


LOYALTY TODAY 

# Finding surprise and delight, thanks to my dog

LINDA DICKERHOOF SPERLING | SEPTEMBER 12, 2012  
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Pets are big business. According to the American Pet Products Association, Americans spent \$50 million on their pets in 2011. And as a pet owner myself, I often feel as if I am spending a good part of that \$50 million on my best friend Morgan. When I first adopted her, I was prepared for the usual expenses related to dog ownership: food and treats, visits to the vet, pet insurance, a matching collar and leash, and of course a monogrammed coat for her to wear when it is cold outside. However I never even thought about the need for a dog walker, nor the expense and trust involved in hiring one.

At face value, it seems that choosing a dog walker wouldn't be a difficult thing to do. Yet, I found it a very challenging task. First, there was the sticker shock of paying someone what amounts to between \$50-\$100/hr. to feed, water and walk a dog. Then, there is the fact that this person would both have a key to my home, and a list of my scheduled absences. Finally, this person is being entrusted with the feeding and care of a living being that trusts me to do just that: feed and care for her. Side note, said living being also has a history of defecating in my house if she isn't given a regular opportunity to do so out-of-doors, so I prefer to avoid coming home to that as well.

In the five years that I have been hiring dog walkers to help me care for my buddy Morgan, I have been disappointed more times than I can even remember (which, I will admit, might have something to do with my choosing the lowest-priced dog walker in my area). I have hired dog walkers who don't come when they say they will. Dog walkers who then lie to me about said visits. Dog walkers who continue to stick to said lies even after I arrive home to a house full of poop and a thirsty, hungry dog. Until a crazy thing happened...I moved and needed a new dog walker.

I decided that I would do things differently the second time around: I wouldn't choose a service provider based simply on price: rather I would get a referral from a satisfied customer. And when I did this one thing, it changed my whole outlook on the industry.

I was lucky enough to find a dog walker (Villaridge Pet Sitters) that provides absolutely amazing customer service which continues to surprise and delight me. I have received photos of my beloved Morgan texted to my iPhone. Upon returning home from my honeymoon, I received a call to confirm that my flight made it in on time and that they didn't need to make one trip to my house to care for Morgan. They have been able to fit the dog in at the last minute without a late-scheduling charge, and don't charge me (unlike my doctor) for cancelling a scheduled visit within 24 hours when my plans change.

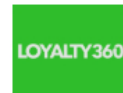
What Villaridge does that is amazing is put itself in the shoes of its customers. They deliver stellar service, realizing that they are being trusted with what many of their customers consider a member of their family: their pets. They understand that long-term customer loyalty is more important than nickel-and-diming their loyal customers. If more service providers would do business with a long-term customer relationship in mind, it would be the cat's meow.

Just don't tell Morgan I said "cat".

By Linda Dickerhoof Sperling

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