The Art of Communication

Knowing what to say and how to say it can boost your organization’s effectiveness

BY BONNEY BROWN

A dog walks into a bar, jumps up on a bar stool and says, “Hey, how about a drink?” The bartender stares for a moment and replies, “Sure, the toilet is around the corner.”

Silly as this old joke is, we all know the feeling: Sometimes the results of our best efforts at communication are disappointing.

Everyone hears and sees things through their own filters. Considering the variety of people we communicate with in our daily work—donors, volunteers, potential adopters, colleagues, staff, Facebook fans, the media and the public at large—it’s little wonder that successful communication can be elusive. Fortunately, there are techniques that can help us communicate more effectively and get the results we want more often.

Mother was right: good manners are important. It turns out that thanking people for adopting, donating or volunteering is not just polite; it may encourage more of the same. Lara Akinin, a social psychology researcher at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia, reports that there is a "positive feedback loop" for giving and altruism: "Reminding donors of earlier donations could make them happy, and experiencing happiness might lead to making a generous gift." So when we tell our supporters that their gifts have made our lifesaving work possible, we are increasing the odds that they will support our work again and more generously.

Everybody loves a good story. We need to provide a lot of facts to convince people to lend support, right? Indeed, there are times when this is essential, but don’t underestimate the power of storytelling. Down through the centuries and long before written communication, our ancestors were sharing and remembering important values and information through stories. A well-told story can capture our attention where numbers can bore. Every animal your organization saves, every person on your team and even your organization has a story. The trick is in uncovering these stories, selecting the best ones for the intended audience and conveying them effectively.

Effective stories have some things in common. They are about a real animal and the real people who helped this animal receive care, love and a better life. These stories touch hearts, resonate with our fundamental values and make people feel good about supporting our organizations. Over time, be sure to share stories that cover the variety of animals you help—all species and types, including cats, dogs, farm animals, pocket pets, young and old, purebreds and mutts.

While we often feel compelled to include every detail and lots of statistics, most stories are more effective if they are not too wordy or bogged down by data. Of course, it is still important to have the hard facts: Reporters, foundations and donors planning to make large gifts want to understand your organization’s full impact on animals’ lives. But the numbers alone, no matter how impressive, are usually not as effective as the story that touches their hearts.

Don’t make them guess. Management guru Peter Drucker notes, “One can communicate only in the recipients’ language or in their terms.” Abbreviations
like DSH, JRT or GSD are just cryptic codes to most people looking to adopt a new furry friend. And these are just the tip of the iceberg in terms of sheltering lingo. Jargon provides such helpful shorthand for our internal communications that it can be hard for us to notice when it slips into our speech and writing to the public. The answer is to find a good editor, whether a volunteer, friend or staff member, who will review documents before they are shared publicly to make sure they're written in plain language.

Eliminate dry details. People are busy and attention spans are short, so write as concisely as possible. For example, if your adoption ad includes a photo of the animal, there is no need to explain in the caption that this is a short-haired orange cat or a tan Chihuahua; people can see that for themselves. What they don’t know is what a ridiculous goofball he becomes when he is playing, how sweet and cuddly he can be or how his eyes are the most gorgeous shade of amber in the sunlight. A little humor and tenderness in animal descriptions goes a long way in touching hearts.

Show them. A picture really is worth a thousand words—maybe even more! But be sure to spare your donors anything that will cause them to cringe. Those of us in the field have to be able to tolerate the sight of injured or abused animals, but most animal lovers can be quite sensitive to such things. So it’s advisable to run any photo of an injured or neglected animal by a few animal-loving friends outside the field for their reaction before you put it on the front page of your newsletter.

Visual impact can help with staff training, too. Discouraged by the blank stares she got during a talk about preventing disease transmission, a shelter veterinarian at the Nevada Humane Society did a demonstration using colored powder on a stuffed toy to show how handling an animal can spread pathogens (represented by the powder) around the environment. Weeks later, the staff was still talking about it. Truly, seeing is believing.

Inviting versus judging. Given our mission of protecting animals, we can be forgiven for a tendency to lecture about the responsibility of pet ownership. But the message is at best boring and at worst condescending—and may even be perceived as judgmental. Instead, we need to refocus our dialogue on the things that really matter to people—the many positive qualities that pets bring into our lives such as fun, companionship, love and joy! Our dogs and cats are often our best friends, and we should talk more about that. Invite people to share in the wonderful and truly rewarding experience of pet adoption and foster care. This positive approach is much more effective not only in promoting adoption and volunteerism, but also in building and deepening the bond between people and their pets.

For attractive photos, avoid distractions like cage bars. This picture of Chubby is appealing—who wouldn’t want to adopt that face?

Take a positive approach to promoting adoptions by tapping into the important qualities pets bring into people’s lives, like fun and companionship.

Make specific requests. It may be counterintuitive, but generally, the more specific the request you make, the better the results. For example, saying, “Presently we need foster homes for kittens. If you can open your heart and home to a litter of kittens for a few weeks, we can find them loving homes for life,” or “We need donations of dry senior dog food and blankets (used blankets are just fine),” will be far more effective than a generic appeal for volunteers or donations of supplies.

On a higher level, we can invite people to share our dream of creating a true safety net for every dog and cat in need in the community and ask them to support the lifesaving work of our organizations by donating, volunteering or adopting a pet today. To ensure that we have the necessary resources, we need to ask people, urge them even, to help. Your passion and enthusiasm for this work is contagious; let that passion shine through in your words.

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