan that puppy ! I wan that puppy NOW! Result of the "wanna principle?" Wrong puppy. By the way, substitute kitty any time you wan, er, want.

The appropriate pet in the appropriate household will hopefully be there a long time. My oldest patient, a wonderful cat who hated me for a very long time, was one month shy of her 24th birthday. It is for this reason that I always advise against the "wanna principle" when selecting a pet. You wouldn't choose your spouse because he or she was waving cutely in a shop window, so why would you choose a puppy or kitten that way?

One needs to decide whether adopting a pet from a shelter or a rescue organization may be right for them, or getting a purebred from a breeder or reseller is preferred. There are reasons for each, so let's explore some of them.

There are millions of animals euthanized in the U.S. for the simple reason that they are homeless and space is limited. Oh, there are "no kill" shelters, as they like to call themselves, which crowd ill and often unadoptable pets in with other healthier ones, chain dogs to fences on 3-foot leashes and then call themselves "humane." There are other shelters that work with far too little funding to do anything more than feed and house those animals often brought to them because they were obtained by the "wanna principle." These are good places to start looking if a purebred dog or cat is not important to you, however there is a word of caution needed here. It is possible that the pet you choose from a shelter is there for problem behavior, and the shelter may not have been told about it (otherwise they may not accept it). You would then be inheriting that problem unwittingly. This could include elimination problems (making in the house), aggression problems (biting, scratching), and destructive problems (eating couches, scratching speakers).

Pet resellers are just that. They purchase pets for resale, mark them up, bathe them, and sell them for a profit. Now while I see nothing wrong with capitalism, it begs the question: do you think these places are going out of the way to buy quality animals, or are they looking for the cheapest price? Several news magazine shows have done exposés on "puppy mills" and "kitten mills," and it is there that pet

shops buy for the most part. These pets can be just as cute, but the number of potential health problems, including congenital problems, is increased since profit is the only motivation for the breeding.

My favorite recommendation for a purebred pet is the rescue organization for that particular breed. These organizations are comprised of people who just absolutely love a particular breed, and go out of their way to foster unwanted members of the breed until a loving home can be found. It is easy to find a rescue organization for a given breed if you are at all computer literate, as an Internet search using virtually any search engine can find many sites for each breed. Just simply type in “X rescue” and type the name of the breed instead of X (e.g. German Shepherd Rescue). The only downside to this way of acquiring a pet is that puppies and kittens are rarely available, as these pets are usually a bit older. The reason for the rescue varies, but usually involves the inability to keep the dog or cat, or the improper treatment of the pet, rather than something they have done wrong themselves.

Breeders of dogs and cats are the best way of getting a pet at a young age from someone who cares so much about the specific breed that they strive to eliminate known genetic problems if they can. The better quality breeders actually show their dogs at dog shows, and the best among them have the winners. It is the offspring of these animals that would be available to you as a pet. Some cautions here, as well though. Some breeders will not allow full registration; meaning that they do not believe this pet is of the same quality as the majority they breed. No problem, as long as you are not interested in showing or breeding the dog yourself, and they aren't charging you the same fee as the “show quality” dogs. Interestingly enough, the breeders are usually no more or not much more expensive than the resellers, only you are getting a much better quality pet from the breeder.

So here's the bottom line: do you really want the dog or cat? Do you know what you want as far as breed or mixed breed? Are you willing to do some shopping if you want to adopt from a shelter? The pet you want may not be at the first one you go to. Are you willing to do an impulse purchase from a mall and throw caution to the wind? Perhaps the most important question is the following: after spending all that time and money on a new pet, are you going to put in the effort to insure that it is healthy, and keep it so? The financial commitment is often overlooked and higher than expected, and the shelters don't need any more unwanted pets than they already have.