Turbo-charging Placements – Pet Adoptions

No-Kill Conference May 2009

Our Results at Nevada Humane Society

Nevada Humane Society became a no-kill organization and set the goal of creating a no-kill community in Washoe County in February of 2007.

Adoptions:

- Increased the adoption rate 53% for dogs and 84% for cats in 2007 (compared to 2006), a higher increase than any other community in the nation.
- Increased dog and cat adoptions an additional 9% in 2008.
- Found new, good homes for 8,635 formerly homeless pets in 2008 and 8,030 in 2007.

Lifesaving:

- Decreased the number of dogs killed by 51% and the number of cats killed by 52% in Washoe County animal shelters in 2007 (compared to 2006). This was the greatest decline of any community in 2006/2007. (In 2007, 2,700 fewer dogs and cats lost their lives in area shelters than 2006.)
- Decreased the number of dogs and cats loosing their lives in Washoe County animal shelters by an additional 10% in 2008.
- Achieved an 89.6% save rate for dogs and 82.6% for cats in 2008 despite a per capita intake rate that is twice the national average. (92% save rate for dogs and 78% for cats in 2007.)
- Successfully addressed five cat hoarding cases, without killing any cats.
- Insured that every dog, cat, kitten, and puppy was neutered, vaccinated, and microchipped before adoption.

The Keys to Dramatically Increasing Pet Adoptions

Set specific adoption goals.

- Goals have a way of uniting and inspiring people, so set a specific adoption goal for each month or for each event. Let everyone know about your goals. Post them in the shelter, include them in news releases, ask the staff, volunteers, and public to help you meet the goal. Make it clear that they are helping save the lives of homeless animals.

- Celebrate each adoption. We ring a bell and everyone pauses to applaud when each adoption is completed. It reminds us all of what we are doing here and it makes the pet adopter feel special.
- Congratulate and thank everyone when the goals are met. When we met our 1,000 adoptions goal for our five-week Home 4 the Holidays adoption event with 1,089 adoptions, we sent out a news release to thank the community and hosted a pizza luncheon for the staff and volunteers to recognize their contribution to the success.

Make it easy for people to fall in love and adopt a pet.

Make the shelter a welcoming place.

- Encourage the community to visit the shelter even if they aren't necessarily looking to adopt. The extra attention is good for the animals, the visitors are more likely to tell family and friends about the animals they saw which can lead to adoptions later, and the goodwill leads to more community support.
- Be sure that staff and volunteers know to greet visitors with a smile, make eye contact, and offer to help or answer any questions.
- Provide places for people to sit to interact with the animals. Toys and brushes in cat rooms and dog exercise areas give people an easy way to interact with the animals.
- Holiday decorations, activities, and refreshments encourage visitors to spend a bit of extra time. These things do not have to cost money; ask volunteers to help.

Adoption Counselors play a dual role.

- Of course Adoption Counselors are looking out for the well being of the animals and working to ensure that they are going to good homes. But they are also there to provide quality customer service to visitors and potential adopters, helping them find the perfect pet for their life style.
- Adoption Counselors should look for ways to make adoptions work rather than for reasons to deny them. The adoption experience should be pleasant and rewarding for the pet adopter.
- In hiring staff, look for people who like people as well as animals.

Open the shelter for pet adoptions when people are available.

- Successful retail stores are open when people are off work – evenings, weekends, and holidays. We should not miss the opportunity to find homes for the animals at these times either. Usually, this can be accomplished at little or no additional cost by shifting the schedule to open the shelter a bit later in the morning when fewer people are likely to be coming in to adopt.

  We are open for adoptions seven days a week, until 6:30 pm each evening and on most holidays. This year, we decided to open for adoptions on New Year's Day. We sent out a news release to let people know and adopted out 49 animals in six hours. Two TV stations came down to cover the first adoptions of the new year.

Bring the animals to the people.

- Statistically very few people get their pets from animal shelters. Many just don't think about it; others have misconceptions about shelters or are reluctant to visit. You can overcome all of these obstacles with offsite pet adoptions. Get the animals out where people will see them, meet them, fall in love, and adopt.

  Don't buy into the outmoded concept that "impulse adoptions" are bad. Studies have proven this to be untrue. Humans are capable of many good and noble impulses, including adopting a pet and giving them a loving home.

- Some pet supply stores, including PetSmart, work with shelters to allow cats-in-residence adoption programs.

- Work with other local groups to host a joint pet adoption event. Best Friends Animal Society offers plans for Super Adoption Events. We host a Super Adoption in conjunction with the SPCA of Northen Nevada. It's a great event bringing all the local rescue groups together, getting media attention for the animals, and finding homes for large numbers of pets in a single day.

Encourage the public to interact with the animals.

- Invite people to touch the animals, spend time with them, and fall in love with them. Even if they do not adopt, the animals enjoy the attention.

  Old-school animal sheltering experts advise minimizing public contact with animals, but it is human nature to want to make personal contact. It is the only way that the person can truly bond with a pet. And studies show that a bond with the pet is a big factor in the success of any adoption.

  Additionally, studies show that the benefit of socialization and contact decreases the animals' stress which makes them more resistant to disease. The animals are healthier when they are played with and touched. (You can provide hand sanitizer and ask people to use it between animals.)

- Invite people into the rooms to interact with the cats.

Cat colony rooms are especially effective as people can interact with the cats in a more natural environment. Be sure to provide chairs and toys in the rooms. Allow public access to rooms where cats reside in cages and invite people to interact with these cats too.

We converted two rooms to create additional cat colonies. One room had counters and we decided to leave them in place. As it turns out, the cats love to lounge on these counter tops, which happen to be at the perfect level for people interaction.

Converting a room into a cat colony does not have to be an expensive enterprise. Our volunteers put together cat climbing trees made out of ladders that can be completely sanitized.

- Recruit volunteers to walk the dogs through the shelter. “Adopt Me” vests help call attention to the dogs. These dogs get adopted much more readily than the ones who are behind glass or bars where it is difficult for people to interact with them.

<u>Charge reasonable fees for pet adoptions.</u>

- Money does not buy or ensure love. If it did, we would not be seeing purebred dogs in shelters. Good adoption matches and services that support adoption success is the key.

  Reducing adoption fees will increase pet adoptions and save lives. Saving more lives will help you garner more community support and donations to support your work.

- Create a Seniors-for-Seniors Pet Adoption Program to match older people with older pets free of charge. It provides senior citizens with the many well-known benefits of pets and helps find homes for older pets that tend to stay in the shelter longer. You can seek sponsors to underwrite the program.

- Offer reduced fees for special needs and older pets and at times of greater need to attract new homes. After all, people who are adopting will have other expenses associated with acquiring a new pet. Lowering fees enables more people to adopt.

<u>Streamline the adoption process.</u>

- Imposing waiting periods is both unnecessary and costs lives if there are other animals waiting for the opportunity to be adopted while an already adopted pet is held in the shelter.

  The pets in our shelter are spayed and neutered in advance and pet adopters are allowed to take them home as soon as the adoption is finalized, usually right away.

- It’s a myth that impulse adoptions are more likely to fail. Good adoption matching, providing information about animal behavior, and post-adoption follow-up/support are the key to successful adoptions, not waiting periods.

<u>Make documents and forms practical and user-friendly.</u>

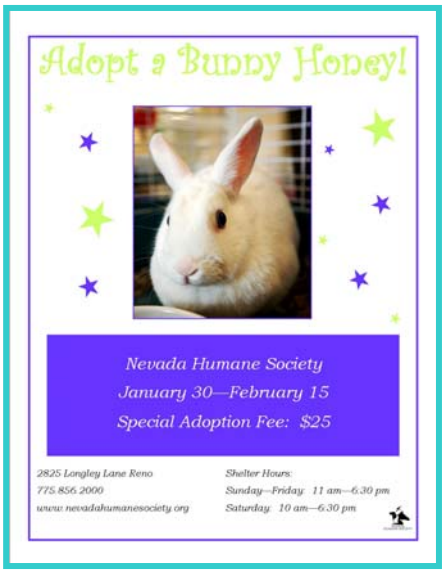
- Paperwork and policies are, of course, necessary parts of the adoption process, but we strive to make the paperwork and interview as friendly as possible while still obtaining the information needed to make a quality decision. (Sometimes, in the zeal to ensure that pets are going to good homes, groups can alienate potential adopters.)

  While the animals are relying upon us to be sure that they are going to good homes, making this determination comes more from a person-to-person conversation, rather than a form. Studies show that knowledge about animal behavior, reasonable expectations for the pet, and the bond between the person and the animal are far better predictors of successful adoptions than rigorous grilling and rigid adherence to a set of rules. Our adoption process includes an interview form that guides the adoption counselor through their discussions with the prospective adopter.

<u>Make it is easy to identify staff and volunteers.</u>

- We invested in logo shirts for staff and volunteers. Staff members wear royal blue and volunteers wear forest green. It made it much easier for visitors to spot someone who can help them and had the extra effect of helping the staff feel like a team. If you cannot afford to purchase shirts, you can still ask staff members to wear a specific color shirt.

Get the Word Out, Get the People into the Shelter



Aggressively promote pet adoptions with fun events.

- Come up with creative, fun ideas and programs that will get media attention and create excitement around pet adoptions. We brainstorm ideas with staff and borrow ideas from other shelters. Some of our favorites include Furry Speed Dating, Adopt a Mini-Panther, Feline Frenzy, and St. Patrick's Lucky Star Pets.
- Go grassroots with posters. In addition to news releases about the events, be sure to create simple 8.5 x 11" posters for volunteers to distribute.
- Highlight a pet-of-the-week in the local paper and in conjunction with local television, radio stations and local businesses. You can also use your own website and e-newsletter to highlight pets.
- Create a Staff Picks program. Copy book and video stores with a Staff Picks program where staff members get their photo taken with their favorite pet in the shelter. Photos of staff and pets are posted, along with the animal's story, in the lobby. Visitors love it and so does the staff.

- Tie into national adoption events, it's easy and can have great results. Two nationwide events that we recreated in our community were:
  - Home 4 the Holidays – www.animalcenter.org/home4theholidays We set the goal of finding homes for 1,000 pets during this five-week event and placed 1,089 in 2008.
  - Pet Adoptathon – www.nsalamerica.org/how_we_help/adoptathon The shelter stays open for 36 straight hours to find homes for pets. It's a great media event and saves a lot of lives.
- Use local community events as inspiration for adoption promotions. We have planned adoption events around the Great Reno Balloon Races, Hot August Nights (a vintage car event), and Nevada Day that have had good results and helped us truly be part of the community.

View challenges as opportunities

- Promote solutions with a catchy title. When we got 54 mostly-orange cats from a hoarding situation, we dubbed it the Great Orange Cat Rescue, created posters, sent news releases, and asked the public to adopt the cats and send donations for the care.
- Ask the public for help. When we take in seriously injured animals that require expensive veterinary care, we tell the public about the animals in need and ask for funds to specifically cover these expenses.

- Head off problems during follow-up calls. When calling adopters, if they even hint that there might be a problem, keep talking. Once you discover what it is, have the most skilled pet-problem solver in your organization (for us it is our Animal Help Desk Manager, but for you it could be a volunteer) call them back, listen some more, and offer advice. With a proactive response, you can turn around potential problems and prevent little things from becoming big things..

Create a Barn Cat Adoption Program.

- Adopt out feral cats to barn homes. In addition to an active TNR program to keep feral cats out of shelters, a Barn Cat Adoption Program can be the ticket to a new chance at life for feral cats who cannot be returned to their original home.

  We are happy to share the details on our Barn Cat Adoption Program, but you can also check out the Barn Cat Inc. program at www.barncats.org. Their *Katrina Cats* presentation will show you how to set up a program for your shelter or community.

There is someone for everyone – believe it.

- Old-school sheltering holds that there are not enough homes out there and that only animals who are attractive and easy going can be adopted. But, in fact, compassion knows no limits. Apart from animals who pose a genuine risk to public safety or those who have a poor medical prognosis, there really is someone out there for every pet – it is just a matter of marketing the individual animal.

"Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not." — Dr. Seuss [Theodore Geisel] (1904-1991)

"Opportunities multiply as they are seized." — Sun Tzu, (400 B.C.)