Humane Society International

Electronic *Library*

How to Write a Cage Card
Illustrations by Susie Duckworth

The cards clipped to dog kennels and cat cages usually include just a few descriptive words, but they could be the most important words you write all day. Serving as mini-biographies, cage cards can make or break an animal's chances of getting a second look from an adopter.

Fortunately, you don't have to be a literary genius to create an effective cage card. To compose irresistible profiles of the animals in your shelter, just follow these tips:

1. Go Professional
Blank cards containing only handwritten scribbles convey a haphazard, unprofessional appearance. Use a computer or typewriter to make uniform cards that leave space for specific information, or ask a designer to create one for you. (If you have shelter management software, you may want to see if it includes a cage-card component.) Cards should be simple yet attractive, with lots of room for all the vital statistics. If you fill out the cards by hand, make sure your writing is neat and legible—visitors are unlikely to take a second look if they have to squint. Use a permanent marker, and buy some plastic sheaths to hold the cards so they stay clean and dry. To add a little pizzazz and convey some important information quickly, use blue paper for male animals and pink paper for female animals.

2. Name That Animal
A Fluffy or a Fido by any other name is just as lovable, but adopters may not know that. Create a positive identity for animals who arrive at your shelter by choosing names that emphasize their special attributes. Always keep names appealing and nonviolent; names such as "Killer" and "Snappy" will obviously send the wrong message. Even if adopters change the names of their pets when they go home, you can ensure that the animals are more than just numbers during their stay in your shelter.

3. Make a List, Check it Twice
To give adopters complete profiles of the animals they're visiting with, include the following information on cage cards (making sure you leave enough space for a good "sales pitch"):

- Name
- Identification number that matches the animal with shelter records
- Type of animal: cat, dog, etc.
- The breed or breed combination
- Sex
- Spay/neuter status
- Age
- Color(s)/Markings

- Reason for the animal's stay in the shelter (whether he's stray or owner-surrendered)
- Date of arrival
- Date first made available for adoption
- Known characteristics or special qualities
- Special needs

4. Say that in English, Please

As shelter employees and volunteers, you probably have your own vocabulary to help speed up internal communications, but the general public may think you're speaking in tongues if you converse with them in the same manner. Abbreviations such as "DSH" or "RottX" not only confuse visitors but also may send them quickly to the next cage. Instead of using these cryptic codes, spell out what you mean in plain English--for example, "Domestic Shorthair" and "Rottweiler Mix." Remember, you're writing for adopters' eyes, not your own.

5. Put Her Best Paw Forward

Convey an animal's special needs by emphasizing the "special" aspect. Rather than stating that a cat "hates other animals," for instance, write that she "would prefer to be an only pet." If a dog requires extra attention, don't say he "suffers severe separation anxiety"; instead write that he "needs an at-home mom or dad." If an animal eliminates indoors, that's all the more reason to say he does so—but in a way that shows people his problems are solvable. "Looking for a forgiving teacher to housetrain me" puts a positive spin on the situation
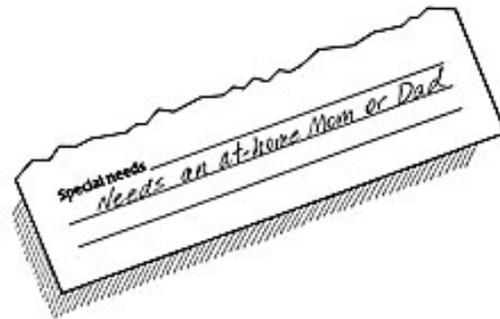
Of course, you shouldn't mislead potential adopters about an animal's true nature or possible behavior problems, but you can use the adoption consultation time to discuss these issues rather than highlighting them on a cage card. Be honest about shortcomings, but don't imply to potential adopters that the animals they are looking at are lost causes.

6. Add the Finishing Touches

Do your best to compliment every animal you make available for adoption. Highlight an interesting feature of the animal such as a curly tail, a funny "meow," or an unusual pattern on a paw. Comments such as "Friendly kitty" or "I can shake hands" might be just the thing that gets an animal noticed—and placed in a new home.

-
Animal Sheltering, Nov-Dec 1999