

Pets on the net – driving up standards

The digital age is well and truly with us and the internet is now the place where most people advertise. You can look to buy most things from the internet – from Porsches to pets, writes *Jacqui Cuff*, *Cats Protection Advocacy Manager*.

Whether we like it or not the advertising of pets for sale on the internet is not going to go away. Even if one site closed its pets' pages then the advertisements would transfer to another or new sites would spring up. And if there were no internet pet advertisements we'd run the real risk of creating a culture that is even less transparent and in which irresponsible and/or backstreet breeders would thrive.

Advertising is in many ways the tip of a very big iceberg. Underlying problems relate to a surplus of cats, unwanted litters and unregulated breeding of cats. The law on breeding and sale of cats dates back to the 1950s and is not reflective of the internet age. These complex issues will all take time to change: some will require new legislation but all are part of our ongoing advocacy work with government and decision makers. Cats Protection is working on all aspects of this difficult problem.

Cats Protection is committed to securing high standards so that the internet becomes a safe place to look for a pet. In the right circumstances

the internet gives unrivalled access to thousands of people willing to give a cat or kitten a good home. Cats Protection knows this itself from its own branch websites for example and from its 'Find-a-cat' online facility where someone seeking to adopt can do so by postcode. We have taken the step of putting Find-a-cat onto the pets' pages of classified sites to encourage people to consider adopting from us.

Cats Protection is a longstanding member of the Pet Advertising Advisory Group (PAAG) comprising leading animal welfare and specialist agencies across the UK. PAAG has been in discussion with the Department for the Environment Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) and it is clear that there is no prospect of a ban on online pet advertisements. PAAG has been working with online sites to develop and agree a voluntary set of minimum standards to improve the welfare standards of online pet advertisements and to protect members of the public from the risk of ending up with a sick, dangerous or even illegal animal. The problem is that the websites are almost entirely automated, and handle hundreds of thousands of adverts every day. The website owners have been very co-operative and already, as a result of PAAG, now use far more automatic filters to try and block irresponsible adverts. Sites will now take down multiple or repeat adverts where it seems a person is repeatedly breeding and selling. They also filter out keywords to reduce the number of illegal breeds eg 'wildcat' or words that suggest welfare issues, eg 'suckling kitten'. If adverts do slip through, sites have been very responsive, taking them down within 12 hours and usually much sooner.

In September 2013 there was a major development for PAAG when Defra publicly endorsed the PAAG minimum standards. Lord de Mauley, the Minister responsible for animal welfare, called a meeting at Westminster of the leading online pet classified websites to discuss

Don't regret buying your pet

Looking at pet ads on the internet? Take care, there are some dodgy sellers and breeders about – an impulse purchase could end up badly for you and the animal. Here are some tips to help you find a suitable pet that is healthy and happy.

- 1 Try an animal charity first – they have thousands of healthy animals just waiting for a loving home.
- 2 See young animals with their mum. Are they old enough to leave her?
- 3 Go and see the pet – make sure you ask about its health and medical history. Beware of dodgy breeders.
- 4 Understand your pet's needs and how much it will cost to keep it. Many animals need companionship, space and exercise.
- 5 Report adverts for illegal breeds and breeders of illegal imports. Pits that have been smuggled in may have a disease that affects their health and yours.
- 6 Is it dangerous, wild or even endangered? Many dangerous, wild or exotic species need a licence and are for specialists. Check it will make a suitable pet.

BANNED
 Breeding or selling a banned breed of dog – such as a pitbull terrier or Japanese Toys – is a criminal offence.

To find out more, visit our website www.paag.org.uk

The Pet Advertising Advisory Group is a group of major animal welfare charities and other organisations.

This online poster summarises the things to watch out for if you are looking at pet advertisements online. You can download a copy at: <http://bit.ly/1edDvxD>

the need for urgent improvement and adherence to the minimum standards. He will be reviewing progress in six months. During that time PAAG members will be recruiting a team of PAAG volunteer moderators who will regularly spot check pet advertisements and log details of any that breach the minimum standards. Our Advocacy team has already had volunteers helping us to spot check cat and kitten adverts on the major sites and PAAG is keen to build on this experience and extend volunteer moderation. A database will be used to log advertisements so we can track progress against finalised minimum standards.

While the minimum standards are just the first step on the road to improving online pet advertisements it's an important leap forward. Success won't happen overnight but with government support we are working hard to ensure that pets advertised online are healthy, happy and find a loving home. ●

Links

Government advice re buying a cat or a dog can be found here: www.gov.uk/buying-a-cat-or-dog

For more information about PAAG and to view the minimum standards visit www.paag.org.uk

For information about becoming one of the new PAAG volunteer moderators or about CP's advocacy work e-mail: advocacy@cats.org.uk