

Policies That Work

Running a business without effective policies is like driving a car without oil. The car—or your business—runs less and less effectively until, finally, it breaks down. To avoid spending time on the side of the road, here are some tips to tune up your policies.

Scheduling Policy

Set your schedule up for success. “What time is good for you?” is a question to avoid at all costs. Though your intent may be to be accomodating and customer-centric, inviting clients to dictate your schedule leads to an inefficient, unpredictable calendar. Appointments often end up scattered throughout the day, with small batches of time in-between that are difficult to use productively. Instead, cluster your appointments to leave larger blocks of time open for business development and marketing—for working *on* the business—and for your own personal use.

Asking clients what time is good for them also implies that your schedule is wide open, carrying the subtle implication that your business is slow. Consciously or subconsciously most consumers are drawn to businesses that are already successful—don’t inadvertently signal that yours is otherwise.

Finally, one key to successful training is building a strong, effective client-trainer relationship in which the client acknowledges the trainer’s expertise and status as a professional. Without this it is difficult to gain client trust and compliance regarding methodology and specific training advice. There are many small moments in which we build or erode this relationship. Scheduling is one of them. Giving clients set appointment times to choose from not only stabilizes your schedule, it conveys the value of your time as a professional service provider.

Lest I be misunderstood, respecting clients and providing excellent, top-notch, sincere customer service is of utmost value to your business and your professionalism. But there are many ways to do this without compromising your ability to run your business while also having time to actively grow it and to attend to your life outside of work. Good client service does not mean being accomodating to the point of inefficiency or inadvertently undermining your professional status.

Payment Policy

Most trainers require payment up front and in general that’s good practice. Taking credit cards, particularly if you offer private training packages, can make your services more easily available to clients when they need them. Payment plans can also help when used carefully. Here are a few rules to offer help without getting burned:

1. Require a credit card for payment plans.
2. Work with your client to pre-set the dates and payment amounts, and build an authorization into your contract so that you can automatically make the deductions on the agreed-upon dates. This saves you and your client multiple collections conversations, keeps the focus on the training, and ensures you’re paid on time.
3. Your contract should stipulate clearly—and be sure to cover this verbally, too—that the client is committing to the entire training plan. This discourages the client,

experiencing improvement in their dog's behavior part way into the training process, from deciding to wrap up early. It's not only in your business interest to avoid this, but serves the client and dog as well—an uncompleted training plan rarely delivers lasting results.

Cancellation Policy

Trainers often operate with no cancellation policy, or with one that stipulates a certain amount of notice required for calling off an appointment. But when a client's week starts to feel too busy and they look around for something to jettison from their schedule, it shouldn't be dog training. Training requires consistency and commitment. Your cancellation policy should not imply that it's okay to put training off if you just call ahead. If you put a package together for a client, deciding that their goals required 6 sessions, for example, then everyone loses if only 5 sessions occur.

You also need to protect your finances. You have a limited number of paid hours in your schedule—if you take, for example, 10 clients a week, a single cancellation represents 10% of your income.

In order to keep your income intact and to help clients create the consistency they need to achieve their training goals, consider a no cancellation policy in which cancellations are automatically charged (this should be in your contract and explained to clients) and then rescheduled. This way clients get the full complement of sessions, dogs benefit from the completion of a training plan, and you enjoy the satisfaction a job completed, as well as your full income potential.

Policies for Now and Later

A final rule of thumb—create policies you can grow into. If you're not currently as busy as you intend to be, your policies don't need to reflect this. Design them to take care of you when you are busy. In the meantime, strong policies will save you money and time. And if you learn to use and enforce them now you'll be ahead of the game when your schedule is full.

*Veronica Boutelle, MA, CTC is the author of **How to Run a Dog Business: Putting Your Career Where Your Heart Is**. She founded and runs dogTEC, whose business is to help yours succeed. If you'd like help reworking your policies e-mail info@dogtec.org or visit www.dogtec.org.*