

FREE, SCRATCH &  
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FREE SCRATCH &  
DENT, BUY ONE  
GET ONE FREE

To read more about strategies shelters use to promote adoption, read "The Price Is Right?" in the July-August 2007 issue of Animal Sheltering.



# CAT COUPONS AND DOG DISCOUNTS

Shelters encourage adoption with special offers

BY KATINA ANTONIADES

If you're active in the animal welfare field, it's likely the phrase "free to a good home" raises the hair on the back of your neck. You may have even protested its use in your local newspaper—on the basis that it devalues animal lives and invites exploitation from those who might collect these "freebie" pets and then sell them to researchers.

But what would you say if you saw a shelter promoting its animals in the same way?

The Humane Society of Berks County in Reading, Pa., regularly borrows a page from the classifieds through its "Free to a Great Home" program, which allows area residents to adopt cats 11 years and older and dogs 8 years and older at no charge.

No stranger to risk-taking, Karel Minor, the shelter's executive director, has been bucking conventional wisdom since he took the helm in 2004. Among his notable shifts in policy are reversals of prohibitions against adopting out black cats at Halloween and pets at Christmastime. Through the fee-waiving program, Minor hopes to boost adoptions by 5 to 10 percent and reduce the euthanasia rate. During an earlier, temporary incarnation of the free adoption special, the shelter avoided euthanizing at least 200 cats for space.

"If we had a \$20 million endowment and we could literally offer every single animal for free, I would do it tomorrow," says Minor, whose shelter won the 2006 Best Industry Practice for Adoption Programs Award from American Humane. "My personal opinion is if we actually are going to say that we're trying to save these animals, it is our job to do it any way we can that is effective and safe. And free is an incredibly effective way to do it. If you're screening correctly, it makes sense."



LOUDOUN COUNTY ANIMAL CARE AND CONTROL

During its “Purr-fect Pairs” promotion, Loudoun County Animal Care and Control waived the fee for one cat when adopters took home a pair.

Minor recognizes the concept is controversial, but he says the free adoptions have been just as successful—and are approved just as often—as fee-based ones. To track outcomes, staff members keep detailed records on animals after they’ve gone home. Among the findings: no one has returned a free animal for behavior issues. Two animals were returned during the first year of the program after being found (post-adoption) to have serious heart conditions, says Minor. “One client was told basically it’d be an incredibly expensive fix,” he says, “and another was told that basically it was something that was going to kill this animal, and [the adopters] said they didn’t want to go through that.”

Waiving fees for senior animals, Minor says, isn’t any different from raising them for puppies and kittens—a common trend among shelters. “We know that people will pay [a higher fee], because if you want a kitten, you’re going to get a kitten,” says Minor. “Therefore, if you’re going to charge a normal amount for an older dog, [for] a really old dog that has less of a chance, you should charge obviously less—and the ideal ‘less’ would be free.”

Even if someone is not approved for an animal up for “free” adoption, he may be deemed a good fit for a kitten or a hamster. “Most people are good people,” says Minor. “Most people want to do well for the animals that they’re interested in adopting, and most people can be steered to the right place. In reality, we’ve seen no difference in the quality of adopters, the intent of adopters.”

Minor challenges the idea that animals are valued more when they’re more expensive to adopt. If that were true, he says, “we wouldn’t have all these pure-bred animals in shelters.”

While free adoptions help Berks County promote pets of a certain age, they also help the long-term residents of the Lycoming County SPCA in Williamsport, Pa. By waiving adoption fees for animals who’ve been at the shelter longer than 90 days, the SPCA encourages people to check out the less popular animals. Of the 90 or so dogs taken home to new families every month, about three are adopted through the special offer. (Cats are less likely to be adopted through the program because they can’t stay as long without becoming ill.)

The downside of using lengthy stays as selling points is that people may assume there is something wrong with an animal repeatedly passed over by other adopters, says Executive Director Victoria Stryker. Employees address the issue by matching dogs' characteristics to certain types of adopters, turning a potential "flaw" into an attribute that creates a perfect match. If a certain dog needs to learn some manners, staff tell potential adopters that she needs a special handler, one willing to spend some time training her, for example.

SPCA staff don't screen more intensively for free adoptions than they do for fee-based ones, but pit bulls are excluded from the promotion. "They're such a difficult breed to place, and we're really, really selective on where we put pit bulls," says Stryker.

Because the free adoptions initially attracted some people who only wanted a bargain and seemed to care little about the animals, Stryker stopped promoting the offer outside the shelter. A sign inviting people to ask about free adoptions hangs inside the building, reaching only people who've already taken the first step toward adopting.

Offering free adoptions through known supporters is another way to screen those who respond. The Winnipeg Humane Society in Manitoba, Canada, once ran a successful promotion by e-mailing all volunteers and donors a coupon for a free adult cat adoption and inviting them to pass it along to friends and family members.

Reducing adoption fees to zero may put a dent in a shelter's cash flow, but at places like Berks County, higher fees for puppies and kittens may compensate for the loss; the shelter handles about three times as many young animals as older ones. "So we really do think that what we're going to see is a wash over previous years," says Minor. "But it'll be a wash that actually increases the number of animals that are adopted, and that's a good thing."

### **Bargain Basement Prices**

Some shelters retain the allure of "free" offers while still bringing in revenue. Loudoun County Animal Care and Control in Waterford, Va., offered a adopt-one-get-one-free special for cats in August 2006. Called "Purr-fect Pairs," the promotion proved to be one of the agency's most successful. By throwing weekly parties for the public and decorating the shelter with names of famous pairs such as Anthony and Cleopatra, employees encouraged adopters to bring home kitten siblings (also given "pair names" by the shelter) or to return later with a voucher to adopt a second cat. Year-round promotions include "The Gray Whiskers Club," which reduces by half the fees for pets 7 years and older.

At the Winnipeg Humane Society, people who take home one adult kitty can adopt a second one

Adopters were treated to more freebies during Loudoun County's 40-hour adopt-a-thon in June. The special adoption weekend—dubbed "Homeward Bound 2007: Adopt Around the Clock"—commemorated the 40th anniversary of the shelter. The agency offered plenty of fun to keep everyone awake through the wee hours of the morning: espresso drinks and ice cream, music, an outdoor movie, and a scavenger hunt for kids.

at no charge within 30 days. Prices for adult cats who've been in the shelter for two months drop by 50 percent; dog adoption fees decrease by half after a three-month stay. The shelter also charges less for a kitten-and-mama-cat pair than for the adoption of a kitten alone.

Free merchandise is sometimes even more beneficial in promoting adoptions; it provides a financial incentive but avoids placing different values on different animals. To help curb the kitty overload last fall, Laura Danis, Loudoun County's public and community relations coordinator, developed "Happy Catsgiving." From Nov. 11 to 30, cat adopters received a "Kitty Care Kit" that included a litter box, scoop, bowls, and toys. They also got a chance to win a donated cat condo; made of non-disinfectable materials, it was inappropriate for shelter use but perfect for the home environment.

Fliers announcing the promotion thanked adopters and included a "Why We're Thankful for Cats" list with items like this: "They are so easily amused—who else can truly appreciate the mystery of a paper bag?"

Through media appearances, online announcements, postcards to former cat adopters, and mailings to veterinarians, libraries, and community centers, Danis spread the word and increased cat adoptions by 122 percent—from 22 cats during the same period the previous year to 49 cats during the Catsgiving promotion.

## Re-tail Strategies: Advice from an Expert

You're at the store, checking out that new CD your friend said you'd love. You decide to buy it, so you bring it to the cash register, pay for it, and go home. No one asks you to fill out an application, no one calls your landlord to see if he approves, and it's a good bet that the cashier won't wonder if you'll properly care for your new disc.

Although the experiences of buying an inanimate object and adopting a pet are vastly different, it's common—and often successful—practice for animal shelters to borrow strategies from the retail world when promoting their animals. But while they wait for more researchers to delve into this subject, animal welfare organizations often have to resort to trial and error when assessing the effectiveness of those strategies.

To learn how retail marketing principles might be applied to shelter adoption, *Animal Sheltering* writer Katina Antoniadis spoke with Jie Zhang, an assistant professor of marketing at the Robert H. Smith School of Business at the University of Maryland. The following tips are gleaned from her expertise, but of course, your experiences may vary depending on your community, your resources, and your adoption process.

**Offer a tangible incentive.** Zhang suggests providing discounted or free goods and services such as pet care products or veterinary care. "Those are very good incentives to really help the potential adopters realize that they're getting help with a long-term commitment to their pet," she says. These promotions don't carry the stigma that some people in the field attribute to adoption fee discounts. "[Adopters] don't feel like, 'Oh, I'm getting a lesser cat' or 'Something's wrong with my dog,'" she says, "but rather, 'They're rewarding my good will, my heart. This is a good thing I'm doing, and therefore, they're giving me some reward.'"

**Give your promotions a deadline.** Maybe it's Adopt-a-Dog Month and you reduce adoption fees accordingly. Maybe you offer a Valentine's Day adoption special on cats. Giving potential adopters a deadline can make a difference by increasing the sense of urgency, Zhang says. "You want to give people a sense of 'Well, this is only temporary; this is a good deal,' instead of just 'something I can take advantage of whenever I feel like,'" she says. People react more dramatically to a change in price that's temporary than

to the same amount of change in a product's regular price, she says.

**Use proven marketing techniques.** Remember the quirks of consumer perceptions. Even though the savings are equal, people tend to respond more to "buy 1, get 1 free" offers (in this context, paying one adoption fee but taking home two animals) than to "50 percent off" specials, says Zhang. And although most of us are aware of the strategy behind writing \$19.99 on a price tag instead of \$20, we often fall for the gimmick anyway. Knocking a penny or dollar off the total fee works better than offering 5 or 10 percent off, says Zhang, who recommends explaining to the public that adoption revenue funds other programs for pets.

**Be aware of the message your promotion is sending.** Adoption fee reductions may attract people who aren't ready to adopt a pet from your shelter, as some organizations have found. "One strong motivation for offering promotions is actually to entice the people who would not otherwise try the product to give it a try," says Zhang. "Here, you want to target people who are actually animal lovers." The key is to try to bring in those who can provide good homes but may never have considered an animal shelter as a source for their next pet.

**Understand the risks of frequent promotions.** In the retail world, says Zhang, companies that run promotions frequently increase sales in the short term but harm their brand equity in the long run. "People may have the perception that it's an inferior product: This is a product that only relies on promotion to sell; there must not be good quality to back it up." Running promotions repeatedly may also change customers' behavior—and not for the better. "You train people to wait on and search for deals," says Zhang.

**Check back after the adoption.** In addition to tracking the success of adoptions by the numbers, shelter staff can also ask adopters questions to determine promotions' success. Zhang recommends a survey of adopters—and the sample size "doesn't have to be huge," she says. She recommends asking adopters whether a certain promotion affected their decision to adopt (and how it did so) and whether they would have adopted the pet without it. Of course, follow-up correspondence can include more general questions, too.

**The Winnipeg Humane Society**  
**SPECIAL SPRING DEALS**



- 🐾 Adopt a Momma cat & her kitten for only \$122.15- less than the cost of a kitten alone!
- 🐾 2 for 1 Adult Cats- \$96.12 for 2!
- 🐾 Scratch & Dent\*- Cats with frostbite damage (ie. no ears, partial ears, tip of tail missing) are \$10.00 off!
- 🐾 Adult dogs in our care for 3 months or more are reduced by 50%!
- 🐾 Adult cats in our care for 2 months or more are reduced by 50%!
- 🐾 Senior (older) pets have a reduced adoption fee year-round!

Ask our adoption staff about our specials



Adopters were treated to more freebies during the agency's 40-hour adopt-a-thon in June. The special adoption weekend—dubbed "Homeward Bound 2007: Adopt Around the Clock"—commemorated the 40th anniversary of the shelter. The agency offered plenty of fun to keep everyone awake through the wee hours of the morning: espresso drinks and ice cream, music, an outdoor movie, and a scavenger hunt for kids. And staff adopted out 36 animals, a number that would normally take two weeks to achieve.

When Winnipeg's adoptions dropped during this year's harsh winter, shelter staff threw a cat luau, donning Hawaiian shirts and grass skirts while adopting out kitties older than 6 years for \$25 Canadian (about \$23 U.S.). Usually, the fee for an adult cat is \$79, with discounts on cats who have been at the shelter for two months or more and on senior cats. Incoming strays often bear the marks of the area's brutally cold winters, so the shelter also has a "Scratch and Dent Sale" that reduces adoption fees by \$10 for cats who have lost parts of tails or ears to frostbite or who just look a bit worse for wear.



"Our city has a reputation of being very bargain-centered, a very frugal clientele, so any type of discounts gets some extra attention," says Chantal Young, Winnipeg's adoption coordinator. "If it gets an animal adopted, we're willing to try anything once; that's pretty much our frame of mind here."

Though some question the application of mainstream retail strategies to the promotion of live animals,

**Happy Cats-giving!**

Adopt a cat from the Loudoun County Animal Shelter November 11-30 and receive a FREE Kitty Care Kit (litter box, scoop, bowls, & toys). Plus, you'll be entered to WIN a cool Kitty Play Center for fun with your new friend!

It's our way of saying THANKS for giving a cat a new home!

**Why We're Thankful for Cats...**

- No walking required!
- They bathe themselves.
- They are so easily amused—who else can truly appreciate the mystery of a paper bag?
- They don't make you feel guilty for taking a nap in the afternoon—in fact, they join right in.
- They show you how to appreciate that patch of sunlight on the living room floor.
- They remind us that a little attitude is OK.
- They know when you're down and how to pick you back up.
- Purring. What else do you need?

Danis doesn't believe money has much to do with the success of her marketing efforts. Loudoun County is an affluent community, and regular adoption fees are fairly low anyway, she says. Even the monetary value of the Kitty Care Kit gift is less important than the welcoming message it sends. "It makes a very positive reason to come to the shelter," says Danis. "I really think it's more deadline-driven, just the promotional [aspect and] making it top-of-mind type of thing."

And the shelter is prepared to weed out those looking for a good deal but not ready to provide a good home. Adoption staff use a matchmaking program for dogs, thoroughly counsel all applicants, avoid same-day adoptions, and send would-be adopters home with a DVD to help prepare them for their new arrival.

Winnipeg's process guards against poor adoptions as well, says Young. The return rate has remained stable, and cat adoptions are up. Although staff reserve the right to deny adoptions, they also take advantage of opportunities to educate. "Because our counseling is very strong," says Young, "we're confident that we're not placing animals into homes with people just because they're on sale or they're cheap." AS