

TEN Public Relations Tips for Shelters of All Sizes

There are plenty of simple ways to boost your shelter's identity in the community. Though shelters in small towns may be able to get plenty of attention by submitting a photo of an animal to the local paper, those in larger cities may need to spend a little more money on comprehensive campaigns to raise the eyebrows of reporters at major media outlets. The tips that follow range from the simple to the sublime, and at least a handful should be useful for your shelter:

1. Pick up the Phone.

Make a connection with a local media outlet by simply dialing them up: "Hello, Mr. Smith, I think your readers would be interested to hear about a dog we rescued from the river today...." If you're pitching a story to a reporter, however, the subject doesn't need to be this dramatic. Local newspapers and radio and television stations are always looking for interesting stories on adoptions, spay/neuter clinics, and the busy day-to-day work of shelters.

2. Let the Picture Tell the Story.

Have an experienced amateur photographer, staff member, volunteer, or friend take a quality photo of a cat adopted to a new family, or a stray dog returned to his owners. Write a simple caption on the back of the photo: "JouJou, a shepherd mix, found wandering Main Street in June, was sheltered at PAWS Humane Society for weeks before being reunited with her owners." Send it off to one of the local papers. A simple effort like this can pay huge dividends.

3. Ask and You Shall Receive.

Use materials provided by national organizations like The HSUS, American Humane Association, and the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. Shelters such as Williamson County Animal Control in Tennessee use prepared press releases, information kits, and letters to the editor to jump-start their media relations programs. Regularly scheduled events include National Dog Bite Prevention Week (in June), Adopt a Shelter Animal Month (in October), and National Animal Shelter Appreciation Week (in November).

4. Put Pen to Paper.

Next time your blood pressure rises over a common problem that could be easily prevented, write a letter to the editor: "For the fourth time this week, PAWS Humane Society has offered shelter to an animal whose family is moving. Though our mission is

to provide shelter for animals, we'd like to prevent these cases in the future...."Your letter might provide tips for moving with a pet or even suggest that landlords reconsider their no-pets policies. For maximum impact, be sure your letter focuses on just one issue. If you receive no response from the first newspaper, send it to another.

5. **Go Back to School.**

Call the local college and ask communications professors if their students might be willing to work on a special project for the shelter, such as an advertising campaign. Or follow the lead of the Montgomery County (Md.) Humane Society and ask elementary students to draw posters that will advance your cause and expose children to your shelter's mission.

6. **Take it to the People.**

Promote your programs in retail stores and other unique environments where a large number of people are sure to take note. Williamson County Animal Control posts photos of shelter animals on bulletin boards at local Wal-Mart stores, increasing adoptions, but also increasing foot traffic through its shelter. Last holiday season the Marin Humane Society in California worked with organizers of a local food drive to promote its shelter animals and let people know that the community had animals in need as well, garnering television attention for both causes.

7. **Get in the Ad Game.**

Try to locate an advertising or communications firm willing to work pro bono. Ask for referrals from a board member whose company does a great deal of work with local advertising firms. Work with an agency to devise a logo, plan a campaign, and develop print ads. Advertising agencies are often willing to take on pro bono projects for the opportunity to exert more control and creative influence than they might on other clients' projects. The downside? Paying clients take priority, so your materials may have to wait.

8. **Get a Partner.**

Link a special promotion to local community events. In Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, homebuilders participate in a builders expo, erecting dog and cat shelters which are auctioned off to the public. The money raised supports spay/neuter programs at the Grand Strand Humane Society. Consider joining the local chamber of commerce to become more active in these types of events.

9. **Make 'em Pay.**

Try to find a commercial sponsor for advertisements. The Grand Strand Humane Society in South Carolina works with a local law firm that prefers to promote its services by supporting charitable causes. In Vermont, the Humane Society of Greater Burlington has teamed up with an insurance agent to sponsor an educational print ad.

10. **Get on the Bus.**

Consider advertising your message with the help of public transportation. After a local ad agency donated \$20,000 of advertising space to Marin Humane Society, the shelter produced placards and posters to be displayed on county buses and bus stops, which helped spread their message to thousands of people daily at a minimal cost.