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Are You Getting Clipped or Ripped?

By Michelle Heald

We look at the services available and what you should be paying for. We delve into why grooming should be done throughout the year and not just reserved for the warmer months, as well as why you need to have qualified professional help.

A few years back I attended a pet industry trade show where the middle of the exhibition area was a large stage for dog grooming competitions. I've never owned a Poodle, Maltese or long-coated breed so hadn't really experienced seeing a professional groomer in action. Certainly I had never witnessed the amazing before-and-after transformations this breed of stylist was able to achieve.

With Poodles primped and Shih Tzus spritzed, it was fascinating to watch. The highlight was the 'extreme' grooming part of the competition - a freestyle grooming event for dog stylists. Purple and pink Poodles were highly visible, but in trotted a less conventional competitor, a miniature Pinscher, and his groomer, who was a young woman with stacks of attitude. For those not familiar with the breed, visualise a mini Doberman. Not much hair on this little fellow. However, it soon became clear that she was there to take on a real challenge. She rolled up her sleeves to reveal fake flame tattoos and proceeded to clip and shave flames onto her subject. The result was highly effective and showed that with a little creativity, showmanship and some nifty skills, you could achieve a very funky result.



Canine Beautician, Groomologist, Coat Technician, Dog Clipper, Dog Stylist or Groomer-there are many names that these professional pooch (and puss) primpers can go under. But for the sake of this article we'll refer to them as groomers.

Many professional groomers have undertaken TAFE courses or other specialist training and then honed their skills over the years. Just like hairdressers, these dog-stylists build the trust of clients and earn a valued reputation. Their clients are regulars and much like a hairstylist with an excellent word-of-mouth reputation, these groomers have full appointment books and waiting lists.

So what's the difference between a groomer and a dog-washer who operates through a mobile service? Generally, mobile dog-washers have purchased a franchise and have had a couple of weeks' training on running the business, hitching a trailer, basic marketing, and the soggy reality of washing and drying a dog. Some mobile dog-wash franchises expect franchisees to undertake a Certificate course at TAFE on clipping and grooming. Others can offer further two-week courses on clipping and grooming to interested franchisees, however, it's not mandatory.

Some mobile dog-washing services have very experienced personnel who've had years of experience and can clip and snip with the best salon groomers. But it shouldn't be assumed that a mobile service has the expertise and experience to clip a Cav, snip a Schnauzer or puff a Pom. Most mobile services are great for a convenient wash and dry. They come to you and take over the careful washing, ear clean, nail clip and dry off of your mucky mutt. It should be noted that mobile services have their 'area' in which they operate. If you live in Mosman and someone recommends their local service operator from Marrickville, it's unlikely that operator will be able to come to your door.

Grooming salons have popped up everywhere in the last few years and much of this is due to the fashion rise of fluffy crossbreeds. Most of the low-shedding varieties like the Poodle crosses need just as much grooming as their purebred cousins. A groomer situated in the eastern suburbs who did not want to be named for this article had this to say: "I've been a professional groomer for over 20 years and it used to be that long-haired breeds like Poodles, Maltese, Shih Tzu and Lhasa Apsos came in regularly for clips because their owners had researched the breed. They knew that regular grooms and clips were part and parcel of having that breed. More recently we've had to start educating owners of the more fashionable crosses because the sales people in pet stores don't adequately explain the requirements and upkeep needed. A supposedly 'non-shedding' breed or cross does not equal low-maintenance grooming."

"It's hard to drum it into a client that they've neglected their dog by not getting it groomed over winter," she says. "What we end up with is a matted mess and more often than not we have to shave the dog. You see plenty of these crosses shaved in spring and it's not because it's getting warmer. We have to be diplomatic and walk that fine line between education and getting angry about it."

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On average these breeds and their fashionable crosses require a professional session every four to six weeks. Some can be left for as long as eight weeks provided they're getting regular coat maintenance, and that involves washing and a proper, regular brush with the right tools. We shouldn't 'let ourselves go' in winter and the same applies for the shaggier breeds. And at an average cost of \$50-\$70 per session, that's quite a financial commitment for many people, but it's a necessary one for the long-term skin and coat health of your dog.

Calculate at the absolute minimum of six grooming sessions a year; multiply that by the lifespan of an average dog; take a guesstimate for the rise in costs of inflation and there you have it. It's not a huge amount considering the expertise of a groomer, the time taken to achieve a great clip and the overall well-being and health of your dog's coat. But it is something owners of long-haired dogs should be aware of, just like the expectation of vet bills, boarding costs and supplying a healthy diet.

If you're up for it, there are 'do-it-yourself' grooming books and DVDs. One that's been highly successful is from Melbourne-based groomer Natalie West, from Doggy Dooz. The step-by-step guide shows tips and techniques for taming the wild and woolly. The DVD retails for under \$50 and is now in its third edition. Topics include bathing and drying, and styling and shaping certain breeds including the Golden Retriever, Cavalier King Charles and a couple of Poodle crosses. The new updated version also includes a first aid section for those unexpected 'ouch' moments.

As well as running a successful grooming salon and retail outlet, Natalie teaches courses from her Seddon premises. As Natalie explains, "Learning basic grooming techniques has many benefits. You'll certainly save some money even if you do three grooms a year, each between a professional session. Plus there is the added benefit of it being a regular health check for lumps and bumps. There are times when health or other commitments prevent you from getting to a groomer. So the tools and knowledge to undertake some of the more simple techniques will, in the long run, be of benefit to you and your dog."

Regular brushing eliminates mats, tangles and burrs, plus removes dead cells and distributes essential oils in the coat. A regular brush also stimulates the blood supply to the skin. Some dog owners believe that their long-hair dogs are getting adequate brushing at home, but just brushing the upper layer can leave the undercoat to form into a thick, matted pelt. Experienced groomers can get the mats out but it's uncomfortable for the dog and time-consuming. Sometimes the only alternative is to have the coat clipped down past the matting.

"People have no idea what's lurking beneath the surface, buried in those matted undercoats," says Vicky Souter, groomer at Fairy Dog Mother Styling Boutique in Gladesville. "I've seen flea infestations, maggots, and worst of all the poor dog has been suffering through this. I can try and explain to clients the need for regular brushing, clipping and grooming sessions but still I've got clients who only bring their dog in three times a year with no maintenance in between. The dog ends up being shaved every time."

Vicky also understands that there are people who like to keep their dog's coat longer in the winter months. But she cautions that people should at least give their longer-coated dogs a home bath and blowdry every three to four weeks and a thorough brushing every week - remember those tricky areas around the backs of ears, around the legs and under the collar. If you're unsure about the brush to use on your Malamute, Poodle cross, Maltese or Border Collie, ask your groomer for advice and they'll guide you on choice and where to purchase.



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Making the Cut

How to find a Great Groomer

Ask around

With any great business operator, it's all about word of mouth. Ask dog owners in your local area and enquire as to who your vet might recommend. I know people who travel from Warragamba to Avalon to have their hair done. Would you have the same commitment to a great groomer?

If you got your dog from a breeder, they probably have some contacts and recommendations.

Check out the premises

Use your great in-built hygiene tester - your nose. Do the premises smell clean? Then look around the environment to make sure it looks clean and well managed.

Experience counts but so do qualifications

Ask your potential groomer how long they've been in business or how long they've been grooming. Have they completed recognized TAFE courses or comprehensive training at other professional facilities?

Tested on humans not animals

Check with your groomer that all products used are approved for use on domestic pets. Talk over any concerns you may have about allergies or skin conditions.

In the unlikely event of an emergency

Should there be an emergency or accident is your groomer trained in first aid? Is there a first aid kit on the premises? Check out whether they have an emergency plan. Your groomer will probably ask for the contact details of your preferred vet. Many groomers will have a working relationship with a local vet who they can contact in the event of an emergency. You should discuss with your groomer what would happen in the unlikely event that your animal is injured. Will they phone you and have you collect your pet and take it to your vet or will they take it to their vet (which may be closer)? Make sure you're both clear on the policies and procedures.

Show restraint

You should be able to see how your pet will be contained, housed or restrained while waiting for their treatment and during their treatment. Use your gut instinct on this and don't be afraid to ask questions.

Also important to note is that it's illegal for anyone to sedate your pet unless they are a practicing vet. Most groomers will expect you to keep to your appointment and give a drop-off and pick-up time. Some will be accommodating enough for you to leave your dog for a longer period if you are delayed or if you arrange this in advance.

Thanks to Richmond TAFE for information provided for this article.