

# Buying pups on the Internet can be worthwhile, but do your homework first . . . you can get scammed

## Puppy pointers

If you are thinking of buying a puppy online, consider these recommendations from experts:

- Get the seller's phone number and mailing address. Call the number to see if it is correct and working.

- Ask for names and phone numbers of people who have bought puppies from the seller.

- Enter the seller's name into an Internet search engine to see if it turns up web sites on which complaints or warnings have been posted.

- Check with the Better Business Bureau in the seller's area to see if any complaints have been lodged.

By **MARYANN MOTT**  
New York Times News Service

**A**fter waiting more than a year, September Morn of Shelton, Wash., recently received her American Eskimo puppy from a breeder she found online. "I consider this breeder a personal friend now, after our many, mostly e-mail, interactions," said Morn, a professional dog trainer. "We've shared joys and sorrows, hopes and worries, and news of our dog families. And if it weren't for the Internet, I might never have found her."

More than 200,000 American households bought puppies online last year, according to the American Pet Product Manufacturers Association, a trade group.

But not all Internet purchases have a happy ending. Law enforcement officials in California and Florida recently reported that charges have been filed in more than 30 cases in which consumers either received sick puppies that later died, or paid upward of \$1,000 for a dog and never received it.

The American Kennel Club, the largest registry of purebred dogs, does not officially track complaints involving Internet purchases. But a

spokeswoman, Lisa Peterson, says more people are reporting health problems in dogs bought online.

Many complain "that the dog arrives sick or in poor condition, and the puppy buyer can't get satisfaction from the breeder because they often live in another state," Peterson said.

Sometimes the puppy never shows up.

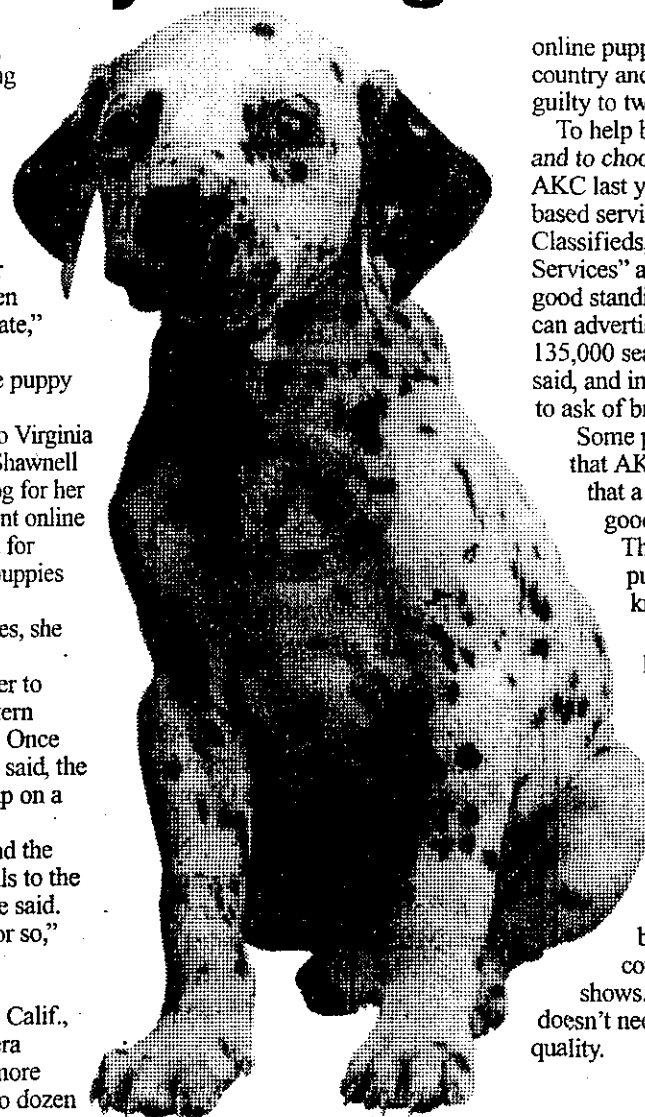
After moving to Virginia earlier this year, Shawnell Ingle wanted a dog for her family. So she went online and noticed an ad for English bulldog puppies for \$1,000. After previewing pictures, she

chose one.

Ingle said the seller told her to transfer the money to a Western Union account in California. Once the money was received, she said, the seller promised to put the pup on a flight to the East Coast.

Days turned into weeks and the puppy did not arrive, and calls to the seller went unanswered, Ingle said. "All I did was cry for a day or so," she said. "My kids were so brokenhearted."

The police in Chula Vista, Calif., say the seller, Elizabeth Rivera Davis of Chula Vista, stole more than \$20,000 from nearly two dozen



online puppy buyers throughout the country and Canada. She pleaded guilty to two of 17 felony counts.

To help buyers find the right breed and to choose responsible sellers, the AKC last year introduced a Web-based service called Breeder Classifieds, found under "Online Services" at akc.org. Only breeders in good standing with the organization can advertise. The site averages 135,000 searches a month, Peterson said, and includes a list of questions to ask of breeders.

Some people mistakenly think that AKC papers alone guarantee that a puppy is healthy and of good quality. They don't.

They prove only that a puppy is the offspring of a known sire and dam.

Prices for pedigree puppies vary by region, depending on the type of dog, its health screening tests and whether the parents are champions.

In general, buyers can expect to pay \$500 to \$2,000 for a pet-quality pedigree puppy — one that the breeder believes won't be able to compete successfully in dog shows. A higher price, though, doesn't necessarily mean better quality.

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Many fans of purebreds say that good breeders often have the following qualities:

■ They are not in the business solely to make money. For many, it is a hobby, with the goal of improving the breed.

■ They often specialize in one breed, and spend time educating buyers about its advantages and disadvantages.

■ They sell only healthy animals and guarantee them for reasonable periods. They should test a puppy's parents for hereditary diseases, and the puppy's vaccinations should be up to date.

■ Their contracts stipulate that if the buyer does not meet specified conditions of care, or becomes unable to keep the puppy, they will take it back.

Elaine Gewirtz of Westlake Village, Calif., wants to make sure her Dalmatian puppies go to good homes, and to people who know what to expect from owning them. More than 60 percent of Gewirtz's prospective buyers come from online breeder referral services and firebusterdals.com, her web site. When people e-mail requests for information, she asks them to call her. She then asks about their pet-owning experience and lifestyle to determine if they're a good match.

"My husband says it's easier for someone to get a bank loan than one of my puppies," said Gewirtz, who has bred 25 champion Dalmatians.

When visiting a breeder's home or kennel, ask to see at least one of the puppy's parents, experts say; the appearance and temperament of the parent can provide an idea of how the pup may turn out. Be wary, the experts advise, if a breeder does not let you do so – or if he does not let you see the environment where the puppy was raised.

If you do buy an animal with a health problem, 12 states have consumer protection laws for buyers. These laws differ by state. Some "puppy lemon laws" make the seller compensate the buyer for a portion of veterinarian bills incurred; others cover hereditary conditions.