

In the Company of Dogs

Three Whidbey Island businesses offer a furry take on customer service

BY CAROLYN TAMLER

As any small business owner knows, one of the most important elements in building a successful retail store is getting potential customers to come through the door. Three businesses on Whidbey Island have learned that employing a charming, engaging dog, or two, to greet visitors can attract guests and welcome visitors to their store. Here are three businesses that are widely known for their furry greeters.



Blue and Samantha at Spoiled Dog Winery



Koa at the Vino Amore Wine Shop

Spoiled Dog Winery

When they first opened their doors in 2006, Karen and Jack Krug searched for a name for their winery and vineyard in Langley. They couldn't use their last name – Krug – because it was already a famous, trademarked name. They looked to their dog, Blue, a Blue Merle Australian Shepherd for inspiration. He was certainly a spoiled dog who had the run of their farm and vineyard, herding cows and protecting chickens. His parents spoiled him with an organic diet of premium dog food and beef from grass-fed cows, and since he helped with everything around the farm, it just seemed natural that the winery would be called “Spoiled Dog.”

Now, their wine labels prominently display Blue's image. In 2010 he was joined by Samantha, a black tri-colored Australian Shepherd who goes by Sami. In the charming Spoiled Dog tasting room, Blue and Sami welcome visitors every day. Karen notes, “We get a lot of people who travel without their pets, or who have lost their dogs, who say they have gotten their dog fix while tasting our award-winning wines.” She adds with a smile, “We have some people we know who come just for that reason.”

5881 Maxwellton Rd, Langley
360.661.6226, spoiledogwinery.com

Vino Amore

Walk up to the counter at Vino Amore Wine Shop in Freeland, and you are just as likely to be greeted by Koa as by the owners of the store, Brian Plebanek and Gail Liston. Koa, a very large golden retriever, jumps up to put his paws on the counter as if to ask visitors, “May I help you?”

Koa arrived as a seven-week-old puppy and immediately took on his assignment at Vino Amore. Interestingly, when Brian and Gail received Koa's AKC papers and saw his birth date, they noticed it was the same as the day that Vino Amore opened its doors. From that first day in the store, Koa became a major attraction. Brian says, “From the beginning, he loved everyone and everybody loved him.”

In addition to assisting with customer service and sending out the monthly newsletter, Koa has two official titles: vice president of public relations and manager of the wine club. His face and name are also featured on Vino Amore's custom-brewed growler, “Koa's Grrrrrrrrrowler,” so people can enjoy Koa at home too! When Brian or Gail take Koa out for a walk around Freeland, many of the business owners invite him in and give him a treat. As Gail says, “He's the best boy in the world!”

5575 Harbor Ave #102, Freeland
360.331.7661, vinoamore.com



© Rob McGowen

Bruno and Brutus at Midway Florist

Midway Florist

Rob McGowen, owner of Midway Florist, has noticed how his dogs, Bruno and Brutus, seem to have an intuitive understanding of his customers. “The dogs seem to sense, and respond accordingly, if someone is coming in for a sad purpose or to purchase flowers for a joyful occasion; and they love to play with the kids that come in.”

He also notes how the dogs are skilled at getting attention. One of the dogs has a habit of bumping up against a person and then aiming his nose in the direction of the doggy treat dish that Rob keeps on the front counter. Most of the customers catch on after one or two bumps and are happy to oblige.

Rob got the two siblings, who are a golden retriever and Labrador mix, four years ago. If Rob learns that someone isn’t comfortable around dogs, he removes them to a back room, but most customers love interacting with Bruno and Brutus. Often people stop by just to say hello to the dogs, even if they’re not placing an order. With the offer of a treat, the dogs will stand up on their hind legs and do their “cute dog” pose.

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360.679.2525, midwayflorist.com ◀



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