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Jan McHugh-Smith is the President/CEO of the Humane Society of the Pikes Peak Region, an open-admission organization with two facilities serving 24,000 animals annually throughout Southern Colorado. HSPPR contracts with 10 cities and counties to provide Animal Care and Control services. Jan's animal welfare experience over the past 30 years also includes being President of the San Francisco SPCA, San Francisco CA; CEO of the Humane Society of Boulder Valley, Boulder CO; and Director of Eagle County Animal Control, Eagle CO.

Previously, Jan served on the American Humane Association Advisory Board, HSUS Companion Animal Advisory Committee, participated in developing the Asilomar Accords and is Vice Chair of Shelter Animal's Count, working create a national database for shelter statistics. She is the past Chair of the Society of Animal Welfare Administrators (SAWA), and served as Chair of CATalyst Council which works to raise the level of care and welfare for cats. Jan speaks on animal welfare issues at conferences all over the United States.

She is a Certified Animal Welfare Professional (CAWA), earned her Bachelors in Music at the University of Colorado, Boulder and a Bachelors of Science at Southern Connecticut State University.

Most importantly she shares her life with her husband, son and 4 wonderful shelter dogs.

Abstract

Increasing Adoptions and Community Support

Since the inception of the humane movement, the adoption of animals has been an integral component of our efforts to save animal's lives. We'll explore different approaches to adoption counseling that will help your staff improve matches and client relationships. We'll discuss methods to support the transition of animals in new homes, getting feedback from adopters, and converting them to organizational supporters.

Full Presentation

Introduction:

One of the tools to save lives in animal welfare is the adoption of homeless animals into a new family. In the US it is estimated that 20% of the animals in households have come from animal shelters, rescue, etc. and 81% of Americans have a pet. What can animal welfare professionals do to increase the adoption of homeless animals? With 2.7 million animals at risk for euthanasia in the USA, animal shelters need to do a better job connecting people and pets. In a 2014 Petsmart Charities study[1] of people who acquired a new pet in the last year: 12% found the adoption process difficult, 5% experienced poor customer service with the shelter or rescue, 12% did not find the breed they wanted, and 12% said they did not know much about the adoption of homeless pets. Public education about adoption and creating an adoption process that is client friendly can help save more animals.

Problem:

In the Petsmart Charities Study on pet acquisition, 66% of the people indicated they would consider adoption from a shelter or rescue. Twenty-five percent said they would look to non-adoption resources and 28% indicated they had purchased a puppy. Some of the reluctance to adoption included not knowing what they would get in a shelter animal; they thought shelters were depressing, and had concerns that animals could have behavior problems or health issues, or they experienced poor customer service.

The reason people were interested in adoption? Seventy-eight percent said they wanted to rescue an animal, they wanted an animal that was desexed and vaccinated, adoption was less expensive, and some wanted to foster before adoption. Opportunity to expand our adoption reach is available if we address client concerns and remove some of barriers to adoption.

Most shelters have limited resources including staff and volunteers which can result in poor service for clients. Streamlining the process to make adoptions user friendly can help remove adoption barriers. How can we continue to make good placements and shorten the time for the process of adoption while building a relationship with the client?

Open Adoptions describes a process of asking open ended questions in a conversation instead of having a written adoption application that typically asks questions answered by yes or no. The organization may have a culture of adoption screening with many rules and regulations that the potential adopter must adhere to. As animal care givers we want to protect animals and find a great home for each animal, but would accepting a home that does not comply with all of our rules save more lives or put animals at risk?

At the Humane Society of Boulder Valley (HSBV) during a test trial, they let go of all adoption requirements except age of the adopter (must be 18 years old or more), no cruelty convictions and not under the influence of drugs or alcohol at the time of adoption. Adoption counselors were trained to ask adopters open ended questions pertinent to the animal they were interested in. Adoption Counselors also inquired about information the adopter wanted to learn about pet guardianship. HSBV did not check to see if landlords allowed pets, did not check references or veterinary records, no fence requirements, no requirement that all pets in the home be sterilized or meet the new pet, and did not decline adoption for declawing cats or indoor/outdoor cats.

HSBV set an expectation for staff to trust in adopters; after all, they had the good intention of saving a life through adoption. There are so many ways people can acquire a pet that does not include this process. The adoption process was conversational, focused on approval, listening to the client and there were no right or wrong answers. Building a relationship was the first step, and then asking questions that would help guide the adoption process.

Full Presentation

What type of pet are you looking for today?
What qualities are you looking for?
Tell me about your lifestyle.
Tell me about your past experience with pets.
I noticed you are looking for a declawed cat, what are your concerns?
Would you be interested in looking at an adult animal that is trained?
What are your plans for the pet when you are at work?
What information can I provide for you today? Potty training? Pet introduction? Crating?

Asking open ended questions keeps the potential adopter from feeling judged and gives the adoption counselor more information to help make the best match. Once a relationship has been established, the counselor can also redirect someone to a more appropriate pet for the adopter.

The Humane Society of Boulder Valley tracked adoption returns over a three month period and the percentage of animals returned remained the same as with the process of adoption application and applying rules method. HSBV adoptions increased thanks to the ability to serve more clients and adopters sharing the good experience they had at the shelter. The length of stay for animals decreased, which made room to transfer in animals from other shelters. Adopters received emails post adoption at 3 days, 3 weeks and 3 months to see how the pet was acclimating and HSBV offered follow up service if there were issues. If an adopted animal was returned, it was an opportunity to learn more information about the pet for the next adoption rather than calling it a failed adoption.

Conclusion:

Rescues and shelters are competing with other pet acquisition sources such as breeders, pet stores, internet purchases and the friends/family network. Barriers to adoption include a lack of understanding about adoptions from rescues and shelters, the perception of adopting sick or behaviorally challenged animals or being treated poorly by volunteers and staff. Removing these barriers can build community support for the adoption of homeless pets. In an effort to find great homes, restrictions on adoption can become barrier or a deterrent for potential adopters. Restrictions often force adopters to be untruthful about their situation in an effort to adopt an animal. This is harmful for the relationship between the adopter and the organization and may be a missed opportunity for education that would benefit this animal or future animals. Building mutual trust and support can benefit the animal, adopter and shelter.

References:

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