

Targeted Marketing to Ease Animal Shelter Overcrowding

Overview: To address shelter overcrowding, during its summer adoption promotion Animal Services leveraged data to inform targeted marketing strategies and reduced the shelter population by 24%.

Challenge: Placer County Animal Services needed to get the word out about adoptable pets in order to reduce shelter overcrowding and animal time spent in the shelter. Unprecedented numbers of dogs were brought into the shelter in 2023 compared to previous years, primarily as strays or from owner surrenders. Between January and May, in a year with heavy winter storms, our adult dog numbers increased by almost 34 percent compared to the previous year, and the number of puppies increased by 144 percent, leading to overfull kennels and crowding. During this period, owners took longer to redeem their lost dogs, and dogs waited much longer for adoption, increasing the average time dogs spent at the shelter from 15 to 21 days. Typically, a dog is kept in their own kennel that allows room to move around; has a bed off the floor and access to both indoor and outdoor space. When the shelter is overcrowded, kennels fill up and many dogs are housed in smaller overflow crates until kennels become available. Being at the shelter can be stressful for animals, and living in cramped quarters increases that stress. The stress from overcrowding can lead to a variety of issues including disease spread, behavioral deterioration and low staff/volunteer morale, all of which further impact adoptability.

Solution: For the month of June, we em“bark”ed on a campaign to increase dog adoptions. Data and targeted advertising helped us take a standard adoption special to the next level. As part of the Summer Celebration Adoption Event, we reduced our pet adoption fee from \$140 to \$5. As we typically do during adoption specials, we sent a news release to local media, resulting in two television appearances. We also posted adoption event fliers to social media and on digital displays of county websites and lobby televisions featuring a rotation of adoptable dogs. We had a limited budget we wanted to use for radio, print, out of home and digital advertising – but given constraints we needed to be as cost-efficient as possible. We implemented a new strategy using shelter data to help target paid ads to customers most likely to adopt, and stretched our limited budget to have the most impact.

Innovation: We reviewed adoption data to identify the top communities where previous shelter adopters were from, and then we prioritized these communities in our advertising which included:

- postcard mailers for nearly 30,000 residents of the top two highest-adopting communities,
- Digital billboards on several busy highways in Colfax, Rocklin and Roseville at no cost through a unique partnership with our city jurisdictions, who operate billboards;
- Geotargeted Spotify radio advertisement (more precise audience and lower cost of entry compared to traditional radio) and geotargeted social media ads, and
- Print advertisements in three key hyperlocal publications in Roseville, Lincoln and Auburn.

Adoptable pet images rotated on these platforms throughout the month.

Results: The month-long Summer Celebration Pet Adoption Event was very successful, resulting in 55 dog adoptions, 163 cat adoptions, 56 pets returned to their owners, and 12 pets sent to rescue groups during the promotion (100 more pets or 54% higher than the previous month). Since this event, we have not had to house a dog in a crate at the shelter and currently average between 8 – 16 open dog kennels on any given day. Overall, we reduced the shelter population of animals by 24%. Reducing the number of animals, and more specifically dogs, in our care through this event allowed for all dogs to be moved into kennels. The volume of people visiting the shelter has increased since the event and adoptions have remained busy throughout the summer. Those who adopted pets during this promotion were asked to complete a survey, and many reported learning about our shelter through our targeted outreach with 21 hearing our radio/Spotify advertisement, 27 visiting our website, 49 seeing our social media advertisements, 26 seeing our digital billboards, 18 seeing us on the local news and 33 receiving a postcard advertisement.

Replicability: Shelters nationwide face unprecedented overcrowding. While discounted adoptions are a common and effective animal shelter marketing strategy, utilizing our data-driven and targeted advertising approach could help other jurisdictions take these promotions to the next level, extending their reach and impact even on limited budgets.

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Additional Materials: Please [follow this link](#) to see related data samples, advertisements, photos, social media posts and fliers.