



Power of Social Media

The most amazing thing happened recently, thanks to a Facebook post. A friend who lived 2,000 miles away contacted me to say his Tibetan Mastiff had escaped and was missing. I knew several people who lived in his area, so took a gamble and posted a photo of the missing TM on Facebook and asked people to share. Within 7 minutes of my post, the dog had been located by someone who saw the post, the owner had been contacted, and he was on his way to pick up his dog. It may sound unbelievable, but it did happen, and exemplifies the power of social media.

According to a survey by the Pew Research Center, nearly two-thirds of American adults get their information and news from social media, with Facebook leading the way: 67% of Americans have a Facebook account and 66% of users get news from the site. Reddit and Twitter both also have strong numbers, with 70% and 59% respectively. The difference, however, is that people using Reddit and Twitter are on the sites actively seeking information, whereas the majority of Facebook users admit they gather news while on the site pursuing something else. It should come as no surprise that age plays a significant role in which sources people go to for news and information: TV is the most popular source for those over age 50, while 30-49 year olds prefer websites, and millennials (18-29 year olds) rely heavily on social media (89%) and visit it daily. Facebook and Snapchat are the top two platforms among college students. This trend is not limited to the United States. The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism Research released a survey which included approximately 50,000 people spanning 26 countries that showed similar results. All of this boils down to one frightening conclusion: Facebook is now the most powerful source of news and information in the world.

How does this impact the Tibetan Mastiff? Or any breed for that matter? Unfortunately, news and information shared on Facebook and other social media sites is not always correct. There is no journalist to fact-check the information or stories that spread like wild-fire. More disconcerting, most people do not discern between news and research articles and blog type posts that have no factual basis. Here are actual examples of horribly wrong information that I have seen posted on Facebook over the last couple of months: 1) Give your dog Tylenol and Advil for pain; 2) You cannot vaccinate against a virus; 3) A breed standard leads to inbreeding; 4) Feeding kibble and raw together will kill your dog; and 5) Your dog can't get pregnant if you are.

The effects of social media are being strongly felt in the Tibetan Mastiff breed. Unscrupulous breeders are setting up websites and social media accounts and heavily marketing a new "type" of TM that is in fact not a type at all, but a modern day cross-breed creation. Newcomers to the breed read, quote, and share the information they encounter on Facebook and elsewhere online as though it were the gospel truth. Preservation breeders that have been in the breed for 30 or 40 years are now being bluntly and rudely told that they do not know what a true TM is supposed to look like by those who have never laid hands on the breed and whose only exposure to the breed is what they have seen and read on social media sites. Personally, I have experienced similar misconceptions even from judges in the show ring. I had one judge tell me that the male I was showing that day was too small and did not have enough coat (28" and 130 lbs; right in the middle of the preferred range of 26-29 inches per our Breed Standard; correct summer coat) and that I needed to go online and get some magazines and find out what the breed was supposed to look like. The battle to preserve the breed is real, and we are losing the battle, due in large part to social media.

The same sort of thing is happening in other breeds as well. From huge monstrosities marketed as Tibetan Mastiffs, to exotic Bullies, to lilac Frenchies, to "teacup" anything, social media is presenting the exception, the extreme, the outright weird as a desirable norm by the manipulation of misinformation. If we, as breed

preservationists and enthusiasts, are to prevail, we are going to have to wake up and speak up. We have to understand how technology has changed the way we perceive even our beloved pets, acknowledge the power of social media, and step up the game, by putting forth the time and effort to establish and maintain social media accounts dedicated to sharing history, news, and factual information about our breeds. We need to harness the positive power of social media to work for us instead of against us as we go forward.

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