

Considering adding pet photography to your repertoire? There's more to it than you may realize. If you feel like a camera-wielding dog whisperer, Bev Hollis, Teresa Berg and Barbara Breitsameter offer their best advice.

PETS

©Bev Hollis



Bev Hollis, Barbara Breitsameter and Teresa Berg met online through a photographers' forum. After becoming friends and discovering how differently they ran their successful pet photography businesses, they united to develop *Unleashed Workshops* for other pet photographers. Go to unleashed2009.wordpress.com to learn more.

BEV HOLLIS:

START WITH LOVE AND RESPECT

I finally quit my full-time job in 2006 and started my photography business. Though it seemed like I'd waited a lifetime to make that leap, the decision to specialize in pet photography took all of 60 seconds—the job I'd left was my veterinary practice.

I work out of my farm studio in northern Virginia's Hunt Country. I specialize in location pet photography, often at one of Washington, D.C.'s many landmarks, and I have a particular fondness for the vintage style.

I modeled my new business largely on successful portrait and wedding studios. I studied what they were doing and, through much trial and error, found what worked for my pet market.

If you're thinking about adding pet photography to your specialties, ask yourself a few important questions:

Do you *like* animals? It sounds obvious, but if your only motive is additional income, I'm pretty sure you'll be disappointed. Pet photography requires enormous energy and commitment. Success in this niche market will be difficult without a true love

Animal instincts

Three pet specialists help you get your pedigree

of and respect for animals.

What species do you know the most about? Start with what you know. Dog parks, shelters, children's riding camps, rescue groups, and friends with pets, all are places to find subjects to shoot, observe and learn about.

Would you consider paying a part-time animal wrangler? Many pet photographers work without assistants, but I consider my assistants to be among my greatest assets. Knowledgeable assistants can be found anywhere animals are handled. Grooming salons, doggie day care centers, veterinary clinics, and boarding kennels are all excellent sources for part-time handlers. I pay my assistants \$15 an hour, and most shoots last two to three hours. For commercial shoots, they're paid by the job. In my opinion, they're worth every penny.

Because pet owners usually see a pet portrait session as a luxury, I want to give

them the maximum number of irresistible shots from each session. Having an extra set of hands allows me to get shots I couldn't wrangle on my own, and to be more creative with my compositions. Without a doubt, my assistants help to increase my sales.

What style of pet photography are you attracted to—formal studio poses, lifestyle, location shots, action shots? As you become better equipped to read and work with animals, you'll begin to develop your own shooting style. To me, it's one of the most critical elements in setting your work apart from all the others.

I bet you've seen people trying to get photographs of their pets by chasing after them. Reacting to the pet rather than shaping the session gives you scant opportunity to capture the best light or most creative composition. With a plan for each session based on the personality and

behavior of the specific pet, I'm better able to direct and control the shoot. Certainly, best-laid plans can go awry, but knowing the pet in advance and having a realistic picture of what I can and cannot get it to do is a huge factor in getting a successful session.

Who is your target market? As I began to develop my client base, it became obvious that pet photography has a specific market: People who can and are willing to purchase luxury photographic services. With very few exceptions, my pet-owner clients have no children living at home. They're split about 50-50 between young singles or recently married couples and empty nesters. In both cases, their pets enjoy the status of family members, even children.

What will my pet clients purchase? At first, I wanted all of my clients to buy giant canvases of their pets, because that's how I envisioned my work. While I have several clients with 30x40-inch gallery wraps on their walls, most of my clients prefer smaller pet images. I'm still selling canvases and gallery mounts, but I'm more likely to sell them as wall collections featuring two 20x24s, two 11x14s and one 10x10 print.

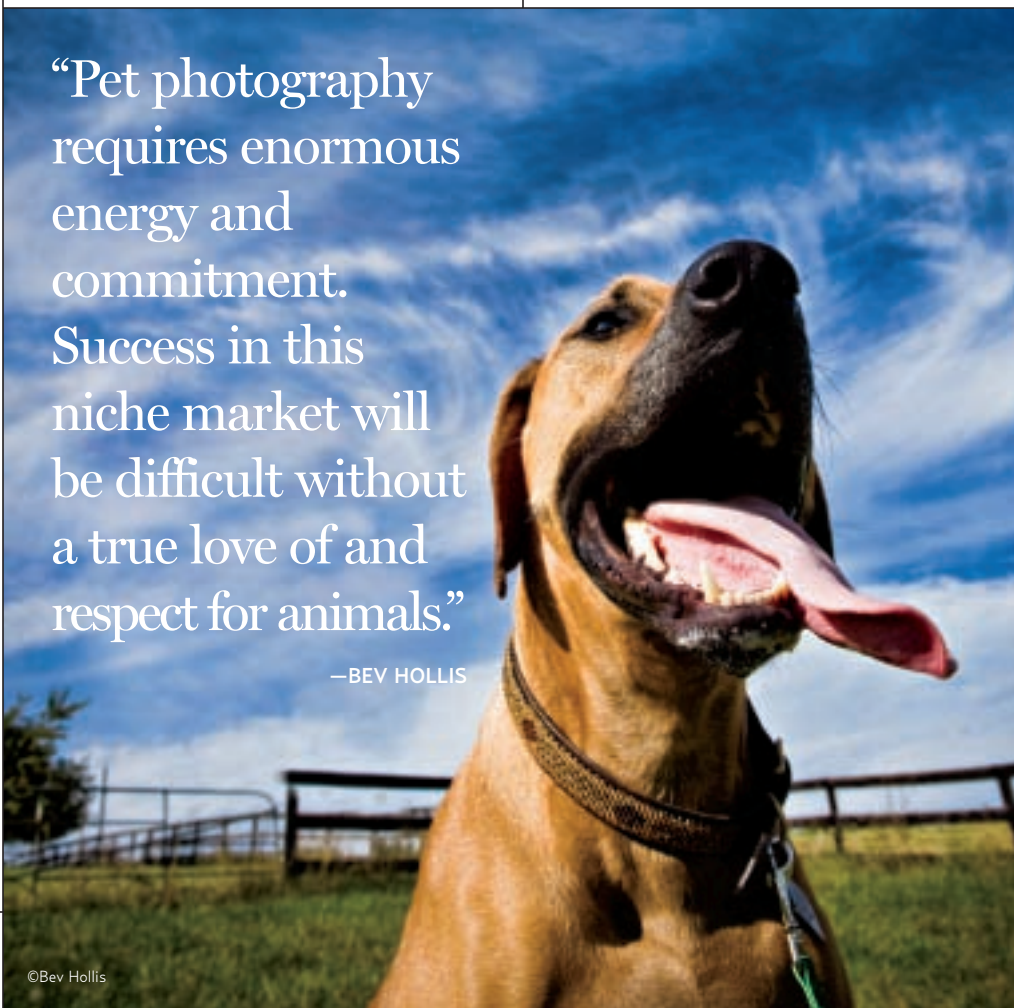
What will clients spend? Through trial and error, I find I'd rather work very hard for a few clients than try to serve everyone. Physically and creatively, I'm unable to be a high-volume shooter. I average three to four sessions per week on location. With the recent completion of the interior of my studio at my farm, this winter I hope to add another facet to my business, shorter sessions indoors.

As I've honed in on my target market and directed my advertising solely toward those people, my average sales have escalated. I've hired a studio manager to do the sales sessions for me, and he's made a huge impact. My average sale has gone from \$900 to over \$1,500.

Whether your goal is to do pet photog-

“Pet photography requires enormous energy and commitment. Success in this niche market will be difficult without a true love of and respect for animals.”

—BEV HOLLIS



raphy exclusively or add it to your portrait business, I believe if you take time to understand pet behavior, develop a marketing strategy to find your target pet market, and think artfully and creatively about pet imaging, you will find yourself enjoying a rewarding income from pet photography.

PET PHOTOGRAPHY WITH FLAIR

- Practice, practice, practice. Switch from single servo to continuous or AI servo to see what works in different situations.
- Work with light. Even if you shoot exclusively with natural light, work it. Reflectors and scrims are not off limits to pet shooters.
- Don't overlook the obvious. Always be looking for elements to support your composition. A pet subject that's exposed and focused properly can look great in a bland setting. Place that pet in an artful setting and compose the shot just so, and it can lead to the large canvas portrait sale. Move that pet!

- Ask the pet owner what her pet likes to do. People love images of their pets doing their favorite activities.
- Give pets the same consideration you give human subjects. Make them comfortable, be patient, and honor their status in the family.
- If all else fails, give them treats!

*Bev Hollis Photography,
www.bevhollisphoto.com*

TERESA BERG: VOLUNTEER WITH RESCUE ORGANIZATIONS

When people started asking me to photograph their dogs, I thought it would be fun, but I didn't see it as business opportunity. Now pet photography accounts for 40 percent of my portrait business. My pet clients spend at least as much as my family clients, and they tend to buy the same products, which simplifies pricing.

I did a bit of research when I began, and



©Teresa Berg

found that dog photography is a fast-growing niche market, and according to the American Pet Association, there are nearly 63 million dogs in American homes; 39 percent of those homes have a photograph of the dog on display. That's why I was shocked to see that very few photographers in my area were doing artistic, professional dog portraits.

Working with rescue organizations has been one key to my success. When I adopted a dog through the Dallas Fort Worth Dachshund Rescue, I learned they needed to get good photos for their website, so I volunteered. Now I photograph every dog that enters the program, and the hits on the website have increased tenfold. People at the organization blog about me, and they show my work at every dog event they attend. Because each of my images is watermarked with my info, traffic to my site has grown as well. The dogs are being adopted so quickly

that they can place twice as many per year, so I feel like I've made a difference. In addition, a gift certificate for my services goes into every adoption packet.

As a fundraiser for Dachshund Rescue, we produce calendars featuring my photos of adopted dogs. The group chooses the dogs and sets up a mini session with the owner. Of course I invite each family to come view proofs and order prints. I design a poster with small images of all 12 calendar dogs to be posted in vet clinics to promote sales. All sales are handled by the rescue group on their website and onsite at community events. I handle the shooting and production, and they handle the printing costs and distribution. Last year we printed 500 11x17-inch art calendars, which sold quickly at \$20 each. (Be sure you associate yourself with a well-run group with its 501(c)3 documents in order. Many groups

are well-intentioned animal lovers but not business people, which can lead to problems.)

Every year I self-publish my own dog calendar to promote my work. I put out a model call via e-mail blast and potential clients e-mail me snapshots. If the dog has the right look, we schedule a free session. People will do just about anything to get their dog on a calendar! Because these are dogs that I choose to photograph, it gives me a chance to play and stretch creatively. After the session, clients come back to view proofs and order prints, and they all sign a model release. When the calendar comes out, every owner gets a free copy, and most order extras to give as gifts. Copies are also sold in a few pet stores and through my website.

Although it's not a huge profit center, my calendar brings in lots of new clients. The production cost is covered by sales from the cal-

endars at pet clinics, dog boutiques and pet spas. It's much easier to walk in the door and ask for referrals when you're handing them a gift, and of course, my little calendars sit on their desk and show off my work all year long.

*Teresa Berg Photography,
www.teresaberg.com*

**BARBARA BREITSAMETER:
HELP ANIMALS FEEL
COMFORTABLE**

Here in the Chicagoland area I specialize in dog and family photography with a dramatic use of lighting, and clean contemporary style. I adore photographing dogs and their people and love to include pets in my family portraiture. A healthy reserve of patience and a warm, welcoming personality are crucial for developing a natural relationship with my clients and students, too.

The greatest photo subject? Puppies! I am at my happiest when a breeder brings in a litter of puppies. Seven weeks old is the ideal age to photograph pups. Their personalities are starting to emerge, they are so animated, romping around or playing with their littermates, and they tire easily, making it possible to get group portraits.

Though I've always loved dogs, I didn't set out to create a pet portrait business. When I opened a portrait photography business, my only experience photographing dogs was taking snapshots of my own. A breeder asked if I would be interested in photographing 7-week-old Bernese Mountain puppies, and I thought I would give it a try.

I went through a whole roll of background paper because these pups were not housebroken yet. One would make a mess, and it was like a chain reaction with the

©Barbara Breitsameter



other pups. Towards the end of the session, I was finally getting the hang of photographing them. I used various containers to keep them all in one spot and couldn't have done it without the assistance of the breeder and my husband, John. My favorite image from that session was of the six pups in the red wagon—one leapt out of the wagon and the other pups were captured watching her in action.

Something clicked for me during that session. As exhausting as it was, I knew then that this is something I wanted to learn more about, and ever since I've been focusing on how to perfect the art of dog photography.

My desire to perfect my art led me to learn about and focus on the animal's body language, which I feel is the key to success in getting those big wall portrait sales. Reading a dog's body language is an integral part of getting a great dog portrait, so I wait for those signs: open mouth with no panting, happy expression, ears forward and alert, and relaxed wagging tail.

Photographing dogs is in some ways similar to photographing toddlers. They sense fear and nervousness and respond to it. I let the dogs get familiar with the studio while I chat with their people. I never pet a dog as soon as it walks into the studio. Give them a chance to get to know you first, to warm up to you, just like that 2-year-old. With the experience I've gained, it's exciting to team up with other dog photographers and teach a workshop. I had to learn so much by trial and error because there wasn't anyone out there teaching. Now we can each demonstrate the style of dog photography that we do best, and the variety is amazing! I think it's a real plus for our attendees to have the three of us working together.

Adding the family pet to a session always

“Reading a dog’s body language is an integral part of getting a great portrait.”

—BARBARA BREITSAMETER



©Barbara Breitsameter

increases sales, but it's so much more than that. Dogs are just unconditional love on four feet. There is nothing like capturing the bond between dogs and their families.

TIPS FOR A SMOOTH SESSION

- Arrange a pre-session consultation by phone or in person to learn more about the dog's temperament, activity level, health, and age.
- Be *relaxed*, go with the flow. If something doesn't work, move on to something else.

- Learn to read a dog's body language. Is the dog calm, alert, happy, anxious, fearful?
- Be patient!
- Don't go in with any expectations. Let the session evolve. ■

*Barbara Breitsameter Photography,
www.bbreditsameter.com.*

The next Unleashed Workshop is scheduled for April 18-20, 2010, in Dallas. Visit unleashed2009.wordpress.com for more information.