

## **Public Relations: Charting a Course**

Humane organizations with powerful public relations programs do more than react when crises occur and respond when the media calls; they plan comprehensive programs to publicize their mission year 'round.

Does your shelter too often practice reactive public relations-putting out fires and merely responding to media inquiries? If so, it's time to delve into public relations planning, which can help you prevent crises and better respond to the inevitable problems when they do arise. Without a public relations plan your shelter is like a feather drifting wherever the wind takes it, but with a plan it's more like a bird using the wind to get where he wants to go.

"Shelters can never be too busy or too small to have a public relations plan," says Mary Paul Long, director of development and communications for the Dane County Humane Society in Wisconsin. "Everyone's got to start somewhere. With a public relations plan, a shelter can grow and prosper."

If there's room in your shelter's budget, consider hiring a consultant who can bring in specialized skills and a fresh perspective. You may even be able to locate a professional who will work on a pro bono basis (preferably an individual with experience working with nonprofit organizations). With or without a consultant, the first step in developing a public relations plan is to consider the long-term and short-term goals of your shelter, its vision and mission statements, and the image the shelter wants to project in the future.

### **Formal public relations planning has six distinct steps:**

#### **1. Identify your shelter's key audiences.**

This first step may seem obvious to some, but shelters have more than one audience and different methods of reaching each group. Pet owners may be one important group, potential adopters may be yet another. You will also need to communicate with donors, volunteers, members, staff, and even community leaders. Consider less obvious groups and more wide-ranging messages as well. Do any of your messages need to reach people who don't have pets? How about children? Will the general public need any information about wildlife? What about social workers who may witness animal cruelty? To identify your audiences, list all the concerns and problems that arise every year, then determine who can help you solve those problems.

## **2. Measure the attitudes of relevant groups.**

Find out how people feel about your shelter and the issues it's promoting. Of course, if you want to find out why people aren't taking advantage of your shelter's services, surveying your own members won't work; you'll need to talk to those outside your organization. You're probably already gathering plenty of information informally when interacting with shelter visitors and others in your community. But you'll need to take this process a step further: Some shelters, including the Humane Society of Greater Burlington, are organizing focus groups-discussion groups of eight to ten people guided by a facilitator to reveal opinions on specific topics. If your shelter doesn't have the time, space, or ability to assemble such a group, contact a private polling organization and ask them to assemble a group or perform telephone surveys, a step which allowed the Massachusetts SPCA to reveal pet-ownership statistics and opinions of 500 people in that state. Larger shelters can even conduct their own phone interviews: In 1992 the Humane Society of Vero Beach, Florida, polled over 2,000 citizens in the community to determine the direction the shelter should take in the future.

## **3. Establish goals and messages for your audiences.**

Next, determine which issues your shelter wants to tackle and how best to do it. You can use the same process to promote the spay/neuter message or publicize pet training programs, but for the sake of illustration, let's say the two most important problems facing your shelter are low adoption rates and the number of unvaccinated pets in the community. In this case your audience should include potential adopters (or the general public) and pet owners. Your focus group may reveal that people are not adopting from your shelter because they believe shelters are sad places to visit and that your agency's hours are inconvenient. Another focus group might reveal that few pets are vaccinated because people don't want to be inconvenienced and don't feel disease is a threat. Using this information, your team can change some of the policies that are in effect or inform the audience of certain customer-friendly policies that already exist. If, for instance, you decide to increase evening hours and offer occasional health clinics, your messages might be, "The shelter is open until 9 p.m. on Thursdays," or, "Rabies vaccinations will be offered at the shelter the first Saturday of every month."

## **4. Develop effective public relations strategies.**

The next step is to review the many public relations strategies available to help get that message across. If you are trying to reach potential adopters, you may decide to implement a community relations program, promoting special events to help your shelter appear more friendly and accessible. To reach the pet owners who are not vaccinating their pets, you may consider working with the media to generate more publicity about the importance of pet health and disease control.

## **5. Choose and implement specific public relations tools.**

Once you've determined the strategy, how do you carry it out? Your answer will depend both on your goal and the overall strategy. For example, let's say that you decide to pursue community relations to encourage potential adopters to visit the shelter. In that case, you might offer tours of the shelter or special events that extend the shelter's hours. Tools that you might put to use to teach pet owners about the importance of vaccinations include news releases sent to the local media, brochures distributed through veterinary offices, public service announcements on the radio and television, letters to the editor, even articles in your member newsletter. When developing your public relations tools, don't be afraid to call other humane societies to find out which of their programs have been the most successful.

## **6. Evaluate the results.**

As polished as your shelter newsletter may be, and as positive as a television segment might be, the important questions are: Has your plan worked? Are your messages getting through? Are people more aware? Have you made a difference? To find out, ask. Hand out customer feedback forms to everyone who visits your shelter. When adopters come in, ask how they found out about you. Put a survey in your newsletter. Better yet, return to the social surveys you've done to determine your goals months or even years ago. By performing phone surveys and assembling focus groups again, you'll be able to reveal any changes in the public's perception and learn if your efforts are really adding up.