



# STEP 3: DEVELOP MARKETING THAT OVERCOMES BARRIERS

“To the best of our knowledge, waiving the fee for the adoption of an adult cat was developed at the Wisconsin Humane Society (WHS), often considered one of the top humane societies in the United States. The idea of a fee-waived adoption program was motivated by the knowledge that many in the community were acquiring free-roaming cats or cats from “free to good home” newspaper ads, neighbors and the like. In most cases, these cats were not spayed or neutered; new guardians did not have the tools to effectively resolve common behaviors that education during adoption could provide, increasing secondary abandonment and thus contributing to cat overpopulation. In addition, waiving the fee created an opportunity to discuss the plight of cats and encouraged adopters to select an adult cat over a kitten. The implementation of this program resulted in increased adoptions of adult cats at WHS.”

– “A Comparison of Attachment Levels of Adopters of Cats: Fee-Based Adoptions Versus Free Adoptions.”<sup>14</sup>

## Use Marketing to Get Past Barriers

Marketing is another tool to help you bust through barriers and reach a larger audience. Adorable pictures, meaningful descriptions, creative advertising and special promotions get people’s attention and help them get past worries about shelter and rescue pets.

If you need to jump start your adoption marketing, start by checking out what other adoption agencies are doing by visiting their websites and Facebook pages. Assemble a list of ideas—even big ideas that aren’t realistic for all animals should be included.

To make sure you don’t miss a step, develop a marketing action plan. The sample provided (template available at [animalsheltering.org/actionplan](http://animalsheltering.org/actionplan)) is part timeline and part checklist for your individual strategies (outreach events and agency wide specials won’t be included). Some basics should be in place early for all adoption-track animals. New strategies should kick in as time passes. This is just one example. The strategies and timeline will vary by agency, but the goal is to help every animal find a good match as soon as possible.

	<b>Code Green = Ready for adoption</b>
	Take an upbeat picture that shows off good looks and personality
	Write a profile description that is positive, creative and highlights best features
	Post pictures and profiles to national adoption websites and to your local online pages
	Set reasonable adoption rates that are competitive
	<b>Code Blue = Available for adoption more than two weeks</b>
	Identify behaviors that may be driving adopters away - Move to a foster home for behavior modification
	Relocate housing to a different location within the shelter, main lobby or off-site location
	Highlight as “Pet of the Week” through local newspaper, television and radio stations
	Take a new picture that captures personality - Upgrade with silly props and colorful backdrops
	Write a new profile description illustrating unique and special qualities - Stay positive and use humor
	Add a short video featuring play and other fun activities to online profiles
	Create a personalized cage sign by using just a few words to say something extra special
	<b>Code Orange = Available for adoption more than four weeks</b>
	Evaluate for mental health- If showing signs of deterioration, move immediately to foster
	Identify new behaviors that are driving adopters away- Move to a foster home for behavior modification
	Take a set of fresh new pictures using better backgrounds, outfits, accessories and popular themes
	Add or subtract from the profile and alter the pet’s name- Use puns, rhymes, and play off current events
	Promote socially by adding photos on Facebook, Twitter, blogs, etc. as a pet of the week
	Spotlight the pet on your website and ask your local businesses to do the same
	Find volunteers to take dogs to training classes or clicker train cats and promote as a special feature
	Bring to special events, popular parks, and other high traffic locations to maximize exposure
	<b>Code Red = Top five animals with highest number of days available for adoption</b>
	Drop the adoption price by waiving or cutting the adoption fee
	Encourage staff and volunteers to add the pet’s picture and tagline to email signatures
	Decorate housing by using popular themes and match colors or patterns throughout bedding and toys
	Create and share flyers on social media asking followers to print and post at work/coffee shops/etc.
	Run senior bloodwork, perform dentals and have the pet groomed to add value and peace of mind
	Find sponsors for adoption fees and any additional medical needs
	Send out on regular field trips into the community to meet adopters where they are



### Start your brainstorming

Be sure to check out one of our favorite sources for cool marketing ideas: the new and improved “Little Black Book of Adoption Promotion Ideas,” available at [aspcapro.org](http://aspcapro.org).

# Getting Past Barriers To Your Marketing

Make sure barriers aren't getting in the way of your marketing and outreach. Here are a few ways you may be holding back your adoptions:

## Holding on to outdated beliefs

*Are you still afraid of fee-waived adoptions for cats?*

When you waive fees, but include all the benefits of your adoption program, you can compete with the marketing genius of stray cats. Research<sup>14</sup>, long-running programs like the one at Wisconsin Humane Society and repeated success all over the country trump old concerns that adopters will be less committed to free cats. You can find excellent resources on fee-waived adoptions at ASPCApro. Collect tips from agencies that tried this approach and love the impact it has on adoptions and reducing the time cats spend in shelters. These accounts will also challenge any budgetary concerns you may have by pointing to savings that result from reduced stays in care, as well as revenue generated by donations and product sales that increase as adoptions increase.

*Do you make it easy for adopters to interact with potential pets?* Never underestimate the power of touch! A 2010 survey of adopters from five different shelters looked at what influenced adoption choices.<sup>15</sup> Adopters pointed to appearance and behavior as well as learning more about animals from staff and volunteers. Adopters also reported that directly interacting with an animal was more important than seeing him or her behind a cage door. We know what you're thinking! But what about disease? Fear of spreading germs often leads to (not so friendly) warnings that visitors should keep their hands and fingers to themselves. The reality is that animal care staff, equipment, shared surfaces and other fomites are more likely to spread disease.<sup>16</sup> Keep your disease control protocols tight, but loosen up with visitors—tear down those “no touching” signs.

## Opening during inconvenient hours

If people aren't available when you are open, they can't adopt. Retail hours, also known as shopping hours, make it convenient for adopters—not to mention volunteers and other supporters—to visit on evenings and weekends. Putting this piece of common sense into practice can get bogged down by legitimate concerns about staffing changes and schedule shifts. But the benefits of making this change far outweigh the challenges. And remember that the hours will be more convenient for volunteers as well, making it easier for them to help out.

Talk to other agencies similar in size and structure and ask how they made the switch. For example, Friends of Lawrence County Rescue (FOLC) in Ohio helped their partners at the Lawrence County Animal Shelter ease into the change with a few weekend events. The increased traffic helped the warden see that expanding hours could increase adoptions and help people buy their dog tags for the year. Now the shelter is regularly open from noon to 4:00 p.m. on Saturdays. FOLC pointed out that being open for adoption also meant being open for intakes. This was a drawback, but it didn't stop progress. The shelter added a few hours to the schedule and an office worker joined the regular weekend crew. Everyone is happy with the decision, especially the adopted pets.

Whenever you make a positive change like extending your hours, be sure to brag about it! Let the public know that you've made it easier for them to adopt and pitch it to local media for extra (free) advertising.





### Find puppy friendly pet store partners

Shelters and rescues are already filling PetSmart and PETCO stores with animals for adoption, but you don't have to stop there! More and more locally owned stores want to support adoption groups instead of selling pets from puppy mills and are looking for partners. To find potential stores in your area, look for the state-by-state search at [hsus.org/puppystores](https://hsus.org/puppystores).

### Waiting for people to come to you

Look to the success of foster-based rescue groups who operate without a facility. Satellite locations, adoption events and volunteers can help expand your reach.

Adopters can't get to you if they don't know where you are! Always publicize all of your locations and hours and let visitors at one adoption site know what other options exist.

A cheap way to expand your reach is to empower staff, volunteers and foster parents to take animals out on the town for walks in parks, on city streets or into pet-friendly businesses. "Adopt-me" vests can make your mission clear and keep adoption at the top of the public's mind. Find the opportunities that work in your community; the key is taking animals where the people are.

### Spreading your staff too thin

Organizations need to budget staff resources for successful adoption programs. If adopters can't find anyone to help them meet animals and answer questions, they will walk away frustrated. Unanswered e-mails and phone calls diffuse good intentions and send potential adopters elsewhere. Keep in mind that adoption events are staff- and volunteer-intensive. Be strategic about the events you choose to attend so you can manage your staff resources and provide great customer service.

Volunteers should not be relied on to fill chronic staff shortages, but they can help you do more. Many volunteers will jump at the chance to participate in the adoption process by introducing animals and counseling adopters. Be sure to offer foster parents and volunteers the same training as you do your adoption staff.

# Check Your Blind Spots

Never take for granted that all of the potential adopters in your community know you are the best source for pets. Chances are you're missing out on entire zip codes full of great homes. On average, about forty percent of the dogs and cats in homes today come from shelters or rescues, but in some parts of your community, that number can be much lower.<sup>2</sup> The HSUS Pets for Life program works in underserved neighborhoods where less than three percent of pets come from shelters and rescues. It's not surprising that in these same areas, only twelve percent of pet owners report having any interactions at all with their local shelters or animal control agencies.<sup>1</sup> This isn't because there are fewer people with pets in the zip code. The pet lovers are there; we just need to let them know adoption is an option for them.



“Cardale didn’t want to spay his puppy Bronco because he knew he’d want another puppy someday. He had no idea that he could adopt one. While talking with Cardale about spay and neuter, I also shared my experience seeing puppies just like Bronco in our local shelter. I didn’t realize the impact of this conversation until Cardale

came back to get Bronco fixed and told me that he was telling his brother to adopt! Now he’s spreading the word about spay/neuter and adoption.”

–Annette Bellezzo, Coordinator, Pets for Life Chicago

You can uncover your “blind spots” by mapping out past adopters by zip code or street address. It makes sense to include data from at least a few years. Depending on the number of adoptions you perform, you can try this by hand or take advantage of mapping software. Try free options like Google My Maps or invest in a product like MapPoint. This will give you a bird’s eye view of the parts of your community you aren’t currently reaching.

Connecting with untapped parts of your community doesn’t happen overnight. A single outreach event won’t turn your organization into a household name. In many cases, these adoption areas will be underserved in other ways, isolated from services many of us take for granted. It will take time to build familiarity and trust by having a visible and consistent presence. Needless to say, the goal is worth the effort. In addition to finding adopters, you will meet clients who can benefit from other services such as spay/neuter, and you will gain advocates like Cardale, who can help expand your outreach efforts.

Find detailed instructions on how to perform a comprehensive community assessment and build a strong presence in previously underserved neighborhoods by reviewing The HSUS Pets for Life Community Outreach Toolkit at [animalsheltering.org/pfltoolkit](http://animalsheltering.org/pfltoolkit).

Jill Kline, Vice President of Community Impact Programs at the Wisconsin Humane Society (WHS), shares her insights from completing a community assessment as part of the Pets for Life mentorship process:

“WHS is fortunate to have a beautiful, inviting shelter in Milwaukee, with open and friendly staff. We know, however, that there are still populations we’re not reaching with our services. We completed a community assessment that helped us to identify the zip code in our city with the most significant economic challenges and fewest animal care resources. We found that just 76 of our nearly 9,500 adoptions in 2011 came from that particular zip code. We identified this as an opportunity to further engage the community in our mission and available resources, including our adoption program. We were excited about the potential impact of building a relationship where these clients would look to us for animals—and we would connect them with altered, vaccinated animals.

We have learned that many people in our focus community do not realize that they can adopt from our shelter. The majority of community members have never been to our building and didn’t realize that we were ready to be a resource for them, whether they already have an animal in the home or are hoping to bring one into their lives. In addition, many people believe that the adoption process may be intimidating or that they would be turned down. As we share information about our organization and adoption process, we find that many community members are interested in saving a homeless animal, and we’ve been able to connect some of our clients with a new companion—a win-win for everyone.”



# Welcome, Adopters!

You know the importance of being professional and welcoming to your patrons. Now take a fresh look at how you are appearing to them as well. Use the following questions to gauge how you're doing from a visitor's perspective. If you want to take it a step further, ask a trusted friend or volunteer to answer these example questions for a fresh perspective.

## For organizations with a central facility:

- Is your facility identified with clear signage that marks the open hours and entrances?
- Is your facility itself easy to locate?
- How does your facility appear from the outside? Are there visual barriers like weeds and trash?
- Is someone available to greet visitors when they enter?
- How does your facility look from the inside? Include the good, the bad and what's missing.
- Is it clear where to go and what to do next?
- How do the animal areas look, smell and sound?
- Do the animals look comfortable, with soft bedding and toys?
- Is it easy to meet with and learn about animals?
- Are visiting spaces comfortable for all types of visitors? Consider your adopters' ages, abilities and what's needed for a meaningful conversation.
- What's it like to call your organization? Are questions answered promptly? How long is the hold time? Do you get lost in "the system?"

## For organizations without a central facility:

- Is it easy to "meet" and learn about animals online?
- Once you find a pet you are interested in, is it clear what to do next?
- When animals are in public locations (such as pet stores), is it easy for potential adopters to interact with them? Are instructions available to inform adopters how to take the next step?
- Are e-mails or phone calls returned in two days or fewer?
- Is communication customer-friendly?
- Is it possible to meet available pets in four days or fewer?
- Are representatives friendly and helpful at adoption events?
- Are visiting spaces at events and foster homes comfortable for all types of visitors? Consider your adopters' ages, abilities and what's needed for a meaningful conversation.

