



## A Big New Voice for Shelter Animals

The Ad Council partners with The HSUS and Maddie's Fund in an unprecedented national campaign to spotlight shelter adoption

BY JIM BAKER



DAN BRANDENBURG/ISTOCKPHOTO.COM

**T**he organization behind such iconic public service announcements (PSAs) as “Only You Can Prevent Forest Fires,” “A Mind is a Terrible Thing to Waste,” and “Friends Don’t Let Friends Drive Drunk” is poised to launch a three-year, \$80-120 million effort to change the way Americans view shelter pets and boost adoption rates of homeless cats and dogs across the country.

Those well-known slogans are only a few from past campaigns produced by the Ad Council, the nonprofit that, since 1942, has worked with ad agencies to develop public service messaging and provide the resulting ads to media outlets. Its previous work has included some of the nation’s best-known campaigns, stretching back to World War II’s “Loose Lips Sink Ships” and the Rosie the Riveter “We Can Do It” ads.

The new campaign, due to roll out in mid-2009, marks the first time the organization has focused a nationwide campaign on an animal welfare issue.

It’s also the first time an organization with the influence, prestige, and financial backing of the Ad Council has targeted the pet overpopulation crisis—and it’s partnering with The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) and Maddie’s Fund on the campaign. Advertising agency Draftfcb Chicago—which counts among its clients such business heavyweights as Boeing, Starbucks, and Hilton Hotels—is producing the creative ideas and strategies. Imagery and wording for the campaign were still taking shape at press time.

Leaders in the animal welfare movement say there’s never been anything like the massive campaign that will reach out using the Internet, TV, radio, print,

and outdoor advertising to persuade Americans who are looking for a pet to make animal shelters and rescue groups their first choice. The campaign has a target of roughly 33,000 media outlets.

“This is the biggest deal in my 35-year career in the field, regarding a national push with an educational component to promote adoptions,” says John Snyder, HSUS vice president for the companion animals section. “The animal welfare movement—The HSUS included—could not afford on our own what we’re going to get [from the Ad Council]. This is an estimated \$80-120 million worth of advertising on this one, focused topic that should benefit all shelters, rescue groups, and anybody trying to place a homeless animal into a permanent home.”

Richard Avanzino, president of Maddie’s Fund, agrees with Snyder on the

campaign's significance. "I think it's going to make a sea-change difference in the [humane] movement. It's going to save the lives of millions of dogs and cats who might otherwise have a sad outcome in their shelter experience. It's going to change our movement from one of caring for animals who are hoping to find a home to guaranteeing that our best friends on four legs will have a home to go to," he says.

### Setting Ambitious Goals

The scope of the task is daunting. The HSUS estimates that 6 to 8 million pets enter shelters each year; around 3 million are euthanized.

The upcoming campaign has three goals designed to change those numbers: persuade people that shelter adoption is the preferred way to acquire a pet; shatter the stereotypes of shelter animals as unhealthy and poorly behaved; and significantly increase the rate of shelter adoptions.

Kathy Crosby, senior vice president and group campaign director for the Ad Council, frames it in simple terms. "Ultimately, we want to double the adoption rate from around 4 million a year to 8 million. We don't want *any* of the millions of eminently lovable and adoptable pets to be euthanized," she says.

Howard Draft, chairman and CEO of Draftfcb, came up with the idea in the summer of 2008 to have the Ad Council—where he serves on the board of directors—create a campaign focused on shelter pets and pet adoption. He also helped initiate the new partnership among the Ad Council, The HSUS, and Maddie's Fund.

"I'm an animal lover, no doubt about it. That's why our Chicago agency began to work with [local] no-kill shelters such as PAWS to execute campaigns on a local level. But being on the board of the Ad Council, I saw a wonderful opportunity to educate a national audience on this important issue," Draft says. "The fact that the Ad Council shared my enthusiasm and enlisted The Humane Society and Maddie's Fund as partners will help millions of people see pet adoption in

a brand-new light—and that means a whole lot of happy dogs and cats."

### Smashing Stereotypes

The campaign will face cultural obstacles along the way. Draftfcb conducted extensive research on the most prevalent concerns, barriers, and problems in society that discourage people from adopting shelter pets. They boil down, the agency found, to one word: stereotypes.

Public perception of shelter pets is clouded by fear and uncertainty, and the campaign will have to challenge that in order to change people's behavior.

Draftfcb has identified three main barriers to shelter adoption:

- Potential pet parents focus on a pet's assumed rough past rather than on a positive future
- People tend to think of the crisis of homeless dogs and cats as a "pet problem" rather than a "people problem"
- People's experiences at shelters, which can turn an ideally happy journey into a "prison visit"

The campaign will stress a simple message: There's nothing wrong with shelter pets. And it will try to sever the root of negative stereotypes with facts: A quarter of pets in shelters are purebred; 6 to 8 million pets brought into shelters yearly are healthy/treatable; many animals are brought to shelters for issues not relating to their behavior (death of an owner, lack of time, allergies, divorce, bankruptcy); and most shelter pets come vaccinated, spayed/neutered and, in many shelters, already microchipped.

But the sad fact is that there's a huge gap between the sympathy many people report feeling for the plight of homeless pets and the number of people who act on those feelings. In initial surveys, 67 percent of people told Draftfcb researchers that their next pet would be an adopted pet. Yet only 29 percent of them went on to fulfill that pledge. Draftfcb's staff realized that they would have to go beyond creating PSA campaigns about animal shelters that simply made viewers cry.

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They would need to devise a campaign that went beyond stirring empathy and raising awareness—one that would “turn tears into action,” in the words of one Draftfcb presentation.

### Activating ‘Brand Advocates’

The campaign’s primary target is a category of people dubbed “Swing Voters.” These are the people who haven’t made up their minds about shelter adoption yet. They believe it’s an acceptable option, but they lack confidence in it. According to Draftfcb research, there are 41 million swing voters still on the fence, and 17 million of those households plan to get a pet in the coming year.

The encouraging news is that there are already 14 million Americans who have chosen adoption, and they’re committed to the concept. They adopted their last pet, and they plan to adopt their next one. So there are about 14 million people—“brand advocates,” in marketing lingo—already in the adoption camp.

The campaign will use adoption’s brand advocates by taking advantage of the changing ways that people communicate today, seeking to engage the 36 million users of the social networking site Facebook by inviting them to make shelter adoption their “pet project.” It will

use online video at YouTube to spread the message. And it will feature a branded website tool that will use information about people’s lifestyles to suggest pets from the existing Petfinder database.

The overarching goal of these steps is to build a vibrant, growing community of advocates, united around one issue—a self-sustaining movement. This is a strategy the Ad Council’s employing across an increasing number of its PSA campaigns. Crosby has high hopes for what it will accomplish for the shelter adoption campaign. “I think what we’re going to be doing on the Web will be wildly successful,” she says.

### Seizing the Moment

But all the Digital Age creativity won’t mean a thing without the participation of those in the animal protection field. “Sheltering professionals will have a huge role in this. They are the front line, the first faces that people will see as they start the journey toward adoption. Our goal is that they will be energized by this campaign, that they will have a renewed sense of hope that their animals will find permanent, loving homes, ending the need for euthanasia,” Crosby says.

The key to success will be readiness, experts say; shelters need to prepare to take advantage of what Avanzino calls a

“once-in-a-lifetime” situation. “This means understanding what is about to happen, understanding that we are on the brink of a phenomenal experience that will give us the opportunity to end the killing and give the animals what we all want for them: a loving home,” he says.

Snyder and Avanzino suggest several ways for local animal advocates to get involved. Encourage volunteers and supporters to contact local media outlets, and request that they run the PSAs. Prepare your shelter to handle increased traffic—make it as clean and presentable as possible. Boost your customer service—greet visitors, welcome them, and invite them to learn about shelters and shelter pets. Train for the experience by attending events like The HSUS’s Animal Care Expo to make your shelter the best it can be.

Snyder adds that shelters should review their adoption policies, making sure they’re not restrictive to the point of being counterproductive. “The public—in an adoption interview—should be helped to reach the level they need to, not pushed down and told, ‘You’re not good enough.’ We want to have realistic adoption criteria,” he says.

The animal protection movement—shelters, rescue groups, advocacy organizations at local, state, and national levels—needs to unify to realize the benefits that are at hand and “seize the moment,” according to Avanzino.

“All of this comes down to collaboration,” he says. “No one organization or individual can do it alone. We can help each other so this is not just a case of animals being helped in isolated communities, but rather is nationwide.”

Avanzino points out that the campaign has a great advantage from the start—it will launch on solid footing.

“The wonderful thing the Ad Council found out in doing their research is that the American people are already with us,” he says. “They already feel that cats and dogs are cherished beings, family members who walk on four feet. They want to help, but they haven’t been motivated to put into action their philosophic agreement with our cause. This campaign will provide them with the motivation to come to our shelters. It’s up to us.” AS

## Prepare for the Thundering Hordes!

**With a national adoption campaign in the works, it’s more important than ever for shelters ensure front-line staff deliver top-notch client service. It would be a sad story indeed if thousands head to shelters to adopt—only to be turned off by the absence of a welcoming smile or inflexible adoption criteria.**

**If you suspect your staff’s skills could use a little honing before—we hope—droves of people arrive at your facility clamoring to adopt your animals, check out the recent workbook *Animal Friendly—Customer Smart: People Skills for Animal Shelters*.**

**Written by Jan Elster, a consultant with 25 years of experience working with shelters, the book provides fun and challenging exercises, role-playing games, and tips on increasing your skills at “verbal aikido.” The martial art of aikido, Elster writes, “has little to do with high kicks, grunts, or harsh, rapid movements we see in the Hollywood version of martial arts. The goal of aikido is the give the practitioner moves to gently defend herself while also protecting her attacker from injury.”**

**It’s a skill that anyone dealing with the public needs, and will need even more should the Ad Council’s campaign have the desired results. The workbooks are \$10 (plus shipping and handling) and can be ordered online at [shelterskills.com](http://shelterskills.com).**

