

Top Ten Tips to Save More Lives by Increasing Pet Adoptions from Your Shelter or Rescue Group

By Bonney Brown and Diane Blankenburg
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Introduction

Back in 2007, when we were pioneering some of these techniques as the new leadership team of Nevada Humane Society in Washoe County, Nevada, few shelters fully realized the potential within their communities to save more lives. In the years since, we and other progressive shelter leaders have shared what has worked in our communities at conferences, through webinars, and in articles. As a result, many shelters have adopted some of these strategies with great success.

Still, there are places that have yet to realize the full lifesaving potential of pet adoption within their community. So we have created this short guide with ten tips that shelters can use to evaluate and improve their own adoption programs and related marketing.

You may find that you are doing some of these things already. We hope that you will be inspired to try a few new ideas and that they will help you more fully utilize the lifesaving capacity in your community!

Can adoptions really be increased?

Yes indeed! The importance of spay/neuter and surrender intervention programs are clear, but the opportunity to significantly increasing pet adoptions is sometimes overlooked. Your organization can realize a quick and dramatic lifesaving difference for the animals by focusing on increasing adoptions.

Being proactive about pet adoption also helps set your organization up to succeed in your fundraising efforts (be it asking the public for donations or getting the funds you need allocated through local governments for municipal or county agencies). Adoptions result in increased awareness and positive connections with your organization throughout the community.

Many communities have dramatically increased their pet adoption rates and several have achieved and sustained annual rates in excess of 20 pets adopted per 1,000 residents. You can use this measure as a way to look at your community's pet adoption potential.

Research done by the Shelter Pet Project showed that of the people expecting to acquire a pet in the next year roughly 17 million of them are open to the idea of adopting a pet. We only need to sway 25% of them to have more than enough homes for the animals that are still dying in shelters.

To look at the adoption potential in your community, you can compare it to some of the communities that have been dedicated to promoting pet adoption.



Adoptions per Thousand Residents in Selected Communities

Communities	Adoptions per 1,000 Residents for Cats and Dogs
Portland, OR	28
Washoe County, NV	23
Charlottesville-Albemarle, VA	18

How to calculate your adoptions per 1,000 residents.

1. Look up the population for the community your organization serves. This can be found in online census data.
2. Gather the total number of adoptions over one full year at shelters in your community (to get a general idea it is not necessary to poll every small group; just get the data from the major shelters).
3. Before doing the math, divide total number of residents by 1,000 (move the decimal point three spaces to the left).
4. Divide the total number of animals adopted for the year by the total number, representing the human population in thousands as calculated in step 3.

Example:

1. Population of Washoe County = 433,824
2. Dogs and cats adopted in a year from shelters in Washoe County = 9,888
3. Divide population by 1,000 = 433.8
4. Divide the total number of animals adopted from shelters (step 2 above) in the county by population divided by 1,000 (step 3 above) = $9,888 / 433.8 = 22.8$ animals adopted per 1000 residents

Using the techniques in this guide, Nevada Humane Society in Reno, Nevada was able to dramatically increase pet adoptions in a single year by 53% for dogs and 84% for cats. They increased each year for four more years until the benefits of other programs significantly reduced shelter intake and the number of animals available for adoption. Now shelters in this community transport dog and cats in from shelters in other areas in order to meet the adoption demand in their community.

Why is increasing pet adoptions so important to your organization?

- Enables fulfillment of your lifesaving mission
- Reduces length of stay
- Demonstrates to the public your ongoing commitment to lifesaving
- Elevates your organization's profile in the community
- Expands your fundraising potential
- Enables the placement of the seniors, special needs and other harder-to-place pets

Top Ten Tips to Increase Pet Adoptions

1. Talk about pet adoption in ways that create the desired results.
2. Market pet adoptions relentlessly.
3. Establish goals and tell everyone about them.
4. Make it easy to fall in love.
5. Set affordable fees.
6. Provide friendly customer service.
7. Create fun and attention-getting promotions.
8. Market special needs pets as individuals.
9. Be flexible.
10. Express gratitude.



1. Talk About Pets and Adoption in Ways that Create the Desired Results

In the past public communication from shelter staff would often focus on attempting to “educate” people and urge them to be “responsible pet owners.” At best, this kind of language tends to come across as boring; at worst, it is perceived as condescending or judgmental. People tend to tune it out—a bit like Charlie Brown’s teacher, “Wah, wah, wah . . .” Most importantly, it fails to achieve the desired results.

Banish language like “educate the public” and “responsible pet owners” in your public communication.

Accentuate the positive instead by focusing on things we all love about animals and the really great benefits of adopting a pet, such as the following:

- The fun and joy that pets bring to our lives.
- Pet adoption as a fulfilling, rewarding experience.
- The unconditional love we can share with our furry best friends.
- The many benefits of sharing life with animals (for seniors, kids, families, single people).
- What interesting, entertaining and enjoyable companions cats and dogs are.
- How they enrich our lives.
- The many great dogs and cats awaiting homes in the shelter.



We gain far more by focusing our communication on the positive aspects of the human-animal bond which builds a stronger and more open relationship between shelter staff and the community. This improved relationship allows people to see the shelter staff as a source of information and support, rather than as judgmental people.

Key Takeaways:

- Banish judgmental and condescending language.
- Communicate in positive language about the benefits and rewards of pets.

“Enthusiasm is contagious—start an epidemic.” – Don Ward

2. Market Pet Adoptions Relentlessly

Keep the *Rule of Seven* in mind. Marketing expert Dr. Jeffrey Lant has explained: “to penetrate the buyer’s consciousness. . . you have to contact the prospect a minimum of seven times within an 18-month period.” In today’s world of information overload, some marketing experts are now suggesting that we need to create more impressions to break through the volume of information people are bombarded with daily.

What exactly are impressions? An impression occurs each time a mention of your organization penetrates the consciousness of an individual. It could be via a billboard, an article, a Facebook post, an appeal mailer, an ad in the local paper, a brief interview on the radio, a brochure they see at the vet clinic, or a friend sharing a story.



Our job is to create positive impressions with the people in our community regarding pet adoptions and our lifesaving work in general. For this reason, the news media is truly our friend. Online exposure is essential, but it is not a replacement for conventional media coverage; nothing beats the credibility of getting on the evening news or in the local newspaper. Learn to spot potential “news” as it occurs within your organization and to create news-worthy events. Master the art of writing attention-getting news releases. Foster relationships with reporters—when they call, it must become your number one top priority. Also learn how to give a good interview—be prepared with your organization’s key talking points which include pet adoption.

Relentless Marketing. Just how often do we need to be getting our message out about pet adoption? The answer to that can be found in two places that you may not at first believe have anything in common with animal shelters—mattress retailers and car dealers. How so? Well, people acquire both infrequently—mattresses every seven to ten years and cars are similar. BUT each Sunday look at your local newspaper and you will routinely see full-page ads for these products. Drive through your town and you will notice people on street corners waving signs for these businesses. They are trying very hard to get our attention. Do they do this because they think they can talk us into buying more cars and mattresses more often? Not really. The real reason is that they want to be top of mind when you are ready to buy. For this reason, they are working constantly, relentlessly and aggressively reminding us that they are there and ready to help.

Pets too are infrequently acquired. So it follows that animal shelters can benefit from this same strategy. That is exactly what we did at Nevada Humane Society which led to dramatic adoption increases and helped create financial stability for the organization.

Being relentless in your promotion of pet adoptions includes getting your messages out in multiple ways. Get on the local radio stations to do interviews encouraging pet adoptions. When it's kitten season and the shelter is full of adult cats, call the local TV station and ask them to help get the word—invite them to come down and film the cats awaiting homes. Post a cute photo of a litter of kittens on your facebook page and ask people to foster or adopt them.

When you are interviewed (actually, in all of your communications), ask people to help—to adopt, to donate, to foster, and to volunteer. There is magic in asking people to do something specific. Requests that are specific make it clear what kind of help is needed and therefore, make it easier for people to take action, and are far more effective than a vague appeal will be.



A picture is worth a thousand words. Many people are visually oriented so including appealing photos of dogs, cats and people connecting with them in your news releases, ads and promotional materials is crucial. Make taking great photos part of what the organization does in its daily work.

As Steven Hirano, longtime editor for Best Friends Magazine, would say, you are looking for photos with the “Awww Factor” as in “Awww, that is so cute. . . sweet. . . touching.” Be sure that photos are crisp, clear and enable people to make an emotional connection with the animals. Images that show the animal making eye contact with the viewer help facilitate this connection.

Be sure that your photos are in focus, free of background clutter and large enough to make an impact.

Key Takeaways:

- Relentlessly get the word out about pet adoptions.
- Make specific requests for adoptions and other support.
- Use images that have the “Awww Factor.”

**“Efficiency is doing things right;
Effectiveness is doing the right things.”**

— Peter Drucker

3. Establish Goals and Tell Everyone About Them

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, and 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.



Directors of municipal shelters or organizations with municipal contracts can engage local officials by sharing information on the beneficial economic impact of increased pet adoptions in their community. After all, each adopted pet is a potential client at a local vet clinic, groomer, trainer or boarding facility and will need pet food, toys, and other supplies that are often purchased locally.

Celebrate each adoption. At Nevada Humane Society, we would ring a bell and everyone would pause to applaud when each adoption was completed. This practice reminds us all of the meaning behind our work and it makes the pet adopter feel special, sending them off with a happy memory of the adoption experience and creating a great start with their new pet.

Congratulate and thank everyone when the goals are met. Post the results in the shelter, send out a news release to thank the community and host a pizza luncheon for the staff and volunteers to recognize their contribution to the success.

Key Takeaways:

- Set specific monthly goals for pet adoptions.
- Engage everyone in achieving the goals.
- Celebrate each adoption and thank everyone when goals are met.

4. Make It Easy to Fall in Love

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.



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.

At one time, experts advised 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 the bond is a big factor in the success of any adoption.

Additionally, 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 touching animals.)

Provide places for people to sit and casually interact with the animals. Toys and brushes in cat rooms and canine greeters give people an easy way to interact with the animals.

Be sure that staff and volunteers know to greet visitors appropriately—smiling, making eye contact, and asking how they can help. Open-ended questions can help start conversations.

Holiday decorations, activities and refreshments help create a fun atmosphere and encourage visitors to spend a bit of extra time in the shelter. These things do not have to cost money; ask volunteers to help.

Open the shelter for pet adoptions when people are available. Successful retail stores are open when people are usually 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.

Bring the animals to the people. Statistically, 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 Petco and PetSmart, work with shelters to allow cats-in-residence adoption programs.

Streamline the adoption process. Imposing waiting periods is both unnecessary and costs lives. Even if your shelter does not euthanize pets for time and space, other animals miss the opportunity for adoption while an already-adopted pet is held in the shelter. Whenever possible, shelters should strive to spay or neuter dogs and cats in advance and allow pet adopters to take them home right away.

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

Make documents and forms practical and user-friendly. Paperwork is, of course, a necessary part of the adoption process, but strive to make the paperwork and discussion as friendly as possible while still ensuring that adopters have the information they need to succeed with their new pet.

Sometimes, in the zeal to ensure that pets are going to good homes, groups can alienate potential adopters. Yet, 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.

Try letting go of some of restrictions and instead focus on facilitating introductions to appropriate pets and sharing helpful information with adopters. Follow up and offer support to help adoptions succeed.

Key Takeaways:

- Make the shelter a welcoming place
- Make it easy for people to fall in love by encouraging interaction with the animals and instituting friendly, supportive adoption policies.
- Open the shelter for adoptions when people are off work—evenings, weekends and holidays.
- Offer offsite adoptions.

“Opportunities multiply as they are seized.” – Sun Tzu

5. Set Affordable Fees

Charge reasonable fees for pet adoptions. Money does not buy or ensure love. If it did, we would not see purebred dogs in shelters. Good adoption matches and services that support adoption success are the keys, not high fees.

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. Multiple studies have shown that free adoptions, especially for cats, get more pets into homes and that the quality of the homes and the commitment of the adopters is not compromised.

Create a Seniors-for-Seniors Pet Adoption Program to match older people with mature 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 free adoptions and veterinary care support for special needs and older pets to attract new homes. This program can be supported by grants or sponsorships.

If it were possible to raise the needed funds to support pet adoptions through fees alone, animal shelters would not be run by governments and non-profits, but rather for-profit businesses. Instead, shelters need to focus on seeking donations to support lifesaving care for the animals including their adoption programs. Government agencies can often accept donations too.

Key Takeaways:

- Charge reasonable fees and offer free cat adoptions in order to increase adoptions without sacrificing quality of homes.
- Seek donations to support adoptions and other lifesaving programs.

6. Provide Friendly Customer Service

Adoption Counselors play a dual role. While Adoption Counselors are looking out for the well being of the animals, they also have another equally important responsibility—providing quality customer service to visitors and potential adopters and helping them find a pet who is a good fit 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.

Most of us who work in shelters have seen hundreds even thousands of pet adoptions and so we may become a bit jaded. Not so for the average person coming in to adopt. Most people adopt only a few pets in their lifetime. They may be nervous or excited or experiencing other emotions related to past pets, but for most pet adopters, it is a special and memorable experience. By focusing on making pet adoptions a great experience and recognizing pet adopters as the lifesaving heroes they are, we are valuing and reinforcing the wonderful human-animal bond which is such a crucial part of creating truly humane communities.

When hiring staff, look for people who like people as well as animals. Establishing customer service standards and providing training for all staff members is a worthwhile investment in the success of any organization.

Key Takeaway:

- Hire and train staff with delivering great customer service in mind.



Sammy's Top Tips for Adoption Counselors

Sammy Pike was a long-time Adoption Associate at Nevada Humane Society. Sammy brought years of customer service experience to her work and used it to place many hundreds of animals in new homes. Sammy's natural warmth and personality were a real plus, but her advice is helpful to anyone who wants to do a great job for the animals:

1. Have a good time—laugh and encourage others to laugh too. Laughter puts everyone at ease.
2. Greet each person with a big smile and a friendly remark.
3. Find out what they are looking for in a pet and introduce them to some specific animals.
4. Help them get to know the animal's personality to see if it is a fit.
5. Reinforce their decision by sharing some of the special qualities of the pet.



7. Create Fun and Attention-Getting Promotions



Relentlessly promote pet adoptions with fun promotions and events. Come up with creative, fun ideas and programs that will get media attention and create excitement around pet adoptions. Brainstorm ideas with staff, take inspiration from holidays and local events, and borrow ideas from other shelters. Some of our favorites include Furry Speed Dating, Adopt a Mini-Panther, The Race for the Right House is On, and Wheel of Fortune.

Tie into national adoption events—it's easy and can have great results. Two nationwide events to consider:

- Home 4 the Holidays—
<https://animalcenter.org/home-4-the-holidays/>
- Clear the Shelters—<http://www.cleartheshelters.com/>

Create appealing visuals. In addition to news releases about the events, be sure to create an image for each promotion that can be used online, as posters and in ads.

Highlight individual pets. Work with local media outlets (TV, radio, print) to create pet-of-the-week promotions. Copy book stores' Staff Picks programs 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.

Partner with local businesses and community groups to promote pet adoptions through special events, offsite events, pet-of-the-week promotions to their customers, and other creative collaborations.

Key Takeaways:

- Create fun and engaging promotions that get media attention and create excitement; then promote them relentlessly.
- Create fun visuals that support adoption promotions, use them in multiple channels—print ads, posters, online, social media, email newsletters, etc.
- Partner with others—tie into national adoption events; work with local businesses and community groups to promote adoptions.



9. Market Special Needs Pets as Individuals



Find the opportunity even in hoarding cases. When faced with a challenge like a hoarding case, look for ways to promote adoption of the animals 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 them or donate toward their care— funds were raised (including \$5,000 from one gentleman, a first-time donor, who loved orange cats), and all of these cats were placed into homes, along with any other orange cats that were in the shelter at the time.

For sick and injured animals, ask the public for help. When you take in seriously injured animals that require expensive veterinary care, tell the public about the animals in need and ask for funds to specifically cover these expenses. People can be very generous when it is to help an individual animal.

Market special needs and senior pets as individuals. Tell their story, highlight what is unique, special, and share the challenges they face. Be candid about issues—explaining their special needs can attract the one person who is able to provide what this particular animal needs.

Create a Barn Cat Adoption Program. A barn cat adoption program can be a lifesaver for the rare feral cat that cannot be safely returned to their home turf and for other some other cats that may not be suitable for life in a home. (This is in addition to active Trap-Neuter-Return and Return-to-Field programs for feral cats.) Barn Cats Inc. of Dallas and Nevada Humane Society have model programs you can emulate.



Key Takeaways:

- Market special needs and senior pets as individuals, highlighting what is special about them.
- Ask the public for donations to help treat sick and injured animals that require expensive care.
- Promote challenging situations, like hoarding cases, with an appealing label and ask the public to help with adoptions and donations.
- Create a barn cat adoption program.



10. Express Gratitude

Congratulate and thank everyone. Success involves truly engaging the community in helping your organization to achieve its goals. When you succeed at achieving a goal, be sure to thank them! You truly cannot do it without them!

Don't forget to thank staff and volunteers too. Words mean a lot, but you can also back it up with simple gestures that say thank you like a pizza luncheon or coffee and fresh bagels in the morning. One of the biggest hits with our staff was when our managers prepared breakfast (or made sandwiches to order for lunch) to thank them for their extra effort that produced positive results.

Don't forget to thank donors, reporters and others that help you along the way. Experts tell us that a heartfelt thank you—without asking for more—is one of the most compelling things we can do to encourage increased giving in the future. So say thank you today, and lay the ground work for future support by building a mutually rewarding relationship with all supporters.



You Can Do It!

Change is never easy, but in working to increase pet adoptions at your organization you are truly modeling the very best of our work as animal shelter professionals—honoring the life of each animal and serving the community.

**“Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot,
nothing is going to get better. It's not.”**

– Dr. Seuss

This guide was created by



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Photos courtesy of Nevada Humane Society

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11 a.m. to 5 p.m.

- Sample cupcakes
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SATURDAY, JANUARY 22, 2011
10 AM TO 7 PM
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EVENT INCLUDES:
Book Signing by *Pickles* cartoonist, Brian Crane 2 to 5 PM
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I can make a difference. I can make someone smile.
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Special Adoption Fees July 2nd through 8th
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Adult Cats - \$25
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Adoption Hours:
 Every day 11am-6:30pm
 Open at 10am on Saturday

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Nevada Humane Society
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They're cranky, cross and ready for forever homes. Are you up for the challenge?

Adoption Fees
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February 21-March 1
 Special Adoption Fee:
 \$25 for "Star" dogs, cats, and rabbits
 Come in and vote for the Mardi Gras King and Queen

February 28 at 11 am
 Mardi Gras pet parade through the shelter!

Shelter Hours:
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real men love cats.

Reduced Fees in June!
 Cats Over 3 Years: FREE
 Kittens Under 4 Months: \$60
 Other Cats: \$25
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Pawspective Art Show

Exhibit Opening Nevada Humane Society
 Saturday, July 18
 4pm-8pm

Free admission
 Refreshments and live music
 Works of local artists on display
 Exhibit of Victory Dogs Collection by contemporary artist & Best Friends Animal Society co-founder Cyrus Mejia (collection on display through July 31)
 Portion of proceeds from art sales benefits homeless animals of Nevada Humane Society

For more information, call 775-856-2000 ext. 333
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