

You're Worth It

Most of us are dog lovers first, trainers second, and business men and women dead last. This reality causes a number of challenges, including a pervasive sense of guilt about charging money for what we do. This guilt is accompanied by chronic undercharging, resulting in an income level that keeps many trainers in perpetual hobby or part time status, drives others back to “real jobs,” or creates long term financial strain for those managing to train full time.

It doesn't have to be this way. Charging what you're worth—and you are worth it—is a win for you and for the dogs.

Getting Over the Guilt

Trainers hold an invaluable and specialized skill and knowledge set. Most likely if you're reading this you have spent time and money to attend a school for dog trainers, used innumerable hours to practice your craft on your own and with the guidance of mentors and colleagues, attended a long list of seminars, conferences, and workshops, and read and watched every book and DVD you've been able to get your hands on. Many of you will have studied and taken certification exams as well. Because though you may love your work well enough to enjoy it whether or not it is paid, it is still work—and highly skilled work that requires a good deal of study and practice.

Training is also work that helps people and their dogs. You have the capacity to change the lives of the clients and canines you work with. Surely this is worth paying for. And though everyone loves to get something for free, we don't generally expect free professional services. If training is to become a full fledged profession we need to keep this in mind. Also important to remember is that people value what they pay for, and

generally in our culture we value more that which costs more. When I was Director of Behavior and Training at the San Francisco SPCA we raised our adoption rates, to the dismay of many who said that adoption rates would fall. But they didn't. What did drop off was returns. Many trainers experience a similar phenomenon when they raise their rates—not only does business not go down, it often goes up (because committed owners want the best) and so does client compliance. Clients who have paid more for a service are more likely to try to get the most from it, just as people who had paid more for their dogs worked harder to make things work when the cuteness wore off. [is this too cynical to have in an apdt piece?]

There's another reason to leave the guilt behind. Financial stress and underpayment are a major component of trainer burn out and business failure. And every talented, skilled, compassionate trainer who quits due to exhaustion or the need to take a job with a paycheck means owners and dogs who will never experience the benefit of her services. The longer you stay in the game the more dogs and their people you can help. To stay in the game you need a successful business. And to have a successful business you need to charge what you're worth.

Setting Your Rates

Trainers often look at what others charge when setting their own rates. While it's important to see what the trends in your area are, you shouldn't feel compelled to do exactly what everyone else is doing. Here are several additional considerations:

Take into account your services—how is what you are doing different, what sort of niche are you filling, what do you offer that others don't? And what are the demographics in your area—the socioeconomic levels, average incomes, kinds of work

most commonly done? Factor in also your needs, both financial and psychological. What do you need to make in order for your business to provide a solid, safe living? And what hourly rate makes you feel professional, makes you feel like you are being truly compensated for your skills?

As a final and central factor, recognize that your rates are part of your marketing plan and that rates carry subtle messages about you and your business. If, for example, part of your image is that you are the local go-to expert (whether you already are or would like to be!) having lower rates than your local colleagues will undermine that message. Americans tend to equate cost with value. Pricing yourself low sends a message of not being as good as others whose rates are higher. There's often a belief that lower prices will lead to higher volume. For plastic goods this may be so, but in professional fields this approach can backfire. For one, you'll tend to get the bargain hunting clients instead of those looking for the best possible service for their dog. And if you've been training for any length of time, you know the difference this can mean in terms of owner compliance and commitment. Secondly, training is not a volume field. You can only train so many hours per week, you can only accommodate a finite number of clients at a time. Given this, volume is not the key to success. Instead, you want to maximize revenue from the billable hours that you have.

If you offer packages (which I do hope you do—see “It's All in the Packaging,” Jan/Feb 2008), you probably offer discounted rates for larger numbers of sessions. Keep two things in mind when structuring your pricing. One, the savings don't have to be large to be effective. Five to ten dollars per hour is plenty to help clients feel like they are getting a good break. And second, be sure to price yourself so that your lowest rate is

what you actually want to be paid per hour. For example, if you want to make \$100 per training hour, you might set your rate at \$110 and offer discounted packages based on \$105 and \$100. If you want to make \$100 but offer discounts at \$95 and \$90, you'll be making less than you wanted.

If You're Still Feeling Guilty

I may have convinced you that it makes sense to charge what you're worth. Does this mean that trainers should avail themselves only to the wealthy? Absolutely not. It does mean that you should be able to make a living. Families of average means who take their responsibility to their animals seriously will choose a trainer based on an impression of their effectiveness and professionalism. A large part of this impression will be made by your marketing, and pricing is one part of that.

Still, for many trainers a business plan that prices you higher will exclude populations you wish to serve by putting your services out of their range. If this is the case, there are several ways to make yourself more widely available. You might, for example, offer regular Ask the Trainer volunteer hours to a local shelter. Though you will not be able in most cases to offer a full training plan, this triage focused on management can help to take the edge off many situations. If you prefer a more hands on approach try providing a shelter or rescue group pro bono case time. Just be sure to put boundaries around this work, for example specifying the number of clients you can handle at a time. It is best to do pro bono work through another agency to keep it from impacting your business. A reputation for taking on unpaid cases can make it difficult to get paid ones.

No Guilt? (or should I call this Sales Anxiety or something like that?)

If you're one of the rare trainers who feels no guilt charging for your very needed and valuable services, or if I've convinced you to give up that bad habit, perhaps you suffer from sales anxiety. You know you're worth it, but how do you ask for it? How do you communicate your services and their worth to potential clients? And how do you answer that dreaded question: "What do you charge?" Not to worry—we'll tackle sales in the next column.

*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 making what you're worth e-mail info@dogtec.org or visit www.dogtec.org.*