



Mixed and Fixed: Not Pathetic, Just Pre-Owned!

A shelter in Georgia reframes the notion of pets with papers

A mutt by any other name is not the same, at least not when he's trying to make a strong first impression on potential adopters.

That's what Helen Abercrombie discovered when she began assigning creative monikers to the mixed breeds entering her facility at Union County Animal Care and Control in Blairsville, Georgia.

It all started a few years ago when Abercrombie was inspired by a speaker at the No More Homeless Pets conference. Feeling burned out and discouraged by her job as the sole officer in Union County, Abercrombie listened intently as Mike Arms, executive director of the Helen Woodward Animal Center in California, described the common practice of begging people to take shelter animals by portraying them as sad, needy, rejected, and generally pathetic.

"It really got me thinking," says Abercrombie, who has AKC-registered foxhounds and has long wished the kennel club would take a more active pro-animal welfare stance by aggressively discouraging breeding. Though she enjoys showing dogs, she is unhappy with the rule that they must remain unsterilized. People tend to regard mixed and fixed dogs as less valuable, she says—in part because of the AKC's glorification of intact, "registered" purebreds. Abercrombie wanted to change society's anti-mutt bias by changing the way shelter animals are typically presented

to the public: hard-luck cases you have to pity to adopt.

To do so, she took a page from the AKC's own playbook: She placed ads in the local paper letting the public know they could get "APPC-registered" animals—strange breeds like the "Catdal" and the "Canardlytel"—at the local shelter. Descriptions of animals on Petfinder.com and at adoption events turned into full-fledged autobiographies of the romance novel variety: "My mother was a Lab and thinks my father was a shar-pei, but she's not sure because she had an affair ..."

The ads set off a barrage of calls to the shelter and the local newspaper. Callers whose curiosity had been piqued soon learned that "APPC" stood for American Pre-Owned Pet Club, "Catdal" referred to an Aussie cattle dog/dalmatian cross, and a "Canardlytel" was a "purebred American mix" whose lineage you "can hardly tell."

Abercrombie had a great time with the promotion, using the AKC model to prepare papers for shelter animals. "For the space where you have 'whelping date,' we'd put, 'We Think It Was,'" she says. "For the name of the breeder, we had 'Tracy Letemrunloose' and 'Spaynoway Mae.'" Sires' and dams' names included "Whosyourdaddy" and "Sugarpiehoneibun"; owners were sometimes listed as "Willie Beyours."

"The more creative you are in marketing your dogs and giving them some worth—saying, 'Hey, these dogs are worthwhile, they are registered, they are certified'—even if it is corny, people stop and look," says Abercrombie.

Abercrombie came up with new names for the odd mixes and played off the AKC list of standards by including strict requirements that animals must be adopted through a shelter or rescued by an individual and that they must be sterilized. "APPC

does not discriminate regarding breed, color, or gender," wrote Abercrombie, "but we do actively discriminate against backyard breeders and puppy mills." In the space where the AKC would write, "Offspring of this animal ineligible for registration," Abercrombie wrote instead, "Offspring of this animal won't be happening."

Cats got in on the act and were characterized as the doggedly domineering creatures they can be. Certificates detailing felines' successful passage of "cat grooming school," for instance, clearly relayed who's boss through an accompanying illustration of a cat grooming a dog.

Not only did the shelter end up placing a lot of animals with curious callers, but the papers were a hit at the agency's regular adoption events. "We take animals to a local flea market, and we'd have them in their crates with their papers on display on top, and people would come along and burst out laughing," says Abercrombie. "We even gave them obedience certificates that showed they were 'guaranteed to make their masters jump through hoops.'"

Other signs attached to kennels during the promotion invited people to donate change in a way they couldn't ignore: "Give us a dime, it will buy us more time. Give us a buck, we'll have much better luck. Give us more if you can; if you can't we'll understand." As much as \$60 a day came in as a result.

While adoptions and shelter finances got a boost from the funny and surprising marketing methods, Abercrombie got a burst of energy to match.

"Sometimes in this job you get so down and out," she says. "This was a lot of work, but it made it fun—because you can see your work paying off and see people enjoying what you've done." —Carrie Allan