



Let Your Mouse Do the Walking

Cats help raise funds for a Florida shelter by doing what they do best—nothing

When shelters and rescue groups want to raise money, they often turn to dog walks. If planned well, the events can bring in a lot of donations while providing some fun for local residents and their pooches. But a cat walk? It's easy to imagine the scene: cats biting their collars in irritation, batting bugs and stalking squirrels, sprawling across the grass to sunbathe, and essentially ignoring anything their humans try to get them to do. And that's assuming their owners were able to get them into cat carriers in the first place.

The SPCA of Central Florida found a solution: If you can't take the cat to the walk, take the walk to the cat. Special events manager Robin Longley came up with Meow March, a *virtual* cat walk. "It's very difficult to have a live event with cats," she says, "so we were trying to think of a way to reach out to our clients that have cats and who are very passionate supporters of the SPCA of Central Florida." Thanks to the Internet, more than 100 kitties and their people stayed home last March while raising money by "walking" from Florida to Washington. The event brought in \$14,255—including a \$1,000 donation—for cat and kitten care.

Everything from the participants' fundraising efforts to the walk itself took place



on the Web. A Meow March walker could sign up online and customize her fundraising webpage by adding a personal message and uploading a photo of her kitty. Through that page, she could send e-mails to friends and family that invited them to donate by clicking a link. When she achieved certain fundraising benchmarks, she'd receive fun, congratulatory e-mails from the SPCA that highlighted a program or service the money would support.

Appropriately enough for an online event, Longley's inspiration came from a website. RoadsideAmerica.com, whose tagline proclaims it "your online guide to offbeat tourist attractions," features can't-miss sights ranging from a 30-foot-tall concrete Hereford bull in Audubon, Iowa, to a towel once used by Frank Sinatra and now proudly displayed at a sandwich shop in Atlantic City, N.J. Longley got permission to use content from the site and

link to it in her e-mails. "They were really thrilled to work with me," she says.

Through the tourist site, walkers got to see one-of-a-kind landmarks including "Nutty Narrows," a bridge in Longview, Wash., that was created in 1963 to help squirrels safely cross a busy street. After a long and quirky journey, which included stops in eight states, the tired kitties took a virtual flight to Key West for—what else?—a virtual party.

Because the event wasn't "real," it took Longley only about a month to plan. The execution was easy, too. Longley advertised the walk in the organization's e-newsletter and on its website and sent out postcards designed free for the shelter. After the walk, Longley sent prizes like mousepads and donated toys and treats to participants who had reached certain fundraising goals.

When the results were in, the top three walkers came to the shelter for trophies and a photo session with shelter cats. Orlando resident Heather Conger took third place by raising more than \$1,000 with her cat Sam, who was adopted from a Tallahassee shelter. "When I saw the total [everyone raised], I was so excited," says Conger. "And it's so easy—you just sit at your desk. It's not even like you have to pound on doors or go take a walk or do anything."

And for a cat, what could be better than that? **AS**

Dog Park

