"Who's for cats?"

Campaign Evaluation

March 2009

Department of Primary Industries, Victoria

Executive Summary

- It has been estimated that there are around half a million unowned (stray and feral) cats in Victoria, living a life of disease and neglect, and causing nuisance in the community. Each year across the State, 50,000 cats are impounded, and 35,000 of these have to be euthanased. The associated financial costs exceed five million dollars annually, and the emotional toll of so many euthanasia procedures leaves animal shelter staff susceptible to traumatic stress disorders.

- "Who's for cats?" is a joint stakeholder response to the complex problem of cat overpopulation.

- Participating organisations are: the Animal Welfare Science Centre, Australian Veterinary Association, Cat Protection Society, Department of Primary Industries, Lort Smith Animal Hospital, Monash University, Municipal Association of Victoria, Pet Industry Association of Australia, RSPCA Victoria, The Lost Dogs' Home, and the Victorian Animal Aid.

- The cat overpopulation problem can be attributed to a number of factors, such as supply exceeding demand, the high reproductive capacity of cats, and general attitudes towards the species, which manifest in irresponsible cat ownership. Research has identified that another contributing factor to this problem is people feeding unowned cats, but not taking full ownership or responsibility for them (e.g. they don't desex or register them). These people, termed 'semi cat owners' are the main target audience for the "Who's for cats?" campaign.

- The campaign's creative materials and key message ("Are you feeding a bigger problem?") aimed to raise awareness in the community about the cat overpopulation problem and the consequences of feeding unowned cats. The campaign asked semi owners to stop just feeding unowned cats and make a decision – either become a responsible owner, or have the cat impounded.

- The campaign involved the development of a TV and radio advertisement, along with print ads, a website, brochures and posters, a media launch, a public relations campaign, event resources, and cat ownership incentive schemes.

- A wide range of promotional activities were undertaken during the twelve month campaign period from November 2007 to November 2008. More than 400 radio advertisements were aired, along with several radio interviews, and a small number of TV advertisements. Print ads were published in major newspapers and in seniors and pet specific publications. A total of 63 newspaper articles were published on the campaign. The "Who's for cats?" website received up to 900 visits (and 22,000 hits) per month, with activity peaking during periods of campaign advertising. The campaign generated discussions through online forums, the "Who's for cats?"' Facebook page attracted more than 500 members, and the TV advertisement was viewed almost 4,000 times on YouTube. More than 150,000 campaign brochures and posters were distributed across Victoria. An estimated 25,000 children learnt about the "Who's for cats?" program, through specially developed lessons incorporated into DPI's Schools Education Program. Participating stakeholders also promoted the campaign to hundreds of thousands of Victorians, through the printing of advertisements and articles in magazines and newsletters, the publishing of information on websites, the promotion of messages at events, and through billboard advertising.

- Eighty people completed a survey after phoning the DPI Customer Service Centre in response to hearing or seeing campaign advertisements. This survey found people most commonly called in response to the radio advertisements, followed by newspaper articles or advertisements. The majority of respondents thought the campaign would be effective in raising awareness about the stray cat problem, and were considering taking action in response to the campaign messages. Most people thought they might take the stray to a pound or shelter, as opposed to taking full ownership of the cat. This finding is consistent with the experiences of animal shelters participating in the campaign, which have found more people are surrendering rather than taking ownership of stray cats.

- The Cat Protection Society and The Lost Dogs' Home collected cat impoundment/surrender statistics for the 12 month period immediately before the launch of the "Who's for cats?" campaign (November 2006 - October 2007), and for the 12 month period during the campaign (November 2007 – October 2008). These figures show pre campaign, a total of 24,122 cats were surrendered/impounded, whereas during the campaign 28,565 cats were impounded. There was no comparable increase in the number of dogs impounded/surrendered during this period. This result suggests that people are listening to campaign messages about handing in cats if they are not able to take full responsibility for them.

- Further evidence of the campaign resulting in behavioural change comes from an RSPCA Inspectorate report. The report states that compared to the previous financial year, there has been a 41.9% increase in the number of calls regarding cats and that "the increase began around January 2008 and has continued through the "Who's for cats?" campaign". In contrast, during the same period, the number of calls regarding dogs decreased by 5%.

- A post campaign survey of 450 Victorians found that 42% of respondents had seen or heard information relating to the unowned cat problem over the past year. Most respondents also had a good understanding of key campaign messages. The most common source of information was newspaper articles, which is not surprising given that the number of campaign related stories published over the 12 months averaged more than one per week.

- A particularly interesting finding of the survey is that awareness of campaign advertising and messages was high across the entire sample, not just for semi owners of cats. This result provides an explanation for the behavioural change associated with a significant increase in the number of cats entering shelters and pounds, and calls to the DPI Customer Service Centre and animal welfare organisations. With the majority of people responding to campaign messages choosing to impound rather than take ownership of stray cats, it seems that 'non' semi owners have had the biggest impact by getting unowned cats off the street (more so than by semi owners taking ownership of cats).

- Although there were only 16 current semi owners in the survey sample, there was a statistically significant increase in the number of past semi owners who had taken full ownership of their cats (as opposed to ceasing semi ownership only when the cat disappeared or died).

- Focus group research results provide further evidence that the majority of people taking action were not the semi owners of cats themselves, but rather members of the wider community who were experiencing nuisance associated with unowned cats. Focus group participants thought the "Who's for cats?" campaign gave people 'moral permission' to have stray cats impounded. Previously these people may not have acted to resolve the nuisance problem due to apathy or

due to guilt that it might result in the cat's euthanasia. Other research has certainly demonstrated that cat nuisance is a significant issue in the community.

- This finding has emphasised the importance of communicating to the "Daves"[1] in the community, i.e. the people who are not semi owners of cats themselves, but who are experiencing nuisance associated with unowned cats, and are therefore likely to respond to campaign messages about the need to have these cats impounded. In the short term, it is the "Daves" who are affecting positive change by getting unowned cats off the streets, preventing future breeding.

- In the long term, the campaign aims to reduce the number of cats impounded and euthanased in shelters and pounds. In order to achieve this objective, it is important to continue promoting "Who's for cats?" campaign messages.

- In addition, improvements can be made in the way the campaign targets semi owners specifically. Evaluation results showed most respondents in the community survey were aware of the disease and neglect suffered by unowned cats. However the semi owners in the sample were less concerned about the health problems faced by stray cats. This highlights the need to better emphasise the welfare risks faced by unowned cats, not just for the population as a whole, but also on an individual basis, so that semi owners can relate this information to the particular cat they are feeding.

- It must also be acknowledged that many semi owners have a bond with the cat they are feeding, and may therefore be unlikely to ever have it impounded. Focus group discussions identified various reasons why these people may also have difficulty in taking full ownership of the cats. Despite such barriers to change, long term exposure to "Who's for cats?' campaign messages may deter these people from taking on semi ownership of a new cat in future. That is, once their current cat disappears or dies, these people may choose not to engage in semi cat ownership again, if they are aware of the negative consequences of this behaviour. Long term monitoring will be necessary to identify changes in rates of current semi cat ownership.

- "Who's for cats?" is the first Australian campaign to involve the cooperation of so many different animal welfare organisations. The pooling of resources has enabled a wide range of activities to be undertaken on a relatively modest budget. The fact that so many different organisations are supporting the campaign undoubtedly adds considerable strength to the messages being promoted to the community.

- The feedback from stakeholders involved in the campaign has been extremely positive. All stakeholders agreed that the cooperative campaign approach was effective, and that they would be willing to continue participating in this type of joint project in future.

- Finally, feeding unowned cats is only one contributing factor to the much bigger problem of cat overpopulation. Other issues to be addressed through legislation, policy and education include desexing, registration, containment of cats to the property, the impact of climate change on the cat breeding season, and promoting the benefits of responsible cat ownership.

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[1] Refer to campaign creative material i.e. posters. Dave's character takes the option of impounding strays in his area ("Dave just called the council to collect the three strays in his street. Dave's for cats"), whereas Jill chooses to take ownership of the cats ("Jill stopped feeding her stray. Now she has become its owner. Jill's for cats").