

The Anatomy of a Breeder's Website

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In my line of work (rescue, breed education) I have made it my responsibility to research breeders, keep track of the non-reputable ones so I know who to call when I get one of their dogs and to know the good ones and work with them to make a better life for our breed. I have been doing this for years and I can spot a reputable breeder from a non-reputable one just by looking at the homepage of their website. I have learned the ins and outs of what breeders are really saying over the years and I would like to share what I have learned with you so that you can make the best decision for your family and your new family member.

The inspiration for this article came from a google search of a breeder after their name popped up in an online conversation. The initial google search came up with complaints against the breeder so I was not surprised when I got to the homepage and started reading between the lines. It is not hard when you have read so many over the years. They all say the same thing, in mostly the same order. It's like there is a build your own website app that puts all of these sites together with just enough difference to make them look personal.

In preparation for this article I looked at six websites. Three reputable breeders, two breeders that I know personally and one that I know of as being a reputable breeder. I then looked at three websites of people that in my personal opinion and/or experience are not what would be considered reputable in most dog circles. One I have met, one we have had rescue dogs come from continually, and the one I previously mentioned.

The first place to start with when researching a breeder is to google their name or kennel name followed by the breed. You would be surprised what a simple google search will reveal. BBB, Rip Off Reports, and/or other breeders publicly bashing the person's name should make you click the exit button and move on, but most don't so we will continue. Read those reviews, good and bad and then go onto the website. The homepage will start with who we are, why we breed, and what we have. This is where the reputable from the non-reputable can be distinguished.

If you read between the lines one breeder is going to say these are my dogs, this is what they have accomplished, and this is why I am proud of them. The other breeder is going to immediately start selling you a product and explaining to you why you should buy one of their dogs.

You see, the first breeder is not breeding to sell you your next dog. This breeder is concerned about the health and welfare of the puppies they are producing. They have carefully planned this litter with the idea of producing healthy, sound dogs to continue their kennel name with the betterment of the breed in mind. They don't care if you buy one of their puppies, in fact you will have to prove yourself to be a responsible pet owner to even be considered to purchase one of their puppies.

The second breeder is going to start off describing their home and property, I am always in awe at how they always seem to live on 5 or 10 acres, with lots of room to run. This will be followed by "our pets are raised in the house and part of our family" Then it will end with something about what "type" of Great Dane they have. They will proudly state if they are European or American Danes and often list some sort of a percentage with champion bloodlines, and of course they are checked out by their vet yearly to ensure health. They want you to buy one of their puppies and they are describing to you how they have produced the product they want you to purchase.

Let's take a tour of the website now. Your first page is always the introduction with several tabs for you to click through. The tabs will show you the boys, the girls, current and past puppies. Does the website look professional? I am not talking about lots of graphic designs or fancy tabs. Is it clean, well laid out, easy to navigate? Are most of the words spelled correctly? If the breeder has not taken the time to make sure that spelling and grammar are correct in order to present themselves well do you think are they going to put the same amount of effort into the product they are producing?

Inspections and Seals of Approval are often posted on the main page. While seals of approval can be picked up anywhere and put on a website by anyone, what the breeder chooses to display on the website is very important. For example, if the breeder has a BBB (Better Business Bureau) seal on the website it tells you that they view their breeding program as a business and/or has had complaints before.

One of my favorite, non-reputable breeders proudly posts how many times they have been inspected by the AKC. This might seem like a good thing to someone who does not know a lot about the AKC, and it must mean that they are on the up and up as a breeder right? Unfortunately what it means is that the breeder has had complaints filed against them and/or they breed several litters a year. The AKC does not have the time to go around and inspect every breeder at random, in fact, when there is a complaint they call them in advance and tell them they are coming giving them time to get things in order before they arrive for the inspection.

If they have a USDA Licensed Breeder seal on the website are the people that wholesale litters to pet stores, sell on websites marketed to puppy buyers or to research facilities. We often refer to these breeders as puppy mills. Below is from the USDA site on who must be licensed. Do you think that these puppies are raised in the house with the family? What kind of socialization or care have they received when they are one litter in a group of many other puppies?

Q. What types of dog/cat breeders and dealers does the USDA regulate? Which breeders and dealers are not regulated under the AWA? A. The AWA requires that the following breeders/dealers obtain USDA licenses: (1) people who breed dogs and cats for use as pets or for other purposes and sell them sight unseen at the retail level; and (2) the wholesale dealers who supply these animals to pet stores, brokers, or research facilities.

Now that we have seen some red flags, let's look at some seals you should be excited to see on a website.

AKC Breeder of Merit. These breeders have been involved in the breed for years. They do the appropriate health testing and have already raised well rounded, sound dogs. Below are the requirements to obtain this seal. Not all breeders have been in the breed long enough to attain this status so please don't throw them out with the bathwater if they don't have it.

- Has a history of at least 5 years involvement with AKC events.
- Earned AKC Conformation, Performance or Companion event titles on a minimum of 4 dogs from AKC litters they bred/co-bred.
- Member of an AKC club.
- Certifies that applicable health screens are performed on your breeding stock as recommended by the Parent Club.
- Demonstrates a commitment to ensuring 100% of the puppies produced are AKC registered

Parent Club seals or mention of membership to those clubs are the icing on the cake! Each breed has a parent club that is affiliated with the AKC. These Clubs are made up of breed enthusiasts who have a common goal of protecting and promoting their breed. These clubs set breeder standards and will have a Code of Ethics that each of their members must follow in order to be a member. New members are screened and have to go through an application process in order to join, meaning that they can weed out the non-reputable breeders if needed. Membership in the Parent Club shows that this

breeder takes pride in their puppies and what they do seriously. It also shows a commitment to working towards the betterment of the breed.

Does the breeder belong to any breed or performance clubs? Local breed clubs are a great source of information and resources to breeders in their geographical area. Event Clubs focus less on the actual process of the breeding of the dog, but focus more on the dog's ability to perform the job it was bred to do and or obedience/rally/agility work. It is always great to see a breeder that has bred dogs who have gained titles in performance events. These titles show that the dogs they are breeding have the correct conformation, breed characteristics and are both mentally and physically sound.

Does the breeder have a tab for links to educational articles, breed information, health, breed clubs, the AKC, and the OFA? If they do they are helping you do your homework on your chosen breed by learning the ins and outs of your breed. These breeders want you to come to the table with a good bit of knowledge about your breed, or be able to find the important things quickly. Non-reputable breeders might have one or two articles listed, but more often than not they don't.

If you move onto the other tabs you will see individual pages for the boys, the girls, past puppies, and the litterbox. Look at each one of these and carefully look at the dogs listed. What do the dogs in the pictures look like? Is the environment clean or does it look dirty? Are the dogs in the house or outside in a shed? Sometimes you will see dogs chained up, is that how they live? Do the dogs appear to be a healthy weight? Does the dog look happy or do they look shy? Are the dogs shown doing activities with the family?

Sometimes these pictures can be deceiving but if you take a good look at the dog and the environment they are in you can learn a lot about how the breeder keeps and treats his dogs.

Does the website have a memorial page? While it is a loving tribute to those dogs they have lost you need to look closely and see why they have passed. If they are all passing from the same condition chances are it will be prominent in that line. Also look at longevity of those dogs. Are they living long lives or are they dying by the age of 7? This will be very important to you and your puppy in the long run.

Now the moment you are waiting for....the litterbox tab, this is the page that will make or break you. It is so hard to look at all of those adorable faces and not want to bring them all home with you. Look carefully past the puppies at the environment. Puppies are messy and dirty little poop machines, but you should see clean blankets, a clean box,

and plenty of toys of all varieties. Can you tell if the puppies are really being raised in the house? Are they outside in a shed or kennel with dirt or shavings for bedding? Are the puppies fat and healthy looking or do they look dirty and skinny?

Do you see the parents of the litter listed? Do they list titles, health testing, and achievements? Where is the health testing on the parents, or did they even do health testing before breeding? Do they have a pedigree that you can view or it is just pictures of Spot and Molly sitting on the porch with a brief statement about what great family dogs they are and how healthy the vet says they are?

How do they describe the parents? Are they breeding for "size, temperament, and conformation?" A breeder who breeds by the pound generally does not have the best interests of the breed at heart, they think the bigger the better, which is not always the best case for the dog as it can cause structural problems. It is not uncommon to see height and weight listed, but it should also not be made into a selling point.

Many reputable breeders (not all) charge the same price for puppies whether they are being sold to show homes, working homes or to pet homes. It does not cost any more money to raise puppies that are a certain color, or a certain gender than it does to raise the rest of the litter. Breeders who price puppies the day they are born with a wide range of prices based on color or gender are pulling your leg. It is also a good idea to stay away from breeders who want to charge you more for breeding rights, full registration, or papers of any kind. They are charging you for the 5 seconds it takes them to check a box on a piece of paper. It does not mean that that puppy is of any higher quality than another dog of that breed.

Buyer beware of any puppy listed as "rare." Dogs are not rare, it is just a matter of getting two dogs with the right genetics together to make a litter and hope they come up with unique colors. These puppies will often come with a hefty price tag and are bred with no thought to health or structure.

In order to purchase one of these little butter balls what do you have to do? Is there a questionnaire to fill out that gives the breeder an idea on your home and family. Are puppy sales on a first come first serve basis based on which one you like or does the breeder match the puppies personality to your family and lifestyle? Do they have a Paypal link for you to pay for your puppy or put down a deposit once you have picked your puppy out? Do they have a link to their puppyfind website? A reputable breeder is not going to sell just anyone a puppy and will put you through an interview process to even be considered. This is for the health and wellbeing of the puppy to ensure that it is placed in a safe, lifelong home.

Contracts can also be listed on websites. These are a safety net for you, the breeder and for the puppy should you not be able to keep the puppy for some reason. Contracts can be short and simple or long and lengthy depending on the breeder and the experiences they have had in the past. Many times contracts start small in a breeder's early years and grow in length over time as problems arise.

Sometimes the non-reputable breeder's contracts grow to negatively affect you because they have had to replace puppies due to disease, or temperament problems. You will see the list of diseases they will not cover grow or maybe they will simply no longer provide a contract at all because of the problems they have had with prior litters. Be sure to read the contract carefully and discuss with the breeder anything you do not understand or are unwilling to agree to.

Finally we will end with the guestbook, buyer comments or reference pages. Sometimes these are my favorite pages to look at, especially when you can tell they were all written by the breeder. If you have time read through the comments. Do they seem genuine or fake? Most will be genuine and give you an idea of the breeder's character and the dogs they produce. However, you should also be aware of the breeder that has more than 30 comments, all misspelled, all stating the same thing in a different order. Each comment states that this is the healthiest puppy their vet has ever seen. I would bet money that if you google that breeder you will find several complaints filed against them for selling sick puppies.

In the end it is your choice who you buy a puppy from. Buying a puppy is not a decision that should be taken lightly and if you are looking for a purebred puppy chances are you want a certain personality that will fit in well with your lifestyle and family. My hope is that I have given you some tools to work with and some red flags to look for so that you can find the best puppy for you. If you have concerns about where to purchase a puppy from go to the AKC website or your breed's parent club and look up a list of breeder's for your breed. Start there and look through several different websites before you contact anyone. Go with the breeder that you feel most comfortable with. If you have concerns about a breeder contact your local breed rescue and ask them who they would recommend. Rescues are in contact with breeders on a regular basis and they will let you know who to go to and who to stay away from.