



StubbyDog™

Rediscover the Pit Bull.

Changing Hearts and Minds

By Laura Petrolino, VP of Operations

You are at the park playing fetch with your dog.

You are on a plane reading a magazine.

You are at the salon getting your nails done.

You are at the grocery store buying dinner.

Undoubtedly, throughout your daily activities, you encounter a moment where you are put in the position to be a pit bull advocate. You might overhear a conversation, be asked directly, or simply have it come up in a discussion.

So what do you do? This is a question that I get a lot, so I thought it worthwhile to put together a short “intro” course for those of you interested in helping to set the record straight, but not exactly sure where to start (or those of you who are already actively advocating, but need a few pointers to be more effective).



I divided the process up into the “5 A’s of Advocacy”:

Be Aware: So the first thing to do when faced with any situation in which you are serving as an impromptu pit bull ambassador is to stop, take a deep breath, and put yourself in check. This is an emotional issue on both sides of the line. It is very easy, especially if you have a pit bull as part of your family, to take things personally and let your emotions overwhelm your intellect. Please don’t. By letting raw emotion rule the roost you will not accomplish anything beneficial for yourself, the person you are talking with, other future advocates and, most importantly, the dogs.

Sure, the love you have for your dog is important, but not if it prevents you from talking logically and laying out important facts, figures and talking points that can help the other party also look past their immediate emotional response and open themselves to the new information that you are bringing to the table. Please know yourself and your limits when it comes to this; if you are unable to separate your immediate emotional response from your attempts to help change public perception about pit bulls, then know it is OK to just walk away. In fact, it is better to walk away.

Acknowledge: Acknowledge the other person's point of view. Please don't vilify them in any way just because their exposure to pit bulls has been limited, they've had a bad experience personally (or know/have heard of someone who has), or have a knowledge base which has been completely developed off of media sound bites and scare stories.

Please try to put yourself in their shoes. All of us have fears about something that might very well be unfounded, but that doesn't make them any less real to us. Just because their fear is not your fear doesn't make it any less scary.

If the person you are talking to has been a victim of an attack or has a dog or family member who has been, start out by expressing your sincere condolences for this fact. Again, put yourself in their shoes.

Arm Yourself: Know your facts and be prepared. Pretend that you are in debate club at school and the debate topic for the national championship. Would you go in completely unprepared with facts, figures and talking points that were both defensible and emotionally and intellectually resonate? I hope not.

We have a whole site of information and resources that you can use to help you prepare yourself, as do BADRAP and Animal Farm Foundation.

I recommend you pick out three to five really key talking points and/or facts that you master, and use those consistently to make your points. For example, I normally start with bringing up the fact that dogs labeled "pit bulls" are not actually a breed, but instead a grouping of dogs with similar physical characteristics. So basically, a stereotype is being applied to a group of dogs simply because of how they look. This tends to automatically break people out of their fixed mindset because it cuts down on their ability to categorize and immediately alerts them



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to the fact that their entire foundation for thought about pit bulls was incorrect. I move forward from there.

Really, it is important to see what works for you. What do you feel comfortable talking about? What do you feel are the most important talking points based on discussions or issues that have come up in your community?

I feel the need to add another warning here about not letting emotion interfere with your ability to provide clear and useful facts. I often find that loving pit bull guardians *think* they know a lot about the dogs and the bias, but actually what they know is that they love their dog and like to snuggle on the couch with him/her or watch them do goofy things. Which is fantastic, but not quite the type of persuasive information needed to effectively be an advocate.

Arm them: Obviously you are not going to provide a full and complete re-education to the person you are talking to in one discussion, nor would you want to. This is why I encourage you to pick around three clear and persuasive points to share with them. It gives them enough to start to re-evaluate their stance, but not too much to overwhelm them.

However, you want to be able to provide them with the ability to find out more on their own, and guess what? That's what StubbyDog is here for. Send them to our site. We will hopefully soon be selling postcard-sized "advocacy flash cards" that you can carry around with you, or simply write our URL down on a piece of paper or the back of your business card (so they can reach back out to you as well, if needed).

I know a lot of you use us as a referral source in this way already, and we definitely encourage you to do it as much as possible. I can't tell you the number of e-mails I get on a weekly basis from people who have been referred to our site and are grateful and excited about the change in mindset and release of long-held false fears that our site helped them accomplish.

Accept: Guess what? As great as your argument might be, as passionate as your intention, as well balanced and knowledgeable as your talking points, sometimes you won't be able to change someone's mind. This is just the fact of life. Please know when to walk away and then do it.

Have faith in the fact that there are a lot of minds that are ready to be changed, and there are some that just aren't there yet. And also realize that even though it may appear that you didn't get through at this point, your message will most likely continue to resonate in the back of their heads, just waiting for the time when the right additional stimulus triggers them to re-evaluate things.

You can't always see the difference you make, but move forward confident in the fact that every time you chip away at some of the long cemented false stereotypes about pit bulls, we take a step forward in an overall change in public perception for these dogs.