

Things You Can Do to Make Your Shelter More Appealing to Supporters, Visitors and Potential Adopters



Clean & Professional Appearance

In spite of the old adage, people often do judge a book by its cover so making your shelter look its best is not superficial, but rather an important contributor to its success. The way your shelter looks can also be seen as a reflection of the care the animals receive, even if that is not the case. Here are a few things to consider in making your shelter look appealing to visitors, donors, and potential adopters:

- Keep it looking and smelling clean. Odors, overly strong scent of cleaners as well as animal odors, can make people think twice about the odor a pet may add to their home, as well as limit the amount of time they want to stay in your facility.
- Coordinate colors/styles. If your shelter looks like it was put together from items obtained in a thrift store, you need to tap into the talents of volunteers and staff who have an eye for these things. Donations of used furniture, blankets/bedding, and other needed items can be sought through specific requests to the public. A few volunteers or staff members with a good eye for color can transform a cat room from a hodge-podge appearance to an attractive space with little or no money at all—simply through the choice colors of the blankets and other items they choose.
- Create professional-looking, consistent signage. This can be done with a computer and laminating machine if you cannot afford professionally made signs. They need to be hung straight, at eye level and not tattered. Use consistent font style, size and color; have them grammar proofed before hanging and keep a positive tone. Make handwritten signs taboo.
- Minimize clutter. Keep counter tops clear and avoid over decorating with nick-knacks. Staff food and drinks and personal items need to be out of public view at all times. Seek donations of storage cabinets or drawers so that things can be stored out of sight.
- Use festive decorations that fit your current promotion, theme or holidays. These can often be obtained through donation requests or very cheaply at dollar stores.
- Provide logoed shirts for staff and volunteers. If you cannot afford these, ask volunteers and require staff to wear a specific color to make them look and feel like a team. This will also assist the public in identifying who they can go to for help.
- Review and update kennel/cage cleaning protocols that employ the latest expert advice from UC Davis Koret Shelter Medicine Program for both animals during their stay and a special protocol for cage cleaning between animals.
- Make sure kennel/cage cards are fresh-looking (not stained, tattered or torn), are printed (not hand-written) and have quality photos and positive, charming descriptions.
- Develop a routine janitorial and maintenance schedule so that floors, high surfaces, vents, windows, doorknobs, etc. are cleaned regularly, and that equipment, such as dryers, are serviced on schedule and in good working order

- Institute routine walk-throughs for management. Cleanliness is an ongoing process in an animal shelter and the only way to really monitor it is to walk through the building daily. When you walk through the shelter imagine that you are seeing it for the very first time and take care to observe details you may overlook if moving faster, such as dust, grime, clutter, poor signage, etc.

Welcoming & Positive Atmosphere

Making sure that visitors feel welcome is an important part of adoption success. Here are a few of the keys to success:

- Hire/recruit friendly and customer-focused staff and volunteers. Don't underestimate the value of a genuine smile or a friendly word from staff. Train all staff members to say hello to everyone they encounter and, if they cannot help right away, to take a second to recognize the person and let them know that they will be with them soon.
- Recruit volunteer greeters to say hello to everyone who comes in the door and help guide them to where they want to go.
- Celebrate adoptions by ringing a bell, clapping, or some other happy sendoff you can devise for new pet adopters. Visibly track progress toward adoptions goals so that everyone can share the successes. It makes the adopter feel special and appreciated and reminds staff and volunteers of the true mission.
- Provide name tags for staff and volunteers.
- Train staff to engage people in dialogue so that they ask open-ended questions that cannot be answered with a yes or a no. Role playing can help staff members understand how things come across to the visitor and develop a style of engaging people that works for them. Staff members who see the value in treating everyone with compassion and respect, even if they are surrendering an animal or being turned down for an adoption, are valuable assets to your organization's reputation.

Effective & Efficient Processes

Making things easy for people who wish to adopt will increase your adoptions and create positive word-of-mouth promotion for your organization. Consider these suggestions:

- Open at times/days that are convenient to the public so that working people can come in to adopt. Schedules can be shifted back to keep expenses the same.
- Don't miss out on an adoption opportunity because it's closing time. Adoptions should be completed, rather than telling people you are closed and asking them to return. Schedule staff so that coverage is available for 30 minutes after the front doors close. If there are no pending adoptions, staff can leave or prepare for the next day.
- Train staff and volunteers so that they can provide accurate information for the public or they know where to go get answers. A simple listing or brief guide can help ensure that inquiries are properly re-directed by busy staff.

- Ensure that adoption processes are clear and not cumbersome. Eliminate obstacles and red tape that delay adoptions. Instead, focus on only what is truly important to adoption success.
- Schedule staff and/or volunteers to help with adoption matching. People can become overwhelmed by the number of animals in a shelter. Someone who can ask what they are hoping for in a pet and then make appropriate introductions to potentially suitable pets will help increase adoptions.
- Provide bonding rooms where people can sit quietly with a dog or cat and get to know them.
- Develop easy ways for people to interact with animals. Allow the public to enter cat rooms and to view dogs without long waits, staff escorts or advance applications. You want to encourage spontaneous love matches, not make the adoption process into an endurance test that is frustrating and discouraging.

Community Awareness & Engagement

While there are many aspects of the shelter itself (as listed above) that determine how appealing it is to people, the community awareness and overall commitment to your mission is also a powerful influencer. Here are a few things you can try that have helped increase awareness and engagement, and ultimately adoptions, in other communities:

- Consider calling your shelter a community animal center or adoption center to help promote this important community service and put the emphasis on this critical part of your lifesaving mission.
- Create and share adoption and foster care goals for the month or for an event. This helps get the community, staff and volunteers bought in to the lifesaving mission.
- Host events and activities at the shelter, especially those that will draw in segments of the population who may not otherwise have a reason to go to the shelter. (This does not work during the pandemic, but it may again at some point in the future. Meanwhile you could host a virtual event from the facility.)
- Create and promote fun promotions that will get media and public attention.
- Advertise. Even if there are no funds available for advertising, you can ask for donations or sponsorships. Local media outlets may be willing to provide discounted or free ad space.
- Hold offsite adoption events and/or open a mall adoption center. These are ways to get the animals out in front of more people, especially people that aren't comfortable going into shelters. They also create awareness and expand