

From **Business Leader** magazine, April 2000, and

Business Leader
Research Triangle Region, North Carolina *online*

Feature



Want to Boost Sales? Hire a Pooch!

Story by Pamela Babcock

Photographs by Bill Cage

When former North Carolina Supreme Court chief justice Burley Mitchell hung up his robes last September and joined the law firm of Womble Carlyle in Raleigh, he had no idea who his new legal partner would be.

It turned out to be a real dog.

Mitchell is featured in a series of advertisements the firm is running featuring a Bulldog named Winston. "Top Dog. New Turf," the headline reads. Other print ads feature the dog playing "Twister" or parachuting in a promotion about the firm's expertise in "airspace" litigation.

Womble Carlyle isn't the only company going to the dogs. These days banks, wireless telephone providers, real estate agents and printing companies are turning to animals as salespeople. Some say merely posing with a pooch is enough to boost sales.

During January's Super Bowl, animals nearly outnumbered lineman.

EDS's ad featured cowboys herding cats. Budweiser's ad featured a golden retriever talking about how he takes care of his owner by giving him only the best - Budweiser. And then there's the famous Taco Bell dog.

When BellSouth Mobility needed a canine actor for a series of ads for its Mobility DCS service, it turned to Gracie, a 4-year-old border collie owned by Bonnie Buchanan of Sanford. Buchanan runs Bon-Clyde Canine Professionals, where she teaches canine acting and provides dogs for TV and print work.

["What Eileen Ford is to the modeling world, Buchanan is to the local dog acting/modeling world."](#)

BellSouth began using the dog in April 1998 to demonstrate the company's "rollover minutes" promotion. In the ad, Gracie mimicked playing dead to show what happens to the competitors' minutes, and rolled over repeatedly to show what happens to BellSouth minutes.

"Sales went through the roof because it was a great offer," says Mike Fox, a senior vice president at Long Haymes Karr in Winston-Salem, who oversees the BellSouth account. "The dog happened to be a really simple, easy-to-understand device. That was how the dog was born."

Two years later, the ads and promotions have changed, but the dog is just as popular. Since then, Gracie has acted in nearly 19 television spots, newspaper and radio ads for BellSouth. The dog and Buchanan have gone to dozens of grand openings at BellSouth stores in the Carolinas, Tennessee and Georgia. There, customers get photographs of Gracie complete with paw prints (they use a stamp) and autographs, which Buchanan signs for the dog. There's even a beanbag likeness of Gracie for sale at BellSouth stores.

"It's been a whirlwind tour. BellSouth even invited the dog as a dinner guest to a millennium party it threw in Raleigh. Gracie had her own place setting at the table and really enjoyed the food," Buchanan reports.



While there are no statistics available, Fox says there's a surge in animals being used to promote non-pet products. He attributes it to the principle of borrowed interest.

"Borrowed interest means you don't have anything interesting to say about your product, there's nothing new to differentiate it from similar products on the market (now available in six new flavors, for example)," Fox says. "Typically, advertisers will go to animals or celebrities." (Fox is quick to point out that BellSouth always has something that differentiates itself from its competitors.)

Take Budweiser, for example. What's different about Budweiser? It's still hops and barley, but they also have a frog and a couple of sarcastic lizards. There's another reason. Animals, not unlike babies, occupy a warm spot in people's hearts. "Feature a dog, feature a kid, pull at the heart strings," Fox says.

He says there was no great scheme to using Gracie in all the BellSouth ads. He draws a comparison to Taco Bell, which he says never intended to feature a chihuahua in every ad.

"The Taco Bell chihuahua was not some masterplan thought up by an ad agency," Fox says. "Can you imagine the meeting? Let's use a chihuahua and it will become a national sensation and people will end up buying a stuffed likeness of of the dog that costs more than any of the food we sell."

Fox says the ads have had a strong impact on product awareness. "The key is as the two years have evolved, fewer people recognize the guy in the ads and more people recognize the dog," he says.

Gracie and Buchanan's dog Toga, a mixed breed, have also been featured in a commercial for Hyder's Family Store, a High Point furniture store.

As Morty and Shorty, the dogs tore up a sofa and jumped off tables in a sequence in which they're left home with the kids. The children, horrified by the destruction, decide they need to go to Hyder's to replace the furniture before mom and dad get home.

Buchanan has booked dozens of other dogs. Bank of America recently turned to her for a "Best Friends" ad campaign that took her and two clients' canines, a boxer and Bernese mountain dog, on a 30-minute hike straight up Crowder Mountain near Charlotte. For the still photography shoot, the dogs pretended to kiss the model on the lips. To get the shot, the photographer ended up putting the dogs' favorite food in the actor's mouth.

"Both dogs were excellent kissers, and with the help of peanut butter and chicken they had a great time doing it," Buchanan says. The image is on the cover of the bank's brochures and in its signage.

Womble Carlyle has had success with a branding campaign featuring Winston. The firm first used a dog in ads in 1996 when it introduced the firm's new logo and slogan "Our Lawyers Mean Business." To play off the dog, the punch line on one ad read: "The bad news is that your rich aunt has named her bulldog her sole beneficiary in Miami," and featured the dog staring at the reader.

The campaign was a hit, particularly within the firm. To lawyers and staff, the bulldog resembled a senior partner, someone who is tenacious, loyal, and fiercely protective of clients' interests, says Paula Blanchat, the firm's marketing administrator in Winston-Salem.

"It was at that moment we realized that many of the characteristics of a bulldog are the characteristics a client would want in a lawyer," Blanchat said.

Clamor for the bulldog continued. The firm got help from consultants and came up with its very own bulldog, named after the founding office in Winston-Salem. Winston has become the centerpiece of a new campaign.

Since dogs are territorial, the firm uses the dog to showcase Womble Carlyle's turf with ads touting "stomping grounds," "business arenas" and "airspace."

Admirers call to request the prized mascot's photo or any number of products, including mouse pads, tee-shirts or coffee mugs featuring the dog, Blanchat said.

When Don Dempsey, owner of Kwik Copy in Greensboro, needed an image for his most recent ads, he turned to Batman, his 15-month-old black Labrador retriever.

Since June, the dog has graced a series of ads in several Triad publications. In the first ad, he's identified as "Batman the Shop Dog." In subsequent ads, the dog is promoted to "partner."

"We decided we wanted to do something to distinguish ourselves," Dempsey says. "We've had really good response to it. People come in all the time and say, 'I saw your dog in the ad.'"

Batman even comes to work at the seven-employee commercial quick printer, schmoozing customers throughout the day and throwing his favorite toy, a tennis ball, at the press operators.

"We have customers who stop by just to see him, and they don't have any business to do," Dempsey says. "I think it has helped people remember us. That's the identity we wanted to create. Putting just my picture in the ad certainly isn't going to do it."

Indeed, canines are cashing in on commercial careers these days. So next time you're looking for that perfect pitch person, think again. You may want to turn to a four-legged friend.

Pamela Babcock is a Raleigh writer.

Looking for a Spokesdog?

Need the perfect animal for your next ad campaign? Check out Bon-Clyde Canine Professionals in Sanford. Owner and trainer Bonnie Buchanan can teach your dog everything, from how to shake hands to how to get in bed and pull the covers over his head. The school is the only one in the region that teaches canine acting, and draws clients from as far away as Washington state and Canada. (There is one cat in the acting program.)

Bon-Clyde offers two levels of canine acting. Does your pooch have what it takes? To qualify for the level one class, all dogs must be able to sit, lie down, stay and come when called around distractions. Level two offers more advanced skills and behavior shaping techniques, using food as a positive reinforcement. Classes cost \$80 for a seven-week session. At Bon-Clyde, dogs with the right stuff can learn how to say their prayers, act shameful and skateboard. They also can learn how to show emotions, including pretending to be happy, sad and vicious. Other tricks include opening a refrigerator, turning a light on and off and ringing a doorbell.

Eventually, dogs with special talents can be trained to perform elaborate sequences. At a skit at Bon-Clyde's Christmas party last year, one dog carried a letter for Santa to a mailbox, opened the mailbox, put the letter in and raised the flag. Then, another dog came out, took the letter from the mailbox and closed the box.

Buchanan has nine dogs of her own and has trained dogs for more than 20 years. Her clients have starred in commercials, informational videos and even a CBS television movie, earning up to \$150 a day.

Buchanan said advertising agencies and casting directors look for dogs of all breeds and sizes, but says owners need patience and a special bond with their pets. She also advises owners to accompany their pets on location.

What Eileen Ford is to the modeling world, Buchanan is to the local dog acting/modeling world. To reach Bon-Clyde, call (919) 774-6794.

[BUSINESS LEADER HOME](#)