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Choosing the Right Pet Sitter

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When searching for the right pet sitter, you ultimately must find someone you trust to care for your dog, cat or other animal. Margaret Verghese always takes her cats, Batman and Bella, away with her on vacation rather than worry about them under the care of a pet sitter or friend. "I'd like to leave them with a friend who knows them well, but most of my friends have animals and I'm scared that they wouldn't get along," she said. On the flip side, "A pet sitter knows what to look for in case something is wrong, but they could be watching lots of pets and might expose my animals to diseases -- and ... my pets can't talk and give me a review!" Dilemmas like Margaret's have equally tested the limits of trust with family and friends, and fueled a \$3 billion pet services industry.

The Friend

Edmund Roberts is always quick to volunteer when a friend needs someone to look after his or her pet. "I love dogs and cats but don't own one myself, so getting to spend time with an animal is a real treat," he said. This is also beneficial for pet owners who can rest easy, knowing their animal is with someone they trust.

The arrangement is sometimes not only mutually convenient, but necessary. Michelle Morganti of Reisterstown, Md., said, "My recently adopted puppy responds well only to certain people, so I wouldn't feel comfortable leaving her with a stranger, even if it is a professional."

The Professional

Karen Santiago, a self-employed pet sitter in Brooklyn, N.Y., finds that she gets many clients whose loved ones back out at the last minute and look to her for reliability. "I offer to call or text message new clients the first few days so they get a little news and are assured I am actually going and caring for their pet," Santiago said.

Though it would seem getting truthful reports about your pet from a friend would be easier, that's not always the case. Roberts finds it difficult to give 100% honest feedback. "The dogs were horrible," Roberts admits of his friend's two bichons. "But they're her babies and I felt bad saying anything negative about them."

Morganti finds professionalism crucial on many levels, especially because her elderly pug requires medical attention. "Though plenty of my friends would watch Miko, it's important that the sitter has experience administering medicine." While not a legal requirement, thousands of sitters are certified through various professional associations and choosing a member ensures that the sitter has completed a course of study in animal care and health issues.

Making a Decision

Despite the convenience, trust and affordability of casual sitters, many pet owners prefer the experience and reliability of a professional, evident as the Bureau of Labor projects the employment of animal care workers will grow 19 percent during the next decade. No matter what type of sitter one chooses, there are some essential factors to consider:

- Make sure the animal's dietary, medication, outdoor and companionship needs are clear.
- Consider if a sitter is going to be as comfortable with the animal as a friend or family member who has previously

spent time with it. If you're using a professional for the first time, invite him or her to your home for an introduction to your pet; this will allow you to gauge how comfortable they are with each other.

- Ask for references if you are hiring professional pet sitters.
- Consider whether it would be best for your animal to remain in its own environment with a visiting sitter, or if it would be in its best interest to stay in the sitter's home.
- Clarify what course of action to take in the event your pet becomes ill.

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