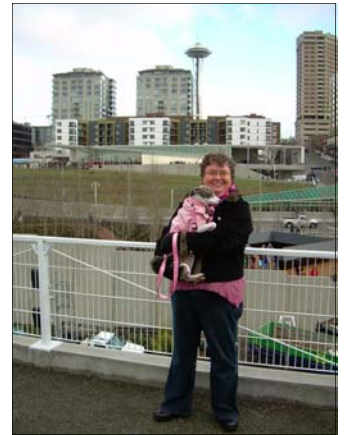


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What It's Like Organizing the Largest IG Meetup in the World

By Wendy Hughes-Jelen

Seattle, WA—When I think back to the day almost a year ago that I launched my Italian Greyhound meetup group, fondly called “IGGY Ambassadors”, you would almost expect me to say I had no idea what I was getting into. Crazy enough, I did, since I used to organize events for the Puget Sound area MINI Cooper meetup group in 2003-2004. That whole experience ended very badly, with a big fight between me and a bunch of men who didn't like a girl telling them the proper way to democratically organize a group of people (it included lectures on inclusion and participation and all of those community-building buzzwords popular in the earlier part of this decade). After that experience I swore to myself I was done with organized group activities and people and especially egomaniacal men with insecurity issues.



Then I adopted a dog.

How is my MINI Cooper and my Italian greyhound, Sophia, related? Well, for one thing, she looks awesome driving around town in it, hanging her head out the window at stop lights and making the person in the next car over grin. And when, about 9 months after adopting her and still having trouble finding other owners of the same breed for playtime, I turned once again to meetup.com as a tool to organize another community—this time one of dog owners.



I didn't go into this lightly. Like I said, my last experience in community-building didn't end so well. And, meetup.com now charged money for the use of its web site. So I bellied up to the bar and plunked down my monthly fee of about \$15. Not much money, really, since that's cheaper than a lesson with a trainer, and I feel my dog actually benefits so much from the experience of socializing with other dogs, it is money well spent for a whole month of playtime opportunities, access to a calendar feature that my Virgo personality LOVES, and unlimited space for photo albums that let me run a “Cover Iggy” photo contest each month (I am planning a calendar for 2008, sales of which will benefit Italian greyhound rescue efforts). I don't really mention the Message Board since our meetup group is about IRL experiences, not chatting online.

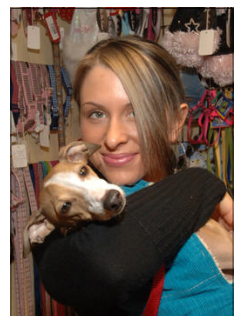


Flashback to the adoption of my Italian greyhound, IG or “iggy” for short.

When I decided to adopt a dog for a walking partner, I took several online “breed matching” tests to find out what sort of dog would be right for me. The first one on the list, an Italian greyhound, I had never heard of or seen in real life. Someone told me about Seattle Purebred Dog Rescue, and I found a local “breed rep”, someone who volunteered for the Italian Greyhound Rescue Foundation locally. She was hard to get ahold of, and after several days of leaving messages (once I make up my mind about something, I take action), I finally got a call back and she gave me the name and number of an owner who had contacted her with a female she wanted to rehome. The owner and I dealt directly with each other and after a home visit I was told that I was the best match for Sophia (they had been to 3 other home visits prior). I prepared for Sophia's arrival the following weekend.

Now, owning a dog is something I had no idea what I was getting into.

The first two months were the most difficult. My yard wasn't fully fenced yet, and this small dog had a bladder the size of a walnut. My husband was unemployed at the time and took care of her during the day, but at night I would have to get up at 3 AM and put on my bathrobe and shoes to take her out in the rain in the middle of the night. It was May of 2005, the year we had weeks and weeks of miserable spring and summer rain. The dog hated rain, and wind I later discovered, and I was enslaved to her every movement in my sleep, resorting to sleeping with a leash around my wrist so I would know when she got up.





After my yard was fenced it was another 2 months before I could afford to get a dog door installed—and then another month to teach her how to use it. I realized immediately I didn't have a clue what I was doing so we started a Basic Manners class at Ahimsa Dog Training (I was fortunate to find the best dog trainer in Seattle to work with), and after a visit to the “small and shy” area of Magnuson's off-leash area, and when a dog came to greet her she jumped into the lap of the nearest sitting stranger and refused to come down, I realized then how much work I had cut out for me. The dog was scared of everything—people, other dogs, buses, bicycles, tires in mud puddles, even squeaky toys of all things (poor dog). She had been somewhat isolated in the first 2 years of her life, but I knew it wasn't too late to teach an older dog some new tricks!

After several months of “small dog playtime” on Saturdays at Ahimsa Dog Training, I heard about a January 2006 IG playdate at Great Dog Daycare in Northgate. We went. It was extremely crowded — it seemed like there were easily 100 people plus 100 dogs in that warehouse. My dog was glued behind me. Each time I would look around to see if she went to play finally, and I would think she did, it was because she was so close to me I couldn't see her. It was impossible to get pictures of her at her first iggy playdate since I couldn't get her far enough away from me to get a shot with my camera.



I anxiously awaited word for another IG playdate, but none was forthcoming. I was desperate to connect with other IG owners to further socialize my dog. Italian greyhounds have a unique play style, and they are not very compatible with other small dogs, especially terriers (and it seems the bulk of small dogs in the world are some sort of terrier, or “terrorists”, as some of us refer to them). I started taking her as a volunteer therapy dog to a local convalescent home through a program with the Seattle Animal Shelter to further socialize her with people. I had to build her confidence about everything around her, and prove to her over and over again she wasn't going to die. I had everyone give her treats and taught her people were a snack source, which turned her into suddenly a very friendly dog, a muddy-paw liability when walking down a city sidewalk (success always brings new challenges).



I finally remembered meetup.com and how it was a one-stop place on the web for people to find each other around a certain topic. There were about 60 people waiting on a list to hear about “IG meetups” in the Seattle area. All it needed was someone to cough up the \$45 to get started (3-month minimum trial) and manage whatever happened.

So IGGY Ambassadors was formed on April 20, 2006. <http://itgreyhound.meetup.com/145/>

We had 30 members within 4 days. I utilized the bonus of Great Dog Daycare starting a “fun run” for our breed on the last Saturday of every month—which is really the challenge of a new small dog group forming, finding an indoor facility to “meetup”. That part was taken care of, now I just needed to make it fun.



I scheduled a picnic at my house for June and got to spend some quality time hanging out with other IG owners and getting to know each other better. We had people from all over coming to West Seattle, from as far away as Olympia and Lake Stevens. It was a great time, people were nice and fun to talk to, and really it's all about the dogs, and they had a super time playing and running around in the sun! The Seattle area since had a new breed rescue volunteer, named Alice Espey, who had recently moved from California. My motivation for starting the playgroup was to socialize my dog, but an added benefit was creating a network of dog owners, and providing support for new adopters of this breed. Informed and happy people make good dog owners, and since this breed has special requirements (they really don't like to go outside to potty in bad weather—not something everyone can handle, a dog peeing in their house), it was a great service to support successful rescue and education of Italian greyhounds. Another owner volunteered to host a picnic for July. I had participation from the membership! We were on a roll.





At our third picnic we had a visit from a Seattle Times photographer. They were working on an article called “It’s a dog-meet-dog world”, http://seattletimes.nwsources.com/html/living/2003223668_dogparty25.html about how people use the internet to socialize with their dogs. I got a tip from the rescue rep, who happened to be a member of another meetup group, so wrote the reporter and sort of stole the other group’s thunder by offering such a photo-op at the right time for her deadline.

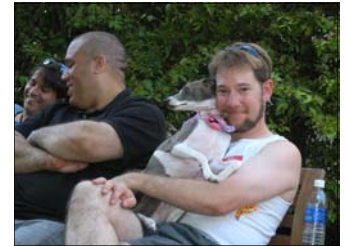


We had about 60 members before the article was in the paper (August 25, 2006). We got about 30 new members in the two weeks after the article was published. Suddenly our middle-of-the-road iggy meetup group was 3rd largest in the country and I started having delusions of grandeur, tons of new members, and being the most popular IG meetup in the world!



That actually happened in November. We hit about 125 members, and what had been the number one meetup group, in Dallas-Plano (TX), had a bunch of inactive members purged by meetup.com and we suddenly had ten more people than they did. We’ve been sitting in the top spot of the worldwide rankings ever since (<http://itgreyhound.meetup.com/>)

Now we have 137 members. We have a monthly photo contest, and several opportunities each month, in different geographic areas, for IG owners and their dogs to get together and socialize and play. And buy things! We have several members who have started their own hobby businesses around providing special items for Italian greyhounds, like collars, snuggle sax, and even one member opened their own pet store (Savvy Dog Boutique in University Place). We have great resources in our members. One member is organizing a playdate in Arlington, and another member is planning one for Lacey. The playdates include fun and games (and food...), and a four hour window to socialize, to make the drive worth it. These other events are in addition to our normal playdate in Seattle. We also have a shopping party at the store owned by one of our members. This is all in one month! And this is in addition to all of the other great dog activities in our area—all posted on our web site, noted to give everyone the chance to get involved (e.g., pet first aid classes, fundraisers put on by other groups, and unique and fun classes, like the Yoga With Dogs class being put on by the Seattle/King County Humane Society during the month of March).



As IGGY Ambassadors nears its first anniversary, I reflect on how pleasant this community-building experience has been. Not too much politicking going on, or if it is, it’s being kept out of my sight. I don’t get too many complaints about things from people, and a lot of praise for creating fun and unique events, and so many opportunities so people have a chance to find SOMETHING that works for their schedule. I create an event to raise money for rescue efforts whenever I get the chance (at every picnic we asked for a donation of \$10 per person, and we also have a “rummage sale” of dog clothing and toys with the money going to rescue). My dog is so socialized now she goes and cuddles with all the other people at the events instead and honestly could care less about the other dogs there. In fact, if it weren’t for almost 140 people relying on me to create a stable and fun IG community, I probably now wouldn’t do it since my dog doesn’t even enjoy it. But I am good at this organizing thing so I do it for the hundreds of Italian greyhounds out there, begging to be understood, begging to be rescued, begging to be adopted, begging for a new coat or snuggle sack. Some of us are getting together for a “pick-up playdate” at Westcrest’s “Small and Shy” off-leash area today—just because we can, and because it’s not supposed to rain! It’s worth every minute of effort I put into it. It’s been a great experience. I just hope we keep getting new members so we can stay NUMBER ONE!!

