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CYBERFAMILIAS

Hey Spot, You've Got Mail

By [MICHELLE SLATALLA](#)

SOMETIMES I think Otto is a goat.

Actually, he is a Labrador retriever. But he eats everything, including pizza boxes, candy wrappers on the sidewalk and, once, an entire layer of fresh-baked banana cake that was cooling on a high shelf in the pantry. I still am not sure how he got to it without a stepladder.

But this was not the problem that sent me looking for help the other day. The problem was Sticky, my tiny papillon, who laboriously chews and swallows only one tiny food pellet at a time, before giving up to run to the window to bark. By the time she returns, Otto has inhaled the rest of Sticky's food and lies sleeping on top of her empty bowl.

Not long ago, I would have relied on traditional sources of wisdom to solve this problem, seeking advice from the vet (who said, after Otto put his muzzle on her lap and looked at her pleadingly, that he was a "good, good boy" and "misunderstood") and from a dog owners' mailing list I've subscribed to for years. But after the list's respondents decided the problem was me — the consensus was that a better dog owner could easily teach Otto to "leave it" — I started to get desperate.

That is how I ended up at an online social network called [Dogster](#), where my plan was to ask for help after I joined the site.

Or, I should say, after Otto and Sticky joined.

Think of Dogster as [Facebook](#) for canines. There, my dogs (along with 346,639 other four-legged members, as of last week) had their own profile pages that listed their likes and dislikes, personal mottoes — Otto's is "Are you going to finish that?" — and best tricks ("catching seedless grapes in mid-air").

So what if my dogs could barely type, much less upload photos of themselves wearing Santa hats?

We live in an era where there is a social network to cater to any niche group you can think of, including infants whose parents create Facebook profiles for them and then expect the godparents to pretend to correspond with the babies. Why shouldn't pets arrange play dates online or blog about their health issues?

Or as Ted Rheingold, the founder of Dogster, put it in a phone interview last week, "It's not

weird at all.”

Mr. Rheingold has a dog, of course. But more important, he has seen the simple photo-sharing site he started in 2004 grow into a popular meeting place where pet owners communicate online and, in some cases, in the real world. One group of 100 West Highland terrier owners who met on Dogster convened at a (dog friendly) motel on the Carolina coast.

It was perhaps inevitable that Dogster spawned [Catster](#), which had 145,551 members of its own as of last week. Coming next: horses, birds and fish will get their own sites, too, Mr. Rheingold said.

He said there is a simple explanation for the lure of animal lovers' sites. “All these people come for the same reason everyone else is on the Internet: they found people who are like-minded,” Mr. Rheingold said. “They were missing what I call a certain kind of social-ality in their lives, and this is the place where they found it. It's actually quite heartwarming.”

That was my initial reaction, too, even after I realized Dogster was urging me to relate to my dogs in new and unusual ways. Like reading their daily horoscopes on their profile pages. (Sticky is a Leo and Otto, of course, is Capricorn — the goat.)

I knew I wasn't the first dog owner to anthropomorphize my pets. On the other hand, that might not necessarily make it right. “It's actually something I would resist,” said John Grogan, who chronicled the antics of his own retriever in the best-selling book “Marley & Me.” He said he has never has felt the urge to dress up his dogs “as little people” or talk to them in baby talk.

Did he even know Marley's astrological sign? “I love my pets, but I try to keep a healthy perspective on what they are, and they're animals,” Mr. Grogan said.

“Sticky is a Leo,” I said.

Perhaps sensing that I was too far gone to help, Mr. Grogan relented. “There's something about the relationship we have with animals that is magical and brings out a side of people that's softer and more vulnerable than we might otherwise see,” he said. “My guess is that on Dogster, people are really bonding with each other, but in the voices of the dogs. Tongue-in-cheek.”

Back on Dogster, in my absence, Sticky and Otto were receiving e-mail messages from other dogs. One read, “Yippee! Kansas has invited Sticky to join the Dogster group called All Fur Fun! ... ‘Where Every Critter is a Winner.’”

She joined.

Next came “friend requests” from Princess Emma, Daisy, Banky and Pete (a Chihuahua who liked to wear a Santa costume).

Sticky and Otto accepted.

Forget the old New Yorker cartoon with the caption that reads, “On the Internet nobody knows you’re a dog.” On Dogster, clearly nobody cared that I was a human.

Which I was starting to enjoy in a perverse way. But then, as I “previewed” the query I was about to post describing my futile efforts to protect Sticky’s food bowl, I realized I would have to make a terrible Sophie’s choice.

I had to assume a single canine persona in which to post the query.

“Pick your author!” the site urged.

Sticky or Otto?

Otto.

No, Sticky.

Channeling her tiny dog thoughts — as I imagined them — I typed: “The humans put the food under a stool. Otto got the stool stuck on his head like a dunce cap and started bashing around the kitchen in horror.”

Then I hit “Post.”

I felt so ashamed.

Within hours, a half-dozen dogs responded. Wolfie suggested adding wet food to Sticky’s bowl to persuade her to eat faster. Sedona was in favor of posting a human guard over the bowl while she ate. Gunner said to take her food away after an hour.

These recommendations, while encouraging, were not perfect.

Sticky wrote back, “Ideally, I would like the food to sit there, undisturbed, for the entire day so I could caper past every now and then to get a piece.”

Soon, a pit bull terrier boxer mix named Ellie recommended putting Sticky’s food in a big box with a little hole that Otto couldn’t get through.

That reminded me that Sticky had a crate, long abandoned, in the basement. My husband put the crate in the kitchen, put her food inside it and — just like that — the problem was almost solved.

I say almost because initially Otto got the cage stuck on his head. But that was the last time he tried to eat Sticky’s food.

“We won,” I said to my husband in my voice, not one of the dogs’.

Then the phone rang and my husband looked grim.

“Otto’s across the street at the school,” he said. “Begging bites of sandwich from the children.”

As I dragged him home, I reflected that this problem, too, could have been avoided if only I had paid more attention to his horoscope on Dogster. “Capricorn: Those delicious scraps in your bowl could bring out the animal in anyone.” Especially a goat pretending to be a dog.

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