

Dog-E-Data and Pet Talk Radio

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"To err is human:
To forgive, canine."
- Anonymous

When you publish a pet magazine, you encounter some real characters along the way from announcing its creation, through printing and distributing the first issue and then getting reactions to it. We've had to adapt to a whole new industry on the commercial side and politely inform some of the more extreme individuals on the animal rights side we aren't going to be their media outlet. And in between, we've met thousands of pets and their companions.

One of the first pair of livewires we bumped into was Brian Pickering and Kaye Browne who responded to our first 'outreach' email to all levels of the pet business and media. We had noticed their site on the Internet for Pet Talk Radio www.pettalkradio.com and were fascinated that there was talk radio for pets! Much less a program that is syndicated nationally. We also discovered through a link on their site that they had established a pet retrieval system called Dog-E-Data which is detailed at www.dog-e-data.com.

We started a quick correspondence and then a phone relationship before bumping into them as compere at the Rose Bay 'People and Pets Day' just before we published our first issue. And what a pair they are! A matched set on the stage, they can be even more riotous in the back garden where we spent some time after the Newtown Dog Show to unwind from the stress with our collection of mutual pets.

Brian is someone who thinks they can do everything and anything – but not always at the same time. He's a whiz with audio recording and technical production using an Apple computer to edit the shows for a satellite feed offline. When asked where he honed his chops, Brian rattled off, "I have a background in commercial (production and on-air) and ABC Radio/TV (Drama / Production & Post Production) / Multimedia (laser discs and touch screens... remember those??) and a history in Multitrack 'Live' Music Recording & Production (Island Records UK, SunWest Studios USA & Eurosonic in Spain). I actually held Enrique Iglesias as a baby whilst recording his dad – Julio!"

Beyond the airwaves, he also lays down the programs for on-demand audio in their website so that those who miss the broadcasts in their listening areas across Australia on the community radio network Pet Talk Radio syndicated to, or those who are not able to pick it up, can via the Net.

While Brian is the wires guy and foil for her barbs, Kaye is someone who can talk underwater! It's something she says happened as a result of having to 'talk fast' to get the story/interview during her years as a TV News & Current Affairs reporter, initially in NZ, but mostly in Sydney on national TV (7, 10, ABC) plus a year or two on Queensland radio stations 4BC, 4MMM and 4BH. She also had a stint doing corporate PR for a giant multi-national and then producing top-rating TV programs such as 'Who Dares Wins' 'Police Camera Action' and 'House from Hell' amongst a potpourri of TV documentaries.

"I like variety" says Kaye, "and I like to win – if the raw material isn't there to keep the numbers high, it's time to look for the next challenge".

Currently – Kaye co-ordinates Dr Harry's pet segments on Channel 7s 'Better Homes & Gardens' TV show. The role enables Kaye to pursue the very latest in pet/animal information and trends for both her Dr Harry segments and Pet Talk Radio! "Don't ask me why they stopped making 'Harry's Practice' – I don't know." says Kaye. "But I do know that the number of letters hitting my desk (all Harry's correspondence/potential housecall letters etc) tripled during last year... so his popularity is if anything INcreasing, not decreasing."

How did you two hook up and were animals involved in the act?

Brian: "We were both working at a young, hip radio station (Triple-M) in Brisbane at the time so some might say animals were involved... we were all party animals!"

But looking back, we've both always been 'animal mad' and we did 'acquire' a kitten just weeks after getting together. A friend told us about a tiny kitten, a male, he'd rescued from a sack on the shores of the Brisbane River. Of course we took him in, but the little guy was so unwell the vet we consulted said the tiny bag of fur might not live and suggested feeding only poached fish, egg, ricotta cheese etc... and oh, by the way it's not a little guy, she's a little girl!"

Happily Chiquita proved him wrong, thriving on TLC, later happily moving in with a new family when work took them overseas.

It was also while they were overseas, again for work, that they lost their hearts to another of society's rejects, a mixed breed, mixed-coloured hound they called Picasso. After all, they were in Spain and just down the road from Malaga, the great artist's birthplace.

Picasso kept Kaye company while Brian worked long days on a BBC TV program called Eldorado and plans were underway for all three to return to Australia when Picasso mysteriously disappeared while sun-baking after a bath. (He'd just rolled in something fishy/dead/nasty).

Whether he was stolen by gypsies (Kaye's belief) or simply wandered off... the result was ultimately tragic. Brian found Picasso three days later by the side of the main road after an appeal on radio brought several calls from people who'd seen the 'little brown dog' but hadn't known what to do or who to tell about the sighting.

At that point, Kaye and Brian decided that if ever they could come up with a system to make it easier for finders to reach someone – anytime day or night – about that pet so it could get home, then they would set it up. That's how Dog-E-Data came about.

"Then our members told us they wanted more than just a passing mention about pets and or animals at the end of a news bulletin, they wanted local and international stories, both good and bad and they wanted to hear about the people in the pet and animal world... prompting us to create Pet Talk Radio!" Brian concludes.

You recently celebrated your 100th show on radio and I can testify that being on Pet Talk Radio in the studio can be a wild affair! How did you two come up with this concept and unleash it?

Kaye: "Crazy though it now seems – given that we'd both worked extensively in radio and TV – Brian and I didn't immediately think about communicating via radio when we first launched Dog-E-Data – our Photo-ID and Tag system for dogs back in 2000. That's because our data-base and archive of behaviour tips and suggestions were all 'on the net'... and because our free on-line newsletters with all kinds of pet news and advice and entertainment info seemed so popular.

We somewhat naively thought we'd eventually be able to ask for paid subscriptions, like many other newsletters do both here and overseas. But we're not publishers (like the pros at Urban Animal!)... we're broadcasters... so a little belatedly, we looked at Aussie radio to see if anyone else was making a show focused on pets and animals and how they improve our lives. Surprisingly, we discovered there wasn't anything – just a few stations with a guest Vet providing answers to veterinary



type questions. All very worthy, but often pretty glum, because the focus was on sickness, injury, pain and sometimes death. With occasional light relief on positive health!

We saw a niche, created it and then cornered it. Pet Talk Radio! with its unique brand of information based entertainment was born."

Like any radio show, there is a cast of characters. Who are the current regulars and who have been their star predecessors?

Brian: "Top of our regulars list is Australia's most personable professional animal behaviourist, Dr Joanne Righetti PhD. Don't let the Italian surname trick you – Jo's a Scottish born Australian with a passion for cats and dogs and a PhD in Australian Native Animals.

In a segment we created for her called 'Heavy Petting' she helps listeners with what seem to be naughty pets. But when viewed from Jo's expert point of view, they turn out to be simply confused animals who can be retrained with the right advice and regular practice. Jo's zoology background is also extremely useful for a segment we've called 'WildSide'. Because when it comes to explaining the complexities of the animal kingdom, a sense of humour is a must – especially when hearing her describe their procreative activities; things like size or frequency or sex in the dark (blind animal reproduction!) No-one's complained yet!"

Kaye: "You want unusual? Lynn Overhill is our regular pet psychic who can talk to and with the animals. Lynn's a reluctant 'animal communicator' who discovered her skills by accident when the neighbour's cats insisted on popping thoughts into her head. Now this former computer guru helps solve problems for pets and their owners when they can't fathom what's going on by more conventional methods.

Dealing with animal issues, we have Dr Joanne Sillince, Vice-president of the Australian Veterinary Association. She provides credible comment on matters of national interest, such as live animal exports through to the changing opinions in the veterinary industry, for example weighing in on the debate that annual vaccinations for older pets are not as critical as for younger animals. As well as displaying the wicked sense of humour and humanity that keeps vets working in an industry involving vast amounts of poos and wees!" The AVA site is at www.ava.org.au

Brian: "And we've got to have the mandatory Dog Trainer. No matter whether it bites, barks or bolts, Karin Bridge believes if it's breathing... it can be trained! Great news for dog owners who thought they had to simply put up with a problem, or their problem pet. As a member and spokesperson for the APDT – Association of Pet Dog Trainers – Karin uses and promotes 'positive' motivational training methods to bring those naughty animals to heel and encourage them to 'earn' rewards." www.apdt.com.au/

"And wait 'til you meet our Reptile Wrangler. Eat your heart out Steve Irwin... Mark Richmond from 'Crocodile Encounters' is a fair dinkum reptile wrangler with a passion to help Aussies better understand the 'beasts' sharing our environment.

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The beast reference is from Kaye who's not a huge fan of snakes. But after grilling Mark about the likelihood of being bitten by one (buckleys and none!), and learning how to keep our pets safe from nasties in the bush, she's slowly coming around to appreciate the fact that Australia has been 'blessed' with the biggest range of reptile species in the world!"

Kaye: "When it comes to celebrities, Drs Harry Cooper and Katrina Warren from Channel 7 top the list. And Drs Steve Van Mil and Chris Brown from Channel 9 all 'appear' from time to time on the radio show thanks to our shared passion for animals. You'll also regularly hear dog-trainer extraordinaire Steve Austin, (who interestingly works with a prison dogs program which will appear in our next issue); Australia's only 'Master Groomer' Jodie Graham talks about keeping our pets skin and fur healthy and looking good; Sarah Griffin on naturopathy and homeopathy for pets, acupuncture and acupressure - especially for horses, welfare and rehoming/retraining experts plus way too many more to mention here as it would take the entire page.

You have two shows I believe. One broadcast in Sydney only and one more national through community radio? Brian...can you explain and do you intend to expand your reach?

Brian: "It's pretty simple really. We broadcast live for two hours every Saturday from noon on Triple H -100.1FM Hornsby Ku-ring-gai which can mainly be heard across the upper North Shore (sadly community radio output power is often very limited)

The first hour has our regular 'pet news and unbelievable but true tales', 'Heavy Petting behavioural advice', 'Wildside' focusing on non domestic animals, plus live studio guests and pre-recorded interviews on topical matters. This is essentially the version which is broadcast around the country via the Community Radio Satellite Service and replayed during the following week by around 40 stations at times that suit them best.

In Sydney - the easiest way to hear Pet Talk Radio is on FRIDAYS at 4PM on 2 Triple-R which is at 88.5FM. 2 Triple R's broadcast signal is stronger than Hornsby's so the show can be heard right across Sydney! It's a great fun way to end the week - anyway what else do you do from 4 til 5 on a Friday arvo?"

Kaye, you have a background in TV production as you do Brian, why not take this concept to the tube?

Kaye: "Pet Talk TV? Sounds great! I've always fancied myself as a kind of blonde Oprah!!! However it's precisely because Pet Talk Radio is an original show that we haven't, as yet, offered a television version to the commercial networks or cable channels. Television shows live and die by their ratings, and while we've been fortunate to have extraordinary successes in the past, the trend in recent times is for Networks to buy a foreign format and make an Aussie version.

We'd like to see the reverse happen, with an Aussie TV pet talk show building an audience here and then perhaps going overseas. But rather than jump in with untested ideas, we've chosen to take time to ask 'pet people' what they want to hear about - (officially 64% of the population have a pet). As a result, Pet Talk Radio has evolved dramatically over 100+ shows... and we want to see it continue to grow because even if a TV show eventuates, it will be in addition to our radio program which we adore making and which in 2005 is about to expand onto the commercial radio network as Brian mentioned earlier."

Can you give us examples of some of the more bizarre visitors you've had on the show and any juicy incidents? (Jackson-Urban Animal's Eclectus-DID NOT POO ON THE CHAIR!!!)

Brian: "Awww c'mon Phil-it was a near miss! Now we know why you wear such wildly patterned shirts-to hide accidents. Plus you just want us to mention that you raised the class of the music we normally play on our live show by providing a CD of YOUR favourite artists!! And you succeeded, according to Kaye!"

Seriously though-when you came on the show we thought we just had a guy with a music background who had started a pet magazine (Urban Animal). But what we quickly realised was that you were also very knowledgeable about birds-amongst others, Eclectus parrots to be precise. And that's what makes our 'pet show' unique. We have interesting PEOPLE!!! In fact our show is heavily geared towards the people involved with animals.

Take for example, Australia's own 'Mr Yowie' Rex Gilro. This guy-along with his very supportive wife Heather - are determined to prove that large-supposedly extinct or 'impossible' creatures exist (or existed) right here in our own backyards.

Like the Lithgow Lion or the huge Panthers that have supposedly been sighted in Sydney's western suburbs... Rex brought with him some clay footprints to prove their existence.

Another turn-a-round for the books was Dr Steve Van Mil, Channel 9 'Today Show' TV Vet whose passion turns out to be cats. Really, really big ones-he's an expert on lions and Sumatran Tigers (he's operated on several and has personally nursed some cubs) and tirelessly raises funds for training 'assistance dogs' for the disabled.

Dr Katrina Warren also provided us with her very 'relaxed' side (which you will never see on TV) with some funny stories about dog Toby and her cat Millie, and also revealed her passion for wild animals (she is a Patron of WIRES).

And of course there is MUCH more to Dr Harry than meets the eye-he is passionate about Wild African dogs and knows more about birds than almost anyone in this country.

But... Ok ok... you want dirt right? Well two ferrets did actually 'pouf' on air-well that's what their owner called it-but on Pet Talk Radio we don't shy away from calling a spade... and frankly... the ferrets farted. Badly!

We've had all kinds of dogs in the studio... and once had three Cockatiels flying around making so much noise we couldn't be heard. A very expensive Burmese cat called 'Special' turned the microphones on and off and started the next ad break and you're right, your Eclectus parrot Jackson DID NOT POO ON THE CHAIR!!! But he certainly posed for a great photo for us and highlighted how intelligent birds really are."

The program seems to be a work of love, have you managed to attract sponsorship for it and who supports this?

Brian: "Yes...and no. Locally in Sydney we're sponsored by the Ku-ring-gai Veterinary Hospital and the Roseville Vet Surgery whose amazing Vet experts provide us with great real-life stories and anecdotes about the animals they've helped in the previous week. Additionally, we've received sponsorship from Boehringer Ingelheim the makers of the anti-tick product, Proban and we're affiliated with a national pet magazine and a pet website (www.petalia.com.au)

As for cold hard cash? It's tough to come by, especially when community radio doesn't have the same minute by minute audience measurement system as commercial radio. However, we're quietly confident we'll be able to announce new sponsorship soon because we're in discussions (at time of going to print) with a very large commercial network of radio stations (sssh. it's a secret!) but by the time the next Urban Animal magazine comes out we will be able to reveal our new 'home' and broadcast time."

We constantly see you at pet events around Sydney. How many did you do as comperes or featured talent in 2004?

Brian: "Featured talent eh? Hmm, maybe we should charge more! We kind of fell into this like we do many things, there was a need, we filled the hole. Last year we MC'd Baulkham Hills (Orange Blossom Festival), Woollahra (Rose Bay), Leichhardt (Hawthorne Canal) and one other and Kaye was invited to judge the doggy events at Newtown Festival.

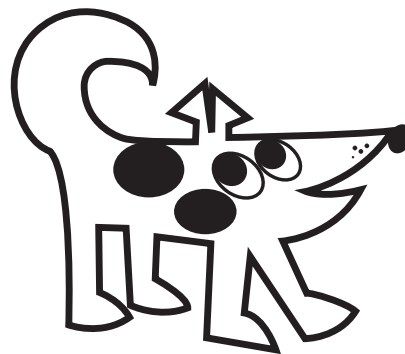
MC'ing is fun and the feedback we get is that people like what we do-which is a good thing I guess! We have some great plans for 2005 regarding local pet events.. SHHHHH! ...can't say too much but Urban Animal will be top of the list to advise when we have something positive!!"

Dog-E-Data has been going quite a few years now. You must have some great recovery success stories.

Brian: "Hmm... What is success? A million bucks? 100,000 members? Nope!

Success for us is Dog-E-Data's 100% record in getting members' dogs home quickly and safely when they've gotten out or lost! (That's dogs registered with us who were wearing their Dog-E-ID tag when they got out, and the finder has rung our Freecall 1800-444-364 number which is also on the tag. Some people join after their dog has gotten lost to take advantage of our auto-generated 'lost dog photo poster' facility, which at 96% recovery is still pretty good.)

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So while we'd hoped the Dog-E-Data service would be self-funding by now-we started in 2000-it is steadily growing as more people realise that it's a cheap price for peace of mind. Dogs are registered with us for a once-only fee of \$45 for that pet's entire lifetime! Someone finding your pet can ring us 24/7 and we ring all your contact numbers to let you know where to pick him/her up. It works!

For example, when the thunderstorm season hit Sydney in December we had member dogs being found at all hours... we had 10 found dogs in one 24 hour period alone!

And unlike most businesses, Dog-E-Data doesn't shut down for Christmas or indeed, any holidays and there's nothing more satisfying than phoning an owner whom you know has left their Christmas table to go looking for their pet and telling them, 'Don't worry, we've found your dog'. We made three such calls on Christmas Day 2004!"

Kaye: "But the coolest thing about the latest technology is that Dog-E-Data now has a 'virtual' call center enabling our team or ourselves to get members' data from any mobile phone or internet connection anywhere-which resulted in a really bizarre but satisfying 'lost/found dog event'.

Brian was skiing down a mountain in Jindabyne, NSW (sounds better than it was - he does the best beginner's snow-plough), when a call came in. Brian stopped, dropped actually, took the finder's call, quickly looked up the ID number via our internet / WAP connected phone and called a very grateful owner in Queensland who was crying tears of joy. She has no idea to this day where Brian was, nor does it matter, her 'baby' was safe.

We'll never be world class skiers, but with every 'found' dog that makes it home, we know we've created something of real value."

PAWNOTE: Dog-E-Data can be accessed via number of URL's

The main one is: www.dog-e-data.com.au also: www.dog-e-data.com

and some other redirector URLs:
www.doggiedata.com.au; www.doggydata.com;
www.dogedata.com

Pet Talk Radio can be accessed via Dog-E-Data or www.pettalkradio.com

The FreeCall number is 1800 444 364 for Lost/Found dogs or new members

Dog-E-Data are also kindly donating 5 lifetime memberships to the October edition winners of our Pet Sounds competition

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