

Internet Interpet

By Phil Tripp

It seems like just as humans are embracing social networking sites on the net, our pets are getting the same opportunities to network through like minded owners who can also type. While humans log onto Facebook for keeping up with friends or MySpace for music lovers and teens, the pet world has also seen social networking communities pop up online where they can share photos, video clips, blogs, jokes, stack up heaps of friends and do any number of other fun things.

There have been no shortage of commercial sites in the past that either list contacts or try to sell something, sometimes being a portal to push products, services or pet accommodation through to those who stroll by their site. And there are also sites that serve as forums for a variety of pet interests with various topics inviting flame wars or intelligent dialogue depending on the people's passion online.

One example of the latter is the free DogzOnline (www.dogzonline.com.au) which has a long history of almost ten years, thousands of posters and has forums on rescue, nutrition, breed-specific legislation as well as puppy problems and general dog discussions. It's tightly moderated, revenue driven by banner ads and always interesting, often controversial in the comments of posters as well as having a lot of content on breeders, clubs and shows. It serves to direct people to specific registered breeders and we used it as well as word of mouth when we decided to vet Dalmatian breeders before we chose Scooter from Starswept in the end.



But there are other, newer sorts of sites that address the needs of those looking for fun and friendship online among pet owners rather than more serious pursuits. Using a name similar to MySpace, Muttspace in the US started up late last year as a social networking site with a frequent blog, member blogs, member photos of their dogs, videos, classified and groups. It's free and a lot of fun, relatively easy to join and quite colourful.

In Australia last year, a young woman came up independently with a similar idea and name. The US individual who formed Muttspace already had the .com URL so she went for the muttspace.com.au site name and started from there. It's not only a place where people can connect but it has a host of free information including training tips, recipes for pet foods and treats, a Newshound column with stories from around the globe, a links section and a space for photos as well as a 'members only' area. It's free and has its own store for specialty products as well as discreet banner ads from the dog community.

With hundreds of members and thousands of page views in its first few months of a 'soft' opening and no national media, the site has now had wag of mouth to spur momentum and is also about to launch a number of new aspects. The Mutt of the Month contest is a fun way for people to stay connected and also win prizes if their pup is primo. But Mutts refers not to mixed breeds but that all of us are essentially mutts in some way. And there's room for cats and birds too!

With 2000 members, Queensland-based DoggyMates (www.doggymates.com.au) hopes to reverse the trend and branch out overseas as it has done interstate. The site brings together dog lovers who live near each other and are prepared to hang out together or help each other out with dog minding, day care, dog walking or other activities. It provides information on dog social events, sports and places where people can take their dogs such as council days, holidaying accommodation and off-leash parks.



Run by Diane Hackett who has another day job, the site has grown over the past couple of years due to her dogged determination of being everywhere she can and in Sydney, she's had stands at Pet Expos, council days, events, and is tireless in her devotion to hooking up dog owners with each other. And she has a terrific sense of humour as seen by her FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions). It costs \$27 to join and for 15 months membership.

Cats get their spots on the Net too. MyCatSpace.com out of the US has a gallery of photos which can be voted on, videos, meow messaging, blogs, very active forums on breeds, advice on nutrition and much more, all free. Locally, catworld.com.au has over 150 members who have cat chats, pics, health tips, stories and breeding info. There doesn't seem to have been any kind of catfight with its larger counterpart, cat-world.com.au which is similar to Dogzonline since it uses the same engine. It has cat breeders, boarding forums, articles, care and health articles.



A social network for dogs, cats and all your fuzzy pets is what Fuzzter.com claims to be, much like its human counterpart Friendster. You can look up a Random Fuzzter and get photos, descriptions, and both furry friends or non-furry. Like Facebook, you can view recent activity which might be new photos, new joiners and of course a world of bloggers.

And finally, UnitedDogs is an online dogs community that lets you create a free webpage for your hound, upload as many as 50 photos, start a blog and if you have no dog, you can pat puppies and dogs online or check out their videos. It claims to have over 27,000 members and is also free.



But be aware there are also those sites that pretend to be social networking or community areas that are actually created by corporations such as dog food, treat, toy or other commercial operations that try to lure users and then sell them something. It's becoming more common as commerce meets communities but fairly easy to spot. Always be careful in providing personal information and when in doubt, don't join, just lurk the edges sniffin' around.

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