

10 Steps to Become a Professional Dog Trainer



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Step 1: Be Sure This Is What You Want To Do



Many people think being a dog trainer is a dream job – and it can be! However, it isn't just about playing with dogs. Much of what we do is work with people. In fact, there is a saying amongst dog trainers: The dogs are the easy part! What we mean is that training a dog is simple compared to getting the dog's owner to change their behavior.

If you are going to have a consulting business, it's important to have empathy for the [owners](#). To be a successful dog trainer, it's necessary to understand that you are actually dealing with the cream of the crop. Most people just give their dog away, turn it in to a shelter, dump it in a strange neighborhood, or relegate it to the back yard. The owners we deal with have made the decision to spend the time and money to resolve their problems. It's also important to know that these owners are not trainers, and what we're asking of them is difficult. It's our job to help them make the changes that will improve both their life and their dog's life.

If you decide to go into shelter or rescue work, you will see the worst that can happen to animals. However, you'll also see the best! You'll see people who are generous and caring and who truly love animals.

Some trainers open a day care or boarding facility. This gives you more control over your daily interactions, but it requires more of a commitment on your time. You don't have to interact much with owners – only at drop off and pick up. However, you now operate a physical facility and you must pay the rent and have set hours. It's not easy to take a vacation; and, if you're boarding, it's a 7-day a week job! But it can be lucrative and fun.

Another area of dog training is in the working field. You can train dogs for jobs – i.e., police dogs, tracking dogs, assistance dogs, and so on. If you choose this area of the field, you will have less exposure to people and spend more time training. However, you must realize that these are working dogs and not pet dogs.

And, last but not least, to be financially successful in this business, you'll probably be a small business owner. You need to do the administrative and marketing tasks that go along with a successful small business. A huge up-side to this field is that it can be done with very little overhead if you do consultations.

Step 2: Get Your Academic Education



To be a good trainer, it's important to have a solid academic foundation in [learning and behavior](#). Dog training is not simply about teaching a dog to sit and stay, anymore. The changes in our society and our relationships with our dogs over the last 50 years have created a myriad of problems that require skill and finesse. Anyone can learn the mechanics of training an animal if they put the time in. However, to be a really good trainer, that academic background is necessary to enhance your training skill.

Dogs are alone most of the day while their family is at work or in school. They live very under-stimulated lives and get very little feedback on their day-to-day behavior. The feedback they do receive is usually from people who do not have a background in learning and behavior; it is often wrongly applied and inconsistent, so can cause more harm than good.

It is very important to understand how to assess and analyze both existing behavior and the changes we implement. Is what we're doing actually affecting the behavior? Is the way in which the behavior is changing what we were hoping for? By understanding [learning and behavior principles](#), we have the skills needed to answer these questions.

Additionally, pet dogs are becoming surrogate children for many people. Even if they haven't quite reached that lofty position, they are considered family members, and owners want to do the right thing. They want to get the most change with the least harm to the animal.

Back in the day, if a dog didn't do his job or behaved in a way that was unacceptable, he was taken out to the woods and shot. Today, that is not an acceptable solution for most pet owners! They want their dog to live a healthy, happy, well-adjusted life – and it takes a good understanding of learning and behavior to get that result.

It is not necessary to have a college degree to receive this education – [it is available in other, quicker and less expensive ways](#)! However, the knowledge is necessary. As a new trainer, it is important to understand what kind of education you need – there is a lot of mis-information about dogs floating around. If you stick with the science – rather than the myths - you should be safe.

Step 3: Join a Professional Organization



As with all professions, dog trainers have professional organizations. These organizations are great resources, and affiliation with such an organization can give you instant credibility.

I recommend the Association of Pet Dog Trainers (APDT), because they are by far the largest of the dog training organizations. They believe in and promote using methods based in science. They also offer many benefits to their members. One of the most

important benefits is the discussion group. As a new trainer, you can get help from seasoned professionals – these old-timers are very generous with their knowledge and experience.

To find out more about APDT, go to www.apdt.com.

Step 4: Get your Hands-on Education



Equally as important as academic education is hands-on education. We are, after all, dog trainers! As Bob Bailey (the most renowned animal trainer in the world) says, “training is a mechanical skill.” And, he’s right. He also says “training is simple, but it’s not easy!” And, again, he’s right.

Learning the skills needed to become a good trainer can only be learned through practice, practice, and more practice. The academic education will enhance your

hands-on training, but you must still get your hands on a lot of dogs and do a lot of training.

There are a variety of ways to get this hands-on education. You can mentor under another trainer, volunteer at a shelter, work with friend’s and family’s dogs, get a job at a vet clinic or kennel, and so on. Start thinking now about your schedule and how you can get your hands on a lot of different dogs.

Step 5: Decide What You Want Your Business to Look Like



Now it's time to get serious! Think about what you want to do within the profession. [What do you want your business to look like?](#)

Do you want to hold group classes and privates? Just privates? Do you want to specialize in a sport such as agility? Do you want to do board and train?

Do you want to have employees, or do you see yourself working alone? How big do you want your

business to get? Remember – the bigger it becomes, the less time you'll spend training. This can be good or bad – it's totally dependent on your personality.

Do you want a facility, such as a kennel or training facility, or do you want to work out of your home. If you have a facility, you'll probably have to have employees. Also, you need structure – set hours, vacation time, etc. And – you'll have bills! You have to make money if you have a facility. If you work out of your home, you'll have more flexibility, but probably make less money. You can still make a good living, but you are subject to the number of hours in a day – you can only work with a set number of clients in a day. However, you can still increase that income by having employees.

Another consideration is what you really love to do. Do you really love dogs enough that you want to spend your entire day with them and have little contact with people? Or, is your interest really in the people – helping them have a great relationship with their dog? This is a crucial question and will go far to inform you about what you want your business to look like.

Step 6: Assess Your Finances



If you have a double-income household or are retired (or independently wealthy!), you may have more flexibility about the amount of money you must bring in. Regardless, how much money you need to bring in is an important consideration.

As discussed in Step 5, the answer to this question may decide how your business will look – especially in the beginning. Most people don't have the financing to start out with a facility; it's something they must work up to.

Additionally, it is very helpful to have a client base and a referral base before opening a facility.

When running a small business it is recommended that you spend 60% of your time making money and 40% working on your business. By “working on your business” I mean marketing, and administrative chores.

If you use the figures in the above paragraph, that will help you have specific goals to work toward. If you work a 40 hour week, 60% of that is 24 hours. If you know how much money you need to stay above water, you can figure how much you need to make in an average week. So let's look at a possible scenario.

You must make \$3,000 per month to pay your bills and feed your dog. You would like to take a 2-week vacation and go to one major seminar each year (all numbers will be rounded up).

3,000 x 12 =	\$36,000 per year
36,000 ÷ 49 (number of working weeks per year) =	\$735 per week
735 ÷ 24 (number of working hours per week) =	\$31 per hour

So, according to this, the least you can make is \$31.00 per hour for your time.

There are ways to make more than your hourly rate, and that is through group classes. However, be sure to figure in all expenses and the time you are preparing for the class. For instance if you do 2 classes per night, you'll probably have 15-30 minutes between classes – that time must be figured in. Travel time must also be figured in.

If you go to a private consultation, spend an hour, and then go to another consultation 15 minutes away, that's 15 minutes that needs to be figured in and paid for in your hourly rate.

Many trainers have a part-time job when they first start out. This gives them some cushion while they are building a practice.

Step 7: Make a Business Plan

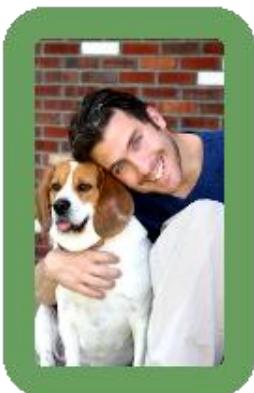


A [business plan](#) doesn't need to be complicated, but it will give you insight into what you currently need, where you're going and how to get there. There are many types of business plans and a variety of resources. You can hire a professional, purchase your own software, or Google "business plan" for free web resources.

Another advantage of a business plan is that it will help define your target market, and save you lots of advertising dollars. If you know who you are marketing to, you can tailor your marketing to that demographic.

If you want financing for your business, you'll have to have a business plan. A business plan for financing purposes will be more in-depth and complex than a simple plan for your own use.

Step 8: Start Your Business



Once you have a business plan in place, it's time to do the actual paperwork required to run a business. This varies from county-to-county, but most counties require a license of some kind. You'll probably also need to file for an assumed name, which is your business name. If you're going to sell product, you'll need a sales tax certificate from your county comptroller. Finally, if you're going to have employees, you'll need a tax ID number from the Internal Revenue Service. These are the basics. It's not expensive or complicated to start a business.

I do recommend that you think about your timing. For instance, if you're going to have a phone number and/or add in the yellow pages, find out what the deadline is to get that information to the phone book people; you won't want to go a whole year without a yellow pages ad. Summers and the holidays are traditionally slow times for dog trainers, so you might not want to open your business in December or July. However, it really doesn't matter when you open it, as long as you keep these types of things in mind and are not surprised when your income reflects them. In some ways, it might be good to open in the summer, and start out gradually; you'll have lots of time for marketing, setting up systems, etc.

Now you're all set to start getting customers!

Step 9: Become a lead trainer



You've got your academic and hands-on training under your belt; you've found a mentor to work with; you're a member of a professional organization; and, you know what your business goals are. Yea - you're there!

Once you've become a lead trainer, you should be comfortable enough with your knowledge and skills to start charging for your services. You are now a professional dog trainer.

Usually, when working with a mentor, you'll start by observing them work. Initially, you'll go on simple privates with them – obedience, housetraining and the like. You'll observe their group classes, helping with the set-up and break-down, and discussing the class and how it went.

The next step is assisting. You'll start helping your mentor with the group classes by helping students when it's their turn to train their dogs. You'll walk around the room tweaking their training and giving them helpful tips. Gradually, your mentor should work with you so you can present part of the class. You may start by showing the class how to get a dog to sit. This means you develop your lecture and demonstration under the tutelage of your mentor. Gradually, you'll start doing more and more of the class. During the assistant phase, you'll probably start going on more complex privates, such as aggression, anxiety, etc. Your mentor may let you take on some of the less complex private consultations.

After being an assistant, and when your mentor is comfortable with your knowledge and skills, you will become a lead trainer.

Step 10: Begin Marketing Your Business



I don't recommend marketing before you're a Lead Trainer. Until you are qualified and comfortable with your skills and knowledge, you're probably not ready to charge people for your services. However, the minute you decide you're ready, you need to start marketing!

Standard marketing principles apply to the dog training industry just as they do to any other industry. However, there are some unique aspects to this business. Here are just a few:

- Unless you do boarding or day care, most trainers do not find an ad in the yellow pages particularly productive
- Veterinarians are your best referral source – marketing to vets requires face-to-face contact and follow-through
- Word of mouth is crucial – take special care of your early clients and be sure they leave happy
- Marketing a dog training business can be very similar to marketing a real estate business – keep your name in front of ex-clients because they may, once again, be in the market for a dog trainer in a few years

Bonus Step 11: Get Certified!



Once you are a professional, it's time to start working towards certification. Certification will increase your credibility and help your business.

There is only one psychometrically sound accrediting organization in the dog training industry, and that is the Certification Council for Professional Dog Trainers (www ccpdt.org). I recommend that you go to their website and check what you need to do to sit for the CPDT (Certified Professional Dog Trainer) exam.

Also, be aware that certification through a school is not the same as certification through the CCPDT. All a school certification means is that you met their criteria – it could be as simple as filling out a form! The CCPDT certification truly has meaning and is the certification I recommend working toward.