

I Want to Work with Dogs!

- by Glen Kowarsky, CEO, Dogs at Camp Canada Ltd.

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Way back in the Spring of 2001, I had a trip planned to France. Finally. France! In case you missed that, go back and read it again: France. I had the airline tickets, the hotel reservations, the travel guides. Oh yes, and the girlfriend. And suddenly I realized that the people who were to care for my dog (my family) had other commitments (or so they said!). Uh oh. Now what? I couldn't leave her with just anyone. After all, we're talking about none other than my one and only (dog!) Abby. Abby is a Humane Society rescue, and came with her own set of 'issues', including epileptic seizures. I worried that she could have an 'episode' while I was away. What would happen?

Now rest assured, I am well aware that I am ridiculously over-protective of this dog. But she's.... she's... well, she's my Abby. Luckily - that time, my family did take her. What would I have done otherwise?

Necessity is indeed, the mother of invention. And so shortly after my trip, I set out to create what I felt was missing at the time for a dog like Abby.

I dreamed of fresh air, open spaces, and a place devoted to dogs – for their pure enjoyment. Wouldn't it be nice (I said to myself... I do that from time to time....) to be able to give my dog the gift of her very own vacation?! That way, not only would I alleviate the feelings of guilt when leaving her, she'd possibly have a better time on *her* vacation than I might on *mine*!

Well I did pursue that dream, and we (my staff members and I) call it Dogs at Camp. Because that's where they are: At camp. A place where dogs come to vacation...where socializing, exercising, biking, swimming, ball and Frisbee...are all part of a day at camp. Wait. Did I say biking? Hiking. Hiking! Not biking. (Were you paying attention)?

It all sounds wonderfully paradisiacal, doesn't it? In many respects it is. But it is, without a doubt, lots of work. Good work mostly, but work nonetheless.

Camp Life

Before booking camp time, we always arrange to meet each new prospective dog and client. This gives us a chance to ensure that we're comfortable with the dog, and it gives each client the chance to find out whether or not ours is a suitable environment for the dog.

At this time we address the client's questions, concerns, hesitations etc. My staff and I are well aware of the feeling of having to leave one's dog, as we have all been in that situation, and we also see the range of emotions of dog owners on a regular basis.

We too are dog 'nuts', and well understand the worries associated with leaving a dog in the hands of 'someone else'. We therefore expect some anxiety (on the parts of both the client and the dog), and indeed some scepticism. It is only natural.

Many dogs behave differently when their owners are not with them – as is often the case with young children. It is fascinating for us to watch each dog settle in, acclimatize, and make new friends. They honestly do, and it's beautiful to watch. Some dogs gain confidence during their time at camp, while others 'mellow out.' All of them get the chance to just be dogs.

So many rules!

One of the concerns that is brought to our attention quite frequently is the stringency of our rules. "Why are you so strict about timing? Can't I just drop off my dog some time in the afternoon?" "A specific drop off hour? Really?" "Can't we come up and play for a while before saying goodbye to our dog?" "Do you have to be so picky about our vet records? I assure you, they're in order!" These are just some of the many rules, and questions about them.

It is interesting to note that we find ourselves in somewhat of a 'catch twenty-two' type situation: If we were more flexible about rules such as drop off and pick up times, it would of course be more convenient for a client. But at the same time, this flexibility would result in many more sporadic interruptions during the day – which would in turn result in a more stressful day for the dogs. This increased 'stress' has the effect of escalating 'tension' among the group. This increase in tension could in fact jeopardize their safety, which is exactly what we work so hard to avoid. We know, as we've tried it both ways!

The point here is that in order to ensure the safety and comfort of each and every dog, our days are very structured: There are specific times allocated for breakfast, exercise, free play time, Frisbee, ball retrieval, hiking, swimming, napping, snacking, dinner...and more. The dogs of course are unaware of the structure of each day. What they *do* seem to be aware of is that their days are busy! It is this very structure that allows for their freedom and ensures their safety.

Behind the Scenes

Our daily responsibilities are divided between the care of the dogs, and the administration of the business. Different staff members are responsible for each. We accept up to 40 dogs at a time, and generally 'hover' between 20 and 30 dogs each day. What then, is involved in caring for so many dogs?

In order to ensure that each and every dog is happy, safe, and comfortable, we all quickly get to know each dog's name and general temperament. We often encounter dogs with special needs, such as those with existing medical conditions. It's surprising how many dogs are actually on medications of all kinds. We also cater to the specific needs of older dogs, in that many need more rest, and less daily exercise. Each dog comes with his or her own food, and we must keep track of what, how much, and how often each dog eats. We also note any changes in eating or behavioural patterns, as these are signs of a dog either feeling unsettled, or perhaps not feeling physically well.

Cleanliness and tidiness of the outdoor fields and trails as well as the indoor space is of course – crucial. Although this should go without saying, consider for a moment the clean-up you might do for your one or two dogs. Now picture the 'result' (ahem) of 25 dogs!

Our camp environment allows dogs to sleep together in small groups. These groups are formed after the day's experience with all of the 'overnight campers' – and a staff discussion and collective decision is made as to which dogs will be most comfortable together. Some clients prefer that their dogs sleep in crates, as this is their practice at home. Sleeping arrangements, therefore, are part of our daily routine.

Given the responsibilities with which we are entrusted, safety is always of utmost importance. Safety procedures and First Aid are therefore practiced and reviewed regularly.

Of course, we wouldn't have any dogs here at all if our camp was not run as a business. It is indeed a business with the same amount of administration needed as with any other business. "What? Don't you just get to hang out with the dogs all day?" Sigh.

We have a computerized automated reservation system as would be found at a hotel. Dogs are checked in, checked out, and invoiced accordingly (Parents generally pay). It is imperative that we track the daily arrival and departure of each overnight and day camper. Transportation to and from camp makes 'planning ahead' the only way to operate.

We maintain a file on each client and dog, which includes Veterinary Certificates, client contact information, emergency contacts, and much more. These files are reviewed to ensure that all information is always up to date.

Our marketing efforts include a web site (which needs regular updating), brochure distribution, newspaper advertising, dog show attendance, cross-promotional initiatives, as well as client coupons and incentives. We must also, of course, have accurate accounting and book-keeping records, and liability insurance.

In order to ensure client satisfaction and retention, it is most important that we respond quickly to email and phone calls (some checking in on their dogs from all over the world)! We also maintain memberships with related organizations, such as the Canadian Pet Sitter's Association, and our local Chamber of Commerce.

The facility itself requires lots of maintenance, including air conditioning, heating, plumbing, and of course (dogs will be dogs) – wear and tear. And supplies. Think of the numbers of biscuits and tennis balls we keep on hand!

Happy and fulfilled staff members are productive and effective staff members. And that too takes focus and effort on the part of camp management.

As we also offer Photography, Obedience Training, and Grooming – all of these services require separate and coordinated administration.

Phew. Now that I've written this, I'm feeling tired!

Parting words

As you can well imagine, (dog people being as we are) we've encountered some 'interesting' requests and remarks from clients. Some are very normal (in my world). Others a little less so. Here are a few. You decide!

"The drive is one farm after another! Just fields, horses, cows, sheep...it's boring!"

"Please make sure he always wears his boots and jacket"

"My dog is very attached to us. Can you make sure he gets a little more love than the others?"

"I want a really good shot of her catching a Frisbee. She's never caught one at home!"

"Here's the popcorn. Just mix it in with his dog food"

"These are chicken 'parts'. Our Great Dane is a growing boy!"

"They must both sleep on their own beanbags! Please make absolutely sure that Lucy doesn't sleep on Fido's beanbag."

"My dog doesn't like yellow labs. Will you have any at that time?"

"Just a little peanut butter on a slice of bread with breakfast please"

"Here's a CD of the music she likes to listen to when she goes to bed."

Caring for dogs is indeed hard work. And as with any type of work, to be good at it – we must believe in and enjoy what we do. Rest assured, we do, on both counts.

And keep this final thought in mind next time you're leaving your dog: Trust the people you've chosen to care for him or her. The experience will of course be different to life at home on the couch (for your dog that is, not you!), but dogs are generally *very* resilient and adaptable. Above all, allow them to be...

...dogs.