

# Identifying Puppy Scams and Puppy Farms



These days, we all turn to the internet when we are looking for information. It makes sense that people looking to add a pet to their family spend time online researching the breeds they are interested in, looking for a breeder, or browsing through dogs available for adoption at their local shelter.

With online shopping becoming the norm, it is understandable that many people would assume purchasing a puppy would be no different to purchasing other items online. Unfortunately, unscrupulous breeders and puppy farmers have taken advantage of this social trend, using it to hide poor breeding practices, or worse still, tricking pet lovers into paying for animals that do not exist.

The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) has reported that every year, puppy scams cost Australians hundreds of thousands of dollars. With the travel restrictions imposed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of scams has skyrocketed.

## How do Puppy Scams work?

The typical puppy scam begins with a glossy, well presented website listing animals for sale. Often the breeds or mixes represented are those in high demand, where sourcing a puppy can be difficult due to their current popularity – breeds such as French Bulldogs, Pugs, and mixes such as ‘Cavoodles’ feature commonly.

Unsuspecting purchasers are lured in with an array of cute puppy photos and ‘too good to be true’ prices. The advertisements may look genuine; displaying microchip numbers, source numbers or membership numbers of legitimate breeders (often these details are lifted from other online sources).

Similar to online shopping portals, purchasers are encouraged to ‘buy it now’, by merely clicking a button. This sends the unsuspecting purchaser to a payment portal or instructs them to transfer money into a bank account without any contact with the breeder at all.

After payment, there might be some contact from the breeder, often with a story about needing additional money to pay for shipping or transport of the puppy to the purchaser’s location. The purchaser is told that collection of the pup in person is not possible and that they need to deposit further funds to cover shipping or delivery of the pup.

Sadly no puppy ever arrives. The purchaser soon realises that they have been conned, and the seller shuts down all forms of contact – disappearing into the night with significant sums of money.

## So how do you recognise a Puppy Scam?

Scam websites are often very professional looking, so it can be hard to tell if they are legitimate. The first thing to remember is that no reputable breeder will want to sell you a puppy without meeting you, or speaking to you in person first.

### *Tip # 1 – Speak to the Breeder*

Reputable breeders want to make sure that their puppies are going to the right homes. They will want to ask questions to check that the breed is right for you and that you have the knowledge and situation to ensure that their puppy will have a long, healthy and happy life. If the person only seems interested in finalising the sale or transport details, they may be a scammer.

### *Tip # 2 - Never pay money for a puppy you have not seen*

Many scam websites use photographs of puppies that they have simply downloaded from other websites or stock photograph sites.

The ACCC recommends that you use a **reverse image search engine** to check if the photos you are looking at appear on multiple websites. One such search engine is [tineye.com](https://www.tineye.com)

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## **Tip #3 – Thoroughly check the credentials supplied**

If the website or advertisement states that they are a registered breeder – contact the organisation they claim to be a member of and check that the membership number is valid.

You also want to make sure that the name of the breeder, location and the breed advertised match the records held, and that the number is not a legitimate breeder's registration number that is being misused by someone else.

In Victoria, if there is a Source Number provided (required for all advertisements selling dogs or cats), you can check the details paired with the source number by visiting the **Pet Exchange Register** website - <https://per.animalwelfare.vic.gov.au/>

If you find an advert that seems incorrect or suspect, you can also report it to the Pet Exchange Register directly.

If there are microchip numbers displayed, you can use a Google search to see if they appear on other websites.

## **What is a Puppy Farm?**

Puppy Farms are breeding facilities where the primary focus is profit, rather than the health and welfare of the animals involved. Breeding animals are typically bred at every heat cycle to ensure a constant turnover of puppies, and the housing is often overcrowded and unclean.

Most Puppy farms have large numbers of breeding animals, sometimes with an assortment of different breeds or mixes. Animals are housed in cramped, filthy conditions, and are not provided with appropriate veterinary care, exercise, handling or affection. Puppy farms are a serious welfare concern, both for the puppies they produce and for the breeding animals that are forced to remain in these terrible conditions.

Whilst large, commercial type puppy farms are easier to spot, it is important to note that breeding operations that fail to meet the physical, mental and behavioural needs of the animals involved can also occur on a smaller scale in someone's suburban backyard.

## **How can I avoid purchasing a puppy bred by a Puppy Farmer?**

### **Tip #1 – Insist on visiting**

Many puppy farmers rely on selling their puppies via the internet. That way, prospective puppy owners are none the wiser as to how the litter has been housed or raised.

A reputable breeder will want to meet you in person and will be happy to show you their facilities. You should also ask to meet the mother of the litter, and see her interacting with her pups. After all, you want to see the mother's size, type of coat, and also assess her temperament as this will have a significant impact on the future temperament of any puppies.

Be wary of any breeder who is reluctant to have you visit or collect your puppy in person. One who has an excuse for why you cannot view the mother of the litter or their other dogs.

### **Tip #2 – Never agree to collect your puppy at a meeting place or have it 'delivered.'**

Be wary if the breeder suggests they meet you somewhere rather than their home – in a carpark, highway service centre etc. – to hand over your puppy. This may be a strategy to prevent you from seeing the conditions at their home. Never agree to have the puppy delivered, unless you have already visited the litter previously.

If you live in another state, ask the breeder for a video chat (via platforms such as Face Time, WhatsApp or Zoom) where they can answer your questions, show you the pups and their mother, and give you a tour of the area where the litter is raised and housed.

### **Tip #3 – Don't feel obliged to purchase**

Many prospective puppy purchasers 'feel sorry' for the puppies, or want to 'rescue' them from the terrible conditions in which they are housed. In doing so, they end up unwittingly encouraging and enabling the puppy farmer - financing the operation.

Instead, if you have concerns, report the breeder to the appropriate authority.