Creating a Customer-Centric Adoption Experience

Friday, May 13th 9-10:30 a.m.
Presenters: Anne Johnson, Director of Site Operations, Animal Humane Society; Cindy Johnson, Customer Resource Manager, Animal Humane Society

About Animal Humane Society

- Mission: Engage the hearts, hands of minds of the community to help animals
- Operate 5 locations in the Twin Cities metro area in Minnesota
- 135 years of history in Minnesota
- Managed Admissions
- 19,865 adoptions in 2015

Goals for the workshop

Share Animal Humane Society’s journey to help other organizations create a more customer centric adoption process, including:

Explore the “whys” and benefits of the changes

- To accomplish, we will review:
  - Overview of adoption process before & our motivation for change
  - Vehicles used for research and gathering information
  - Tactics for change and the new process
  - Following up with customers & what we learned from this effort

Adoption experience before changes

Philosophy on adoptions has always been open-minded, non-judgmental with emphasis on owner education rather than screening. We strive to be a partner in pet selection and our organization top of mind as a resource to support all stages of a pet’s life.

- Overview of process
  - Customer walks into adoption center
  - Volunteers are in animal areas and assist with visitations
  - Upon selection, customer completes application and goes to adoption desk
  - Staff stationed at one large counter review the application, share animal’s history & medical information, explain adoption policies and offers, do the computer data entry and ring the sale.

Notes:
• Staff page for volunteer to bring animal to desk
  • Say our thank yous and goodbye

• Results
  • Complete information not always provided until after the selection was made
  • Staff and volunteers had to leave customer during visitation to get information
  • Staff gravitated towards the desk versus the animal areas where the customers were
  • Long lines of people waiting at the desk
  • Proximity of desk meant that new visitors entering the shelter crashed into customers waiting in line at the desk.
  • Visual clutter and physical obstacles to seeing what people wanted to see – animals!
  • Transactional, impersonal feel
  • Little to no consideration for customer’s physical comfort

• Motivation for change
  • Change not complaint driven but our desire to refresh the experience
  • Be progressive and elevate the customer experience beyond the standard acquisition experience.
  • Create a process that demonstrated trust in our adopters and their decisions and aligned with our adoption philosophy.

• Gathering information
  • Utilized a team of people from different areas of the organization who worked together to develop a process
  • Identified, “Who are our stakeholders?”
  • Vehicles:
    ▪ Customers: on-site interviews, post-adoption surveys, new visitor walk-throughs
    ▪ Staff & volunteer focus groups
    ▪ Other shelters – what inspirations could we glean from other’s experiences?

• What did we learn?
  • On site interviews
    ▪ Customer expectations:
      • Adopting a pet will take 15-30 minutes
      • Clean and tidy facility
      • Adequate number of staff and volunteers
      • Healthy animals
      • Well-spelled out policies and rules
      • Staff and volunteers have good customer relations skills – be attentive and caring.
      • Adequate space for interaction with animals
      • Easy access to information on the animals during viewing and visitation
  • New visitor walk-throughs

Notes:
Focus for this exercise is aesthetics:
- Sensory
- Intuitiveness
- Comfort
- Signage & tools for navigation

Learnings:
- Smell and look of shelter - was less smelly and nicer than they expected
- Staff, volunteers and animals seemed happy, friendly
- Signage not noticed therefore not helpful
- Closed doors not inviting, didn’t know if I could enter or not
- Cages and kennels looked nice, neat and comfy
- Cage cards are confusing
- Visitors unsure where to go for more information
- If not a person or animal, it’s not seen
- Lack of comfortable seating for paperwork

Staff & volunteer focus groups
- Questions posed:
  - How do our volunteers and employees “think” about customer service?
  - Who do they consider AHS customers?
  - How do they “rank” the top AHS customers?
  - Who do they consider AHS’s competition?
     - What makes people want to choose a shelter?
  - What would they do with a “magic wand”?

Learnings:
- Superior service as a customer means = amazing communication, make me feel special and important, positive attitude, go above and beyond my expectations
- Staff and volunteers don’t always understand people have multiple options for pet acquisition because they are so close and invested in the world of animal sheltering.
- Adopters not always top of mind

Post-adoption surveys
- Learnings:
  - Many things we were already doing well, including:
    - Adopters felt well-prepared and ready for their new pet
    - Interactions with staff and volunteers characterized as friendly, helpful and caring
    - Adopters would recommend AHS to others
    - Our shelters are clean and neat in appearance

Notes:
• Things we could do better:
  o Less than half reported being greeted when they entered the shelter
  o Provide complete animal information at decision point. Decision point happens at visitation.
  o Help with post adoption health issues
  o More pet history, information and pet’s “story”
  o Lower adoption fees
  o Reduce wait times

  o Other shelters
    • Contacted 8 other shelters about their adoption process and thoughts on the customer experience
      • How do they make customers feel welcome
      • What visitation options are available
      • How do they deliver animal and policy information
      • What helpful tools did they bring in
      • How do they measure customer satisfaction
    • Learnings & themes:
      • First impressions important, make greeting customers a priority
      • Provide multiple visitation options (rooms, walks, off-leash areas)
      • Provide a comfortable, private space for conversation when doing adoptions
      • Use technology to improve communications and make staff & volunteers mobile (i.e. radios, tablets, pagers)
      • Kid’s activity area can take some stress off the process for parents
      • Cross train volunteers to handle more adoption process responsibilities

• Tactics & Outcomes
  o Adoption center renovations – To achieve physical comfort and intuitive spaces for customers to navigate.
  o New tools
    • Tablets and radios
    • Strategically placed supply stations
    • Redesigned cage card
  o New & revised roles
    • Staff Floor Captain
    • Staff Volunteer Liaison
    • Enhanced Adoption Support volunteer role

• Adoption process: key points to the experience

Notes:
The adoption experience starts the moment the person walks in the door. With each element of the experience, you want the customer to feel *welcome, important/values and comfortable.*

- Focus on in-person communications with customers.
- Greater visibility of animals.
- Greater visibility of volunteers and staff that can assist customer.
- Invest in one of your greatest assets – volunteers.
- Provide visitation options so people can visit how they want to.
- Be efficient with your customer’s time.
- Make customers comfortable.
- Demonstrate trust for your adopters.
- Celebrate adoptions and express gratitude.

- **Engaging the customer after adoption**
  - Exposure to all our other programs in a way that is celebratory, supportive and promotes engagement
  - Welcome email series

- **Communications & Training**
  - Provide status updates to staff and volunteers in as process being built and tools being tested.
  - Staff and volunteers trained together on new process & tools.
  - Practice, get feedback, tweak and repeat.

- **Measuring success**
  - Outside, expert analysis of the process is helpful to identifying strengths and weaknesses
  - Customer surveys
  - Volunteer surveys
  - On-going review and adjustments

- **Advice for others who are preparing or contemplating same journey**
  - Be sure you have alignment of vision and goals - up and down the ladder. Define and use these to guide your decision making. For AHS, these guided us:
    - How does this make the customer feel welcomed?
    - How does this make the customer feel valued and respected?
    - How does this make the customer feel comfortable?
  - Communicate often and clearly – internally and externally.
  - Have benchmark data so you can measure customer satisfaction before and after
  - Allow some staff and volunteers to be part of building the process and problem solving.
  - Allow appropriate time and support for training, especially if introducing new roles and tools on top of a new process.
  - Role playing is a key tool for training.
  - Some staff or volunteers may not come on board.

Notes:
- Be sure you have people in place to provide on-going support to volunteers in these roles.

- **Reflections - What would we do differently?**
  - Initiate outside expert analysis during the research phase to get that objective, professional expert assessment at the beginning
  - Expanded checkout space/stations
  - Not wait so long to pull the temporary checklists/conversation guides
  - Furniture choices – durability, ease in cleaning
  - Roll out new process during slower adoption months. Give people some headspace and time to practice and build expertise.

**Contacts:**

Anne Johnson, Director of Sites, ajohnson@animalhumanesociety.org

Cindy Johnson, Customer Resource Manager, cjohnson@animalhumanesociety.org

[www.animalhumanesociety.org](http://www.animalhumanesociety.org)