I vividly remember a disastrous business meeting some years ago when I was asked by my company to come aboard to work on a project that was in trouble. The woman who was managing the project was very resistant to my presence. The two of us were instructed to have breakfast, get to know each other and work it out. We met and we ate, but the dialogue was stilted and awkward. I was making no progress at all and every conversational gambit led to a dead end. Finally, as I was gasping for air, she mentioned that she owned a Shih Tzu whom she adored. At last, I thought, a topic! I grabbed onto the whole doggie thing and took off. I actually thought she was interested, but boy, was I wrong! As soon as I left the restaurant, she was on the phone to our boss, telling him that I was a crazy person. “She trains dogs, for God’s sake!” she exclaimed in horror. I was lucky that my boss already knew about my weird hobby and didn’t care.

And yet, training and showing dogs is not something I am ashamed of. In fact, I love it passionately, and want to be an ambassador to the pet world. I believe that promoting dog training saves lives. If I can convince a pet owner to find out how to teach basic manners to his dog, that animal is far less likely to wind up surrendered to a shelter. Some studies show that as many as 61% of dogs who are surrendered are given up due to behavior issues. So, over the years, I have developed ways of talking about my hobby that rob it of some of its cultist overtones. Here, for what it’s worth, is my system.

Keep it casual
“Dog training is a hobby of mine,” I might say. This implies that I also do other things with my life. That’s very important, because (a) its true, and (b), it doesn’t sound so obsessive. Yes, yes, I know we’re obsessive, but we don’t have to tell everyone, do we?

Avoid jargon
Let’s go back to Buster’s debut. I might say, “I took Buster to his first dog show on Saturday. We had a lot of fun, and he even won a couple of ribbons.” We are a nation obsessed with competitive sports. This sounds sporty, and therefore, very All American—everyone understands about winning ribbons.

No one actually wants the details
If they ask about Westminster (they often do), I might say, “Oh, we don’t go to that kind of show, that one is like a beauty pageant. We don’t care what our dogs look like (people are relieved to hear that we’re not like those silly people in “Best In Show”). We train them to do stuff, like jumping and retrieving.” Do not discuss the fine points of Heel position, or how hard it is to train the Figure Eight! Pick stuff everyone can understand. Don’t get so caught up in Buster’s wonderfulness that you must share every glorious moment. Your training partner might care. Your casual listener probably doesn’t. If they want to change the subject, let them. They almost always do, and will. Don’t try to tug the conversation back to your triumphs. When they’ve moved on, so should you.

Don’t get too intense
We cultists are well known for this. However if you can manage to stay light and breezy, you might even find that your listener becomes interested and starts asking questions, like, “Can you tell me how to teach my dog to Sit?” And, lo and behold, you soon find yourself viewed as a valuable resource, instead of a nut case! And here’s the secret, delicious part: You are actually proselytizing for our cult! You might eventually entice one of your listeners into joining a class, and he or she might fall in love with working with their dog, take an advanced class, get bitten by the competition bug and…the path to enlightenment is clear.

Diana Kerew-Shaw entered her first dog show in 1958, and has been a devoted follower of all things “dog,” ever since. She has shown and titled her dogs in Obedience and Rally, while raising a family and managing a busy career.