

Sweating the Small Stuff

Eight little improvements any shelter can make

BY CARRIE ALLAN



For both aesthetic and safety reasons, legible, professional-looking signs—much unlike this one, which conveys the idea of sickness a little too well—are a must at any shelter.

Some days, working in an animal shelter seems overwhelming. You think about everything that would need to happen to stop the flow of animals into the shelter and increase the number finding homes. You look at your ancient building, its peeling paint and cracked floors. You look at the animals sleeping or stretching or just standing hopefully in their cages, and think about how there never seems to be enough time.

Everyone who's worked at a shelter has been in that frame of mind, and it can be hard to escape. But one thing that can help is taking a day or two to make a dent in some areas that can benefit hugely from a short, focused burst of attention.

One of the best projects of The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) is the Animal Shelter Consultation (ASC) program, which sends teams of sheltering professionals into organizations and agen-

cies across the country to examine which pieces of their operations are working well and which could use a fresh approach. ASC teams examine the workings of a shelter, top to bottom, checking on everything from HR procedures to HVAC systems.

But many shelters' problems are rooted in the local public's perceptions about their work. Some of these perceptions take time and restructuring to address, but ASC director Carolyn Machowski says she's often surprised at the number of basic problems that could be fixed with an hour or two of elbow grease.

"We went to one shelter that had their trash cans out at the public entry, and they hadn't been emptied in forever," she says. "When you walked up the path, you had to swat flies away from your face. Our team were all like, 'They knew we were coming today, right?'"

You may not be expecting an evaluation team any time soon, but from the moment they arrive in your parking lot,



Staff members may look right past their shelter's peeling paint, dirty walls, and general unsightliness, but public opinion may not be so forgiving. A fresh coat or some artwork from local schools will add appeal.

your visitors are constantly evaluating you. And you'll make a better impression by addressing some of these basics.

You don't have to do them all at once, but you might try a team-building activity: Pick your least busy day of the week, gather your co-workers, and work together to get just one of these things done. Do another the following week. If you get several staff involved, you can even cap off the day with a mini-party or happy hour to celebrate. Cheer for what you've gotten done that day, and what you'll accomplish over the 365 to come.

Take Out the Papers and the Trash

Before an adopter ever comes into your building, she has to park somewhere. What's that experience going to be like for her?

Check it out: Are there cigarette butts or other pieces of litter scattered through the parking lot? Get a broom and sweep 'em up.



Providing animals with enrichment and comfort items, such as toys and blankets, is a great way to lower their stress and bring out their most adoptable side.

What about external trash cans, Dumpsters, and smoking stations? Can they be seen, or worse, smelled? If they can be, they're giving a bad impression before a visitor ever arrives.

Ask the shelter managers: Would it be possible to move the Dumpster around to the back of the building so it's not such an eye (and nose) sore? And maybe staff could take their cigarette breaks out back rather than at the front entrance of the building; visitors shouldn't have to walk through a cloud of smoke to get to the cat room!

Empty the trash cans, and establish a system to ensure they continue to be emptied on a regular basis. The definition of "a regular basis" may vary from one organization to the next, but there's one constant: They need to be emptied before they overflow or become an offense to the nose. And put a recycling bin out next to the trash can—it'll show the public you care about the world outside as much as the animals inside.

Bring Me ... A Shrubbery!

What kind of landscaping is around your shelter? Does the lawn need mowing? Do the hedges need trimming?

The Whatcom Humane Society in Bellingham, Wash., has a relationship with a local garden club. Even in the smallest towns, there's often a local

gardening group that will be happy to adopt the animal shelter and spend time sprucing up the lawns, watering the flowers and pruning the flower beds, and providing some leafy, flowery things for the indoor areas, says Penny Cistaro, Whatcom's executive director and a regular consultant for The HSUS ASC program.

Even if your building doesn't have a lawn, it must have a front door! Can you add some natural touches to make the entryway more inviting? If the budget doesn't allow for it, try starting a little change collection drive in the break room to raise some cash for minor landscaping touches; you can call it the shelter's "hedge fund."

Once you've got a little cash in hand, a quick trip to the garden store can yield some big pots for the walkway and some pansies to plant in them. You could also get some potted or hanging houseplants for the lobby—a plant can brighten up a sterile, industrial space in amazing ways.

Even if you don't have so much as a flower pot, there may be weeds growing up against the building. Pull them up—they give an impression of a sloppy, run-down facility.

Scrub-A-Dub-Dub

Every good shelter maintains a regular cleaning schedule for its animal hous-

ing areas, but what about the parts of the building more often occupied by people?

When your lobby is grubby and foot-printed, when a puddle of pee from the latest canine arrival sits for an hour before anyone does anything about it, that tells visitors bad things about your facility. Walls may not talk, but when they're grubby and grimy and greasy, they speak volumes.

Katherine McGowan, a regular ASC consultant and director of development at the Asheville Humane Society in North Carolina, recommends a few quick fixes. First of all, make sure to mop your lobby floors regularly—several times a day, if possible.

And silence those walls: Take a bucket, fill it halfway with hot water, and mix in a half cup of dishwashing liquid. Scrub the walls of the lobby and other high-traffic areas with a mop, starting from about midway up and moving down toward the floor. Then rinse with lukewarm water. "This will degrease the walls, making the lobby appear more attractive, smell better and eliminate any surface bacteria," McGowan says.

Animals poop. Animals pee. That's a fact of life, one that you'd think that members of the public would understand; they're animals themselves, after all. But they don't always understand why there's poop on the floors of the kennels. You know why: Before most of your visitors woke up this morning, you had already completed your first rounds of cleaning and feeding for the day, and the animals have had more digestion time since then! But to the public, poop seems like a sign of a dirty place—so if it's feasible for your organization, it's a good idea to give the cages another quick scoop before you open your doors to visitors.

Deck the Walls

"Thou shall paint the walls of thy animal shelters a shade of green close to the color of pond scum or mouthwash. The color of the paint shall make thy temples throb. Furthermore, this paint shall be allowed to crack and peel away until it looks like the surface of a desert. Thou shalt not make any graven images to hang upon

the walls of the shelter. Thou shalt not, under any circumstances, make the place look cheerful.”

Actually, this policy governing the decorations of animal shelters was never officially established! But from what various ASC consultants have seen over time, you’d think the rule had been brought down by Moses with the rest of the Ten Commandments.

“Too many places are still painted Institutional Green,” says Jan Chipperfield, D.V.M., of the Humane Society of Missouri. “Put up some posters. We have school kids make ours in our outreach programs.”

You can check your shelter’s charter, but our guess is there’s probably no rule dictating it has to be puke-green inside. So pick a day when your facility is closed to the public, and give the bedraggled areas a fresh coat of paint. Preferably a shade that’s not gray, but not so blindingly bright it will give anyone a headache, either—soft, warm yellows are a good option.

Touch base with the art teacher at a local elementary school to see if he can get a couple of his classes to do bright, cheerful paintings of animals to donate to your organization. Display them with pride in a high-traffic area. Or take the DIY approach: Walk through the shelter on a busy day and take pictures of the staff and the animals, then create a bulletin board to display them in the main lobby. It’ll make your building feel more like a community space—one that people will want to spend time in.

Become a Clutter-Buster

One problem that the ASC teams see again and again is buildings full of clutter: storage rooms full of junk that doesn’t look like it’s been used in years, broken equipment that no one’s thrown out because everyone thinks it’s someone else’s job, and lobbies and hallways full of kind-hearted clutter—kibble and towels and newspapers donated by the public.

If that sounds familiar, it’s time for a clutter-busting day. Go room to room—straighten up the office, the lobby, the volunteer room, and any other space that looks like Tornado Alley. Store donated

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Clutter is not only an eyesore but a quick way to lose or misplace important items. Throw out what you don't need or seldom use, and organize and label things you do.



Landscaping is the first thing adopters will see when coming to your shelter, and while your flowerbeds and hedges don't need to look like Martha Stewart's, it's a good idea to keep on top of weeding. Litter should be cleaned up and garbage cans moved out of sight.

crates in a secure area out of the public's view. Organize your shelves of books on pet care and training.

"When customers visit the shelter, a cluttered appearance lessens the professional credibility of the organization," says McGowan. "Put a system in place for logging inventory of food and donations. Implement a facility maintenance protocol and policy. Have donated items stored immediately, maintain literature racks, keep things off of the floor that don't belong there, and write in everyone's job description [that they should] pick up garbage and debris when they come across it."

Machowski adds that she sees a lot of broken and obsolete equipment in shelters, those gadgets that everyone's been meaning to fix, but somehow hasn't gotten around to. You know the wardrobe rule—if you don't wear it within a year, get rid of it? The same thing applies to old, broken-down equipment that's doing nothing but taking up space. Throw it out or recycle it, Machowski advises.

Signs of Improvement

The folks who come into the shelter for the first time don't know where everything is. You can make their visit a lot easier and less intimidating by creating cheerful, user-friendly signage—signage that doesn't look like last week's shopping list.

Take your team through your shelter and pull down any old, faded, water-stained, or hand-scrawled signs. Then make room for the new. It's great if

someone at the shelter has an artistic bent and can produce some attractive, professional-looking signage for the facility. But even if you don't have a resident Rembrandt, making basic, clean signs—pointing out the way to the adoptable cats, for example, or the way to the public restroom—is easier than it's ever been. Use your computer's word processing program to create simple, boldface messages and print them out. Get them laminated, or slide them into plastic page protectors and hang them up in strategic areas of the shelter.

Signs aren't just for your interior walls, either; it's a good idea to hang a sturdy sign with after-hours emergency contact information on the front door of your building, and make sure that your after-hours voicemail message provides that information, too.

For tips on creating cage cards that will be appealing and understandable to potential adopters, check out animalsheltering.org/cagecards-101.

The Comforts of Home

Cages and kennels will never be the ideal place for cats and dogs. While many shelters are moving toward group housing, some facilities are—at least temporarily—stuck with the traditional models: small cat cages, cramped dog runs. But by providing some toys and blankets to your critters, you can make your shelter seem more like a pet hotel, one that cares enough to pamper pets with little luxuries.

For animals whose living spaces don't provide much space, it's especially important to invest staff time in making sure these cooped-up critters get some comfort. Take a group of friendly dogs for a walk together—preferably in a public place, where people can see their snazzy "Adopt me" jackets. Spend 15 minutes in a meet-and-greet room, cuddling one of those lap cats. Give a dirty dog a bath out in the exercise yard.

Beyond spending time with the animals, your team can give them some comfort items that can make their hours pass more quickly. Kongs stuffed with cheese or peanut butter can occupy a kenneled dog for hours. Old towels can amuse the obsessive shredders, and ice cubes with treats frozen in the center are a delight they'll have to play with to enjoy.

Cats enjoy toys, too—stuffed mousies, plastic balls filled with fishy treats, and springy things that encourage them to bat and pounce are all good options. But cats are more easily stressed than most dogs, so one of the best comfort items you can provide a cat is a box to hide in. Check with a local shoe store; many customers would likely be happy to leave the shoebox behind if they knew it was going to comfort a kitty.

Grin and Bear it

Some days there's more to bear than to grin about, but whatever's going on in your day, when you interact with the public, you've got to remember to flash

those canines—and not in a snarl! It may help to start each day by having a quick team meeting, and forcing everyone at the meeting to show off their pearly-whites. Yes, it’s cheesy—but at the very least, it’ll amuse everyone and start the day on a brighter note.

A smile and a friendly greeting can be the determining difference between a client who leaves the shelter annoyed and disgruntled, and one who leaves pleased and impressed. Every time the ASC team visits a shelter, it requests input from the public about the organization it’s assessing. And more than any other complaint, citizens remember—and report—shoddy treatment.

“I went to the shelter to adopt, and they were so unfriendly to me.”

“No one even said hello to me when I walked into the lobby.”

“I brought in a donation of all our old sheets and towels, and the guy at the front desk just took the box and didn’t even say thank you.”

Shelter work can be depressing, but if shelter staff seem frustrated and annoyed when they speak to clients, those clients will be less likely to come back. And if they don’t come back, the days will get even more depressing. It pays to think of everyone who comes through the door as a potential ally, donor, or adopter.

Chipperfield suggests having a volunteer at the door to greet everyone who comes in—a strategy that can be even more effective if the greeter is accompanied by a friendly shelter animal. It’s a personal touch that immediately gives visitors a positive impression.

Organizations that don’t have enough people to have a constant greeter must make sure that the folks manning the front desk are cheerful and friendly. Put your extroverts out front, train them well, and watch them turn on the charm.

It’ll get easier to smile if you remember to celebrate the victories, small and large. Celebrate the adoptions: Put pictures of adopted animals up in the lobby and announce them over the PA system if you have one. It’ll make you a stronger team, and make your shelter a happier place. AS

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