

# Turbocharging Pet Adoptions and Community Engagement

## What shelters can learn from those cheesy used car salesmen

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By [Bonney Brown](#)

Cars, mattresses and pets—no obvious connection, yet there is one similarity: All are infrequent acquisitions. Statistics show that people buy a car every 10 years and a mattress every seven years. While those of us working in animal welfare see pet adoptions almost every day, the average person only acquires a few pets over the course of a lifetime.



In spite of this infrequency of purchases, each week, the Sunday newspapers contain full-page ads about great deals to be had on cars and mattresses. These merchants know that we only buy their products every seven to 10 years. It's doubtful that they think we will buy more cars or mattresses just because we saw their advertisement. But they know that eventually we will be looking for their products, and when that day comes, they want their business to come to mind.

Promoting pet adoption is not all that different. The majority of people will acquire a pet at some point, and when they are ready we want them to think of their local shelter. We can't count on reaching them at the exact right moment, the very day they decide it's time to get a cat or dog—so we too need to be out there, continuously promoting our animals.

Mention adoption promotion to animal welfare leaders and most will tell you, "Oh, yes, we do that." But the relatively low percentage of animals acquired through shelters and rescues indicates we may not be achieving the promotional frequency and relentlessness that keep car and mattress dealers in business.

## Assessing Adoption Potential

A 2009 study conducted by the Shelter Pet Project found that a potential 17 million American households planned to acquire a pet within the next year.

With that in mind, comparing the current adoption rate in your community to some of the best-performing communities will provide insight into the potential opportunities. Shelters in Colorado performed 17 adoptions per 1,000 people in 2013. From 2007-2013, Washoe County, Nev., shelters sustained over 20 adoptions per 1,000 residents. Monmouth County, N.J., and Kitsap County, Wash., had an adoption rate of 14 per 1,000 people in 2012.

Given our limited funds, shelters need to get as much free publicity as possible (and when we pay for advertising, we need a real bang for our buck). That's why it's important to come up with fun, eye-catching, attention-getting promotions to engage the media and make a memorable impression on the public.

Doing this will boost your adoptions by alerting pet lovers that your organization is a great place to find a furry companion. It will help to increase donations, too, as donors love seeing creative efforts to save animals.

## Finding Good Ideas

Brainstorming ideas with staff is fun and very effective. If you are still at a loss, borrow concepts from others—after all, it's for a great cause!

At the Nevada Humane Society, we started with holidays. On New Year's Day, we featured the first adoption of the year, just as many newspapers highlight the region's first birth. Valentine's Day inspired our Furry Speed Dating promotion. On the

Fourth of July, we hosted a free Ice Cream Social. Safe trick-or-treating at the shelter became a Halloween tradition. On Election Day, we invited people to meet the *Repuplicants* and *Democats*. When the local art museum exhibited Egyptian antiquities, we transformed the shelter into an Egyptian bazaar complete with donated Middle Eastern snacks, performers and volunteers dressed as *Cleocatra* and *Bark Antony*.

The Wheel of Furtune event features a wheel just like on TV, and adopters spin it for prizes. For Woofstock, staff sported tie-dye shirts, and '60s music filled the shelter. The Cup Cake Day idea came from a shelter in New Zealand; over 1,200 cupcakes were donated, raising money and bringing new people in for the first time. Seeing that even those difficult ladies on the "Bridezillas" TV show managed to find love, we hosted a Petzilla promotion and found homes for some haughty cats and cranky Chihuahuas. (Hey, some people like a challenge!) Plump cats



were promoted with a Fat Cat event, black cats with an Adopt a Mini-Panther promotion. When a hoarding situation brought in dozens of mostly orange-colored cats, we asked people to help with The Great Orange Cat Rescue.

Inspiration can come from anywhere. We received several letters from one woman complaining that we were “hijacking holidays for animals.” “What’s next?” she asked. “Arbor Day?” Hmmm, Arbor Day, trees, dogs ... yes! So, we partnered with a local nursery that was thrilled to donate a free tree for each adopter.

Not every promotion worked, but a few duds were a small price for the events that succeeded beyond our wildest dreams. Create and adjust—give one idea a try and then make improvements if you need to.

## **A Better Business Model for Adoptions**

We all know that money can’t buy love, and yet for years, many animal welfare organizations have acted as though paying for a pet was the only way to guarantee the animal would be treasured. But several studies have since confirmed that animals given as gifts or acquired at no cost are no less valued by their adoptive families. So now we can reduce and waive fees to increase adoptions. Some shelters still view adoption fees as a primary revenue source, but this business model does not work and never did. After all, if it worked, all shelters would be for-profit businesses. Instead, we should view adoptions as a way to increase our visibility and support in the community. When we share the compelling stories that come from our increased adoption numbers, we can ask our donors for greater generosity to support this lifesaving work.

## **Enthusiasm Is Contagious**

When you have seen thousands of adoptions, as many of us who work in shelters have, it’s easy to get a bit blasé. Just for a moment, put yourself in the shoes of the people adopting a pet for the very first time. Imagine their high hopes and nervousness. They have come to our shelter—though they could get a pet elsewhere—to find a new best friend, to save a life. Our job is to make them feel like a hero by the time they leave the shelter. However you choose to do this—ringing a bell to celebrate, having staff applaud as adopters leave are both possible options—make sure your adopters leave feeling proud.

Make it easy for folks to fall in love by fostering an immediate bond between the visitors and the animals. This bond requires touch—which is why stores want you to touch their merchandise, car dealers want you to take a test drive and politicians want to shake your hand and kiss your baby. For us, this translates into encouraging visitors to touch and interact with the animals in the shelter so that an attachment can form that will lead to adoption.

Setting adoption goals for each month and then tracking each adoption publicly on a big display board within the shelter helps get everyone pulling together and also creates a sense of accomplishment when goals are met.

When we talk about “the responsibility of pet ownership,” it is at best boring and at worst condescending. Like Charlie Brown’s teacher (“Blah, blah, blah”), we get tuned out. Instead, touch hearts and inspire people by talking about all the fun and rewarding aspects of adopting a pet. When we truly tap into the great well of compassion for animals in our communities through relentless and inspiring marketing, our adoption numbers will soar and our shelters will come alive in ways we can only begin to imagine.

Statistics provided by Susan Houser, author of the “[Out the Front Door](#)” blog. Statistics for the blog are provided by the shelters, and links to the data are included in blog posts about each community listed in the blog’s right sidebar.

#### About the Author

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