

Some worry that dog shows are in danger of crossing over the rainbow bridge. While the demise of dog shows is not imminent, entries are down to about half a million from a high of roughly 1.5 million 25 years ago. There are beacons of light: the Philadelphia show is enjoying three years of year-on-year growth, for example, while several regional shows are also growing. So, the question beckons:

How Do We Ensure the Health and Longevity of Dog Shows?

The June 2017 Dog Press survey outlined the issues that confront those involved in dog shows, with an emphasis on how to account for declining attendance. The reasons most often cited include:

1. Judges favor professionally handled dogs, leaving owner-handled and bred-by entrants out in the cold.
2. The expense – AKC fees and renting appropriate space is often cost-prohibitive, which, necessarily, increases the cost of entries to exhibitors.
3. Judges don't really know the breeds they're judging. This, of course, is subjective, but the perception needs to be addressed. Nearly 90% of survey respondents said that pro-handlers, politics and loss of purpose result in shows no longer rewarding breeding stock.
4. Other competitors are unfriendly and cliquish.

How to Make Dog Shows a winning experience { Again }



While there are limitations to what any individual exhibitor or club can do to improve something as vast and splintered as dog shows, that does not mean we are powerless.

First off, the key is to focus in every way on the simple, but fundamental, truth that increasing the number of exhibitors

will solve many of the problems and, ultimately, contribute to your success, whether you are a club officer or an exhibitor. First, consider every pure-bred-dog-loving person you meet as a prospect and treat them as if you value their business. (You do – or should.)

Regional Clubs Are Well Positioned to Improve Interest and Attendance.

1. Establish a mentoring program. Add a check box to your premium to identify newcomers and pair them with an experienced club member who can show them the ropes and introduce them to others. Create a mentor program for new members to your club.

2. Add other revenue-generating opportunities to shows. Add CGC or tricks testing, for example, for additional revenue (no equipment required). Vendors increase the attraction of the show and pay usage fees. Offer health clinics or testing, e.g., eyes, hips. Split the fees with providers.

3. Add newcomers to your board – listen to them. Typically, the most experienced breeders and handlers are the club officers. Consider designating one rotating board spot for a committed newcomer to remind others how it feels to be new so you can develop programs to make your club and events more newbie-friendly.

4. Advertise – use social media (especially to reach younger prospects). Make sure your community is aware of events (including matches and practices) to introduce this world to new participants. Ask club members and attendees to promote events on social media. Don't forget to invite the public just to watch.

5. Promote owner-handlers and bred-by classes. Offer a special award or prize so non-professionals feel valued and appreciated. Hire judges who don't reflexively reward the professionals.

6. Offer handling clinics and matches. Practicing with nothing on the line is huge for those new to the sport. Build in a format for experienced members to advise attendees and you'll build attendance and loyalty. (and create a new revenue stream.)

7. Consider a benched show. While this is often impractical, offering a specified time when attendees can visit the dogs during a show and question the breeders enhances attendees' experience and enables breeders to meet prospective owners. Philadelphia's National Dog Show attributes much of its success to the fact that it's benched.



8. Get involved with state and county fairs. Offer demonstrations and Meet & Greets. Many fairs pay participants and you can spread the word about your club and its activities.

Owners and Breeders Have as much at Stake as the Clubs.

Ever had a major broken at the last minute? Are you struggling to get enough points without incurring outlandish travel expenses? Many of the speed bumps in a successful show career are remedied by strong attendance.

1. Reward those clubs and judges who best uphold the integrity of the judging. Let clubs know when a judge's selections reflect the breed standard well. Make a point of patronizing shows that hire these judges. Participate in forums when clubs discuss hiring judges. (Be honest when you lose to a better dog.)

2. Let those in power know how you feel, e.g., AKC, regional club officers. Subscribe to club and AKC news releases and let them know whether their plans contribute to the betterment of the breed, first of all, and support all shows secondarily. Tell them how to get more of your business. After all, they are best situated to make necessary changes. Never forget: you are their constituency.

3. Understand your dog is a breed ambassador. When you are out in public, particularly with a breed as personable and appealing as PWDs, remember every interaction is an opportunity to introduce someone to the sterling characteristics of your breed.

4. Be nice. It seems so simple but, to someone new to showing, a kind word or a smile goes a long way to make someone feel valued and included – and make them want to come back.



Our very survival depends on new blood. Seek out opportunities to introduce new people to the sport, encourage participation and make those who venture in want to come back.

“Too many shows cater to pro handlers. They reward judges who look at the wrong end of the lead and continue to hire them.”

-Susan

