

Animal Actors

Lights! Camera! Animals!

We get some interesting enquiries here at the Urban Animal office and quite recently we've had a number of pet owners calling us to find out how their pet can be a star. Some people just want their pooch, puss or parrot to appear as a model within the magazine. Many pet owners have bigger expectations, wanting their charges to appear in commercials, movies or TV.

Like doting parents who believe their daughter can sing better than those buffoons on Australian Idol or Starstruck, many folk believe that their pet has something special, is talented and could be destined for a life in front of cameras. One memorable call was from a woman who has a special cat. She believed that he had great potential to take on a starring role in, say, a pet food commercial. She wanted us to supply a contact number for an animal actors' agency (which we just don't do). Our advice was that any specialist agency would want to know how trainable her cat was and how quickly he could adapt to being put in unusual situations. "Oh no", was her reply, "He doesn't do tricks he's just beautiful".

Steve Austin is one of Australia's leading animal trainers. His professional experience spans over 25 years. He consults, takes puppy training classes, trains detector dogs for quarantine services and Assistance dogs for the disabled. Many animals he has trained have appeared in commercials, TV programs and movies both here and overseas. As Steve says, "Too often, people believe they have a pet-star living under their roof. Good looks aren't enough for an animal to be considered for an acting job."

"Through my training activities, appearances at pet shows and lectures, I come across a great range of animals. If I think an animal has the potential to be an actor I will approach the owner and encourage them to really train that animal. There are many qualities an animal needs to be considered for commercial work. It needs to be extremely well trained, well socialised, and most importantly, it should be able to be handled by a great range of people."

There's a feeling of organised chaos on sets for commercials, movies and TV. Lots of loud noises, moving objects, film crew and other distractions require an animal to be totally focused. "The animal needs to be as motivated as the trainer", Steve stresses. "A Director will require multiple angles, lighting conditions may change or a human actor may miss their cue or fluff their lines. An animal actor will need to perform their task over and over again. I want to know that I can get a cat or dog to stay on their mark and not be distracted. I have to be able to jump over the animal and get no reaction."

Michael Garcia, from Melbourne's Canine Solutions, has worked on many Australian TV shows like A Country Practice, Skithouse, Blue Heelers, and his own dog starred in Kelly I and II. He agrees with Steve that he will only consider highly trained dogs to add to his roster of canine actors. "The owner or handler has to demonstrate much more than just come, sit and stay. Dogs have to perform both on and off-lead. They need to show me that they can limp; play dead; shake hands; fetch and retrieve objects, go to a mark and respond to both voice commands and hand signals."



Canine Solutions' Scooter

Both Michael and Steve are used to unusual requests from advertising agencies. As Steve recalls, "I had to train a team of cockroaches for a pest control commercial. The brief was, they had to run in a line, across a kitchen floor. We used a vibration method to signal them to run towards a food reward. Another tough job was to train a cat to be pelted with rain and wind while being held by an actor. It's a rare cat who could remain calm and in control in those sort of conditions."

Even the most highly trained animal actor will not perform as intended. One of Michael's memorable moments involved a car and a dog for an RSPCA commercial. The brief was simple, the dog had to bypass a number of cars then stop at a specific car, cock its leg and pee. Not a hard trick for most dogs you would think. "Think again", laughs Michael. "Our first dog was right on cue and sniffed each tyre as planned. But as he got to the star vehicle, he froze and suffered a bout of stage fright. There was no leg lift and no pee. We tried everything to get him to do the required action—we tried a number of scents and anything we could think of to get him to perform but nothing worked. So we brought in the backup dog but he had the same problem. We managed to get him to partially lift his leg but the main element was missing—no pee! On a commercial, time is money and in showbiz there's an old saying, "When all else fails...cheat it," how we did, well that's another story."

At times, a trainer or handler just can't accommodate a request from an ad agency or production company. "The animal's safety and well-being is always paramount for me," says Steve. "If I feel that it could be a dangerous situation, if they could be harmed or feel any discomfort, then I won't put them through it. I don't want any animal in an uncontrolled environment where they could be injured or stressed in any way."

Like Steve, Michael also sources his dog actors by a number of avenues. "Sometimes I'm just walking in the park and will come across a dog with potential. If the owner is keen and wants their dog to be added to our roster then we require them to submit photos, videos and a CV. Over and above a dog's level of obedience and work ethic, is the capacity of the owner or handler. They also have to show their skill and willingness to perform and have the right attitude."

So are there many 'Stage Mothers' in the animal acting world? "Too right there are!", laughs Steve. "I've had to overcome some problems with some very precious people indeed. Many don't understand the commitment and work ethic involved on their part."

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If you're considering training your pet and grooming them for a star-studded career in front of the camera, it would be good to know whether the earnings could pay for a new wing on the house. Or whether the remuneration is only going to cover a bag of super premium. As Steve explains, "It's not going to be a real earner in the beginning. But after a number of jobs, that animal, say a dog, will get known. A director will then seek out that particular dog and request it for a job. Once the dog is known and has done some meaningful jobs, that's where you can start commanding some serious money. A well trained and experienced animal actor is going to cost less for them in the long run than a novice dog that needs more time."



Steve Austin and friends

Michael also explains, "Our listed actors receive a minimum daily fee plus allowances for travel and other costs. Fees are based on the type of work to be performed. As a lead actor you get a higher rate

then say an animal in the background. Commercials, movies and TV spots command higher fees whereas photo shoots are generally only half-day calls. On average, an animal actor would expect to receive \$250 a day, plus."

Urban Animal's last cover-model, Arnold the Australian Bull Dog, came to our attention out of the blue. We were about to have a casting call for a suitable doggy model and just a few days before, we got an email with Arnold's photo attached. Perfect looking dog, we all thought. But we needed to know if the little guy could sit and stay on command and how quickly he would get used to a camera in his face. Of course the results speak for themselves-Arnold was perfect.

But before you start sending those digital happy snaps and overloading our server, please take into consideration our fee structure. The animals featured in these pages generally do the job for love, snacks and their owners' bragging rights.

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