



Shelter

research
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Should shelters re-home animals through pet shops?

by Tim Adams

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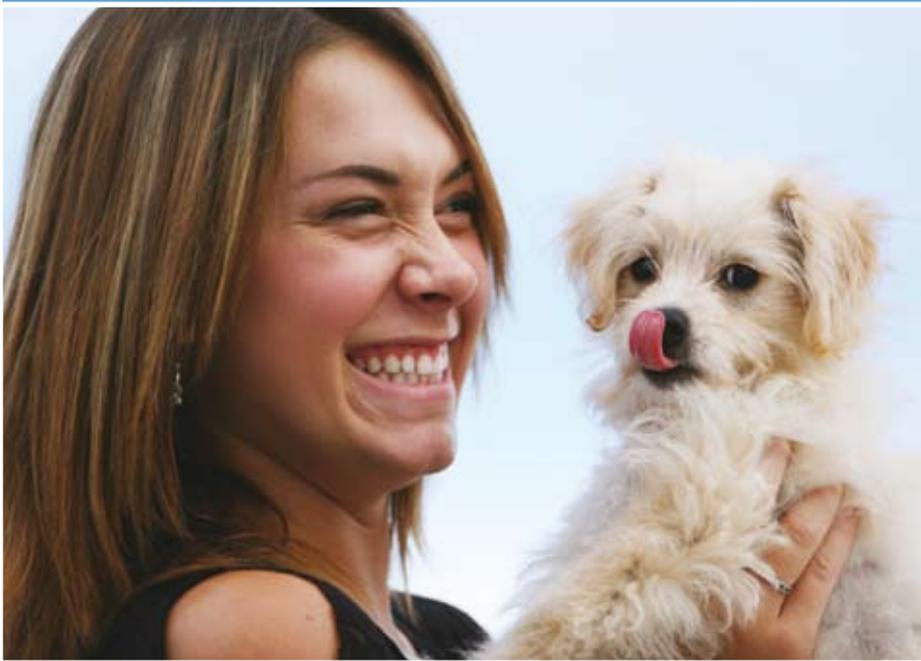
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The relationship between animal welfare organisations and pet retailers is not always harmonious. But what happens when a large welfare shelter partners with a chain of pet stores to rehome more animals? In order to determine how such an alliance might affect community opinion, a study was undertaken in 2009 by the University of Queensland.

In particular, the study aimed to determine whether community opinion of the sheltering organisation would be negatively impacted by this arrangement, which in turn might reduce the level of community support. For a non-profit animal welfare organisation, this is a critical factor since little to no government funding is provided.

Randomly recruited respondents were asked a series of questions about how they felt about the shelter when they were told of an alliance between a shelter and a pet shop chain. Their answers were compared to a control group of respondents who had not been told about the alliance. Overall the respondents were positive about the alliance and indicated they felt better about the actions of the shelter organisation. The study found that respondents believed that the sale of shelter animals through pet stores was appropriate, with comments such as “[the shelter] are just branching out in an effort to re-home more animals”, and “I think that by providing this link, [the shelter] is actually fulfilling its duty.”

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Using Social Media Tools To Save Animal Lives

by Michelle Williamson

Chances are you already have a website. You may already have a personal Facebook page, or have spent some time reading blogs. But what you might not know is that the often hyped 'social media community' could dramatically increase the ability of your shelter to find homes for displaced pets.



'Social media' describes websites that allow users to directly share information with each other. These online tools are now the fastest growing segment of the Internet and represent a broad change in how people communicate with one another.

According to a recent study, three-quarters of Australian online adults now use social media tools. Two thirds read blogs, read reviews, or consume other social content and almost half of Australian online adults are members of social networks. Nielsen has reported that social networks have now overtaken email as the biggest activity online.

So how do animal shelters make the most of these new trends? How do we tap into these online conversations to spread the word about animal adoption and responsible pet ownership? The answer, according to groups successfully harnessing these networks, is to become the leader of your own online communities.

Social media for animal shelters

Tapping into compassion online

At this very moment, people are discussing and researching online. This means before they adopt a pet, many potential adopters are spending time on their social networks weighing up the pros and cons of animal ownership.

Should they go to a pet store? Should they get a pet from a breeder? What is a 'shelter' or 'rescue' pet?

This conversation presents a new opportunity for shelters. You may not be able to afford a giant media campaign extolling the benefits of pet adoption, but you can invite your previous adopters, donors, volunteers and supporters to help you spread the word.

USING SOCIAL MEDIA TO TELL A STORY

"One of the strongest advocates for animal adoption is people who've adopted," says Vickie Davy from PetRescue.

"Allowing a community to form around people's passion for their rescue pets has helped us to create an army of animal lovers helping us spread the adoption message."

The organisation's Facebook page *"I adopted my pet from PetRescue"* has led to a 2,000 strong group who've shared over 1,000 pictures of happy, adopted pets enjoying new homes.

This success has been shared by the Animal Welfare League in Queensland, who started a Facebook page *"I found my sweetheart at the Animal Welfare League Qld"* for a Valentine's Day promotion. Tapping into a veritable fountain of support, their group grew to over 100 members in just a few days and became a centerpiece for promoting shelter adoptions.

Gabrielle Wheaton, PR Manager for the AWL QLD, has obviously been delighted with this result and over the past year has been tracking what works for their organisation online.

"When we survey people, a lot of people say they found us via our website. We've recently started Twittering and blogging as well, which has helped us attract new supporters and followers."

We've found the best aspect of online marketing is that once something gets people's attention, it really gets their attention, quite often going 'viral' to use the word of the moment."

USING SOCIAL MEDIA TO FIND HOMES

"The 'real time' capabilities of social media make it the perfect resource to support the fast paced nature of rescue. Got a pet who needs help today? Then tweet it", says Vickie.

"PetRescue found that after adding social media capabilities to our animal listings, the community were quick to help us by sharing animal profiles on their personal accounts."

We've had pounds contact us needing 20 foster homes in a single afternoon. It was possible because people helped us spread the word, beyond what we could have ever hoped to achieve on our own."

And, it's not just new foster homes that can be found using social media tools, but permanent homes too. "Special cases, like those pets who need a new owner willing to pay for surgery, elderly or very young pets or special needs pets are especially popular with online communities.

There's something about a pet that's a bit 'unique' that captures people's imagination. It's like people are just waiting for the right pet to come along. One that really speaks to them. It's magical to see the perfect family come forward for a pet that, on the surface, seems almost unadoptable."

Getting started in the conversation

While your organisation's website is important, it usually represents a one-way conversation. Social media tools present a huge opportunity for shelters to start a two-way conversation with their online audience and share their message - and these tools are free to use and easy to learn!

Advertise amongst your existing supporters or volunteers for someone with experience with online tools. They don't need to be a professional, but a social media 'native' will be able to help you identify which tools will best suit your group's aims. Letting your supporters interact with you can be as easy as adding a link to your Facebook fan page, blog or Twitter account to your website to let people know you are now participating.

Tools on the web

* Facebook

Many people already have a Facebook account, so understand the basics. Creating a 'Facebook Fan Page' for your group is easy, but requires ongoing updates, maintenance and conversation to be effective. You can allocate the task of updates to a team of computer savvy volunteers, but be sure to give them a staff contact internally that they can pass enquiries or complaints to. Also, have a staff member check in regularly to make sure all is well.

Use the page to highlight an 'adoptable pet of the day', upcoming events, photos from around the shelter, staff and volunteer profiles and to reprint any media articles featuring your group. Encourage your Facebook fans to participate and share their own adoption experiences.

* Twitter

Twitter is an excellent 'real time' tool that is good for putting out calls about things happening 'right this second'. If your group needs volunteers that afternoon, wants to promote a new pet that has just arrived, or needs sponsorship for an emergency situation, then use your Twitter account to ask for help.

* YouTube

Often used in conjunction with Facebook and Twitter, a YouTube account simply lets you post videos online. Videos are immensely powerful for improving animal adoptions as they can be used to show the pet's size, personality and any tricks or cute behaviours that may make them more appealing to potential adopters.

* Blogs

You might consider having a blog on your website as a partner to your online or printed newsletter. As something of note happens, you write a short article on your blog. At the end of the month, compile all your blog entries into your newsletter for sending and you're done - voila!



* Community newsgroups/forums

If you have a larger base of supporters you'd like to make contact with, inviting them to be a part of your organisation via a newsgroup or forum can give them the opportunity to contribute to your work. This is also a useful tool to give volunteers a chance to connect with each other outside of their daily duties.

All of these tools can be mixed and matched to get the best result. There is no requirement to use any or all of them. Often the best plan is to simply try one for a period, then assess the results before trying the next.

Remember: The secret to a successful foray into social media is often dependent on everyone in your organisation collecting updates, information and photos about daily operations for sharing. The more 'intimate' the picture your followers are getting, the more engaged they will be with your group.

Tips

- * A good photo is definitely worth a thousand words online. When posting pictures of pets, make the effort to get a photo that shows them looking relaxed and calm and try to get eye contact with the camera.
- * One of the biggest complaints from people enquiring about adoptable pets online is that they applied and no one got back to them. Set up a process which ensures emails and online enquiries are replied to promptly and professionally.
- * For ideas, watch what other shelters and non-profits do online. There's nothing wrong with borrowing or adapting an idea for your own group to use!
- * Look for volunteers to help you with your online efforts. Photography, video or graphic design volunteers can all be sourced through local volunteering agencies and can often work from home.
- * Deal with complaints or problems online as you would in person or on the telephone - and, wherever you can, resolve the issue publicly. Remain professional and make the effort to work through any genuine concerns. While it can seem scary to start an online discussion with your public, doing so ensures the conversation doesn't take place elsewhere on the web, limiting your ability to set the tone and resolve the issue.

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Should shelters re-home animals through pet shops? cont.

To avoid any negative feelings, consumers needed to understand that the alliance would create increased opportunities for re-homing animals.



Further, there was no reported decrease in the perception of the shelter as doing “good” – a critical finding.

However, it was very important that consumers were well informed about how the alliance would work. In particular the issues of impulse purchasing, adoption screening, and why the alliance was formed were key factors in communicating the shelter-to-pet shop concept to the community. Defining the strategic fit between the two organisations was important to avoid scepticism of the pet shop’s involvement in the scheme. Interestingly, any resultant consumer scepticism tended to be directed at the commercial retailer rather than at the welfare organisation. To avoid any negative feelings, consumers needed to understand that the alliance would create increased opportunities for re-homing animals. Once they were informed, consumers’ attitudes very quickly became positive about the alliance.

The study concluded that promotions regarding the alliance strategy between an animal welfare shelter and a commercial retailer must focus on:

- WHY the partnership was formed: e.g. What will the retailer gain? What is the shelter’s motivation?
- HOW the partnership will help the animal shelter achieve its mission: i.e. communicate the strategic fit between the partners, and ensure the partnership is transparent.

In particular the study found that communication to the community about the partnership should be transparent, honest and rational. It recommended specific communication that:

- more animals will be re-homed by the alliance
- a greater number of potential supporters can be reached
- pet shop adoption centres will be located more centrally and will be more convenient to adopters
- animals are supplied to the commercial retailer from an ethical source (the shelter)
- impulse purchasing is deterred through a screening process
- the shelter can actively compete with other pet sources such as breeders

One of the most important findings of the study was that the alliance helps to build a sense of community around the sheltering organisation. Consumers are encouraged to talk about the shelter organisation, be loyal to them, and look to them for future acquisitions of pet animals.

About Shelter Research

This publication is distributed to every major shelter and pound in Australia. Articles in Shelter Research are written to assist the work of shelters, and information contained therein is obtained from international scientific literature and research.

We welcome your feedback and suggestions:
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Kate and her dogs; Archie and Joseph

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