# **Marketing Change**

A longtime animal welfare leader talks about how shelters can better promote their pets

aybe it's because he was once a Marine and served a tour of duty in Vietnam. Maybe it's because he was once viciously stabbed by onlookers while trying to rescue a puppy who'd been hit by a car. Maybe it's because accounting—Mike Arms' area of expertise when he first came into the animal protection field—is an inherently rough business! (Okay, it's probably not that.)

Whatever the reason, Arms, president of the Helen Woodward Animal Center in Rancho Santa Fe, Calif., is a tough customer when it comes to a tender subject: the importance of aggressively promoting the animals in shelters in order to save more lives and make happy matches.

A nearly 40-year veteran of the animal welfare field. Arms has also worked at the ASPCA and the North Shore Animal League America, and has spoken at numerous national and international conferences on how shelters can become more appealing, people-friendly, and professional.

Highlighting the need for strategies that cater to the way consumers think, Arms explained to Animal Sheltering editor Carrie Allan that small changes to a shelter's marketing approach and adoption area can make a big difference in adoption numbers.

AS: The issue of how much to charge

for shelter adoptions has been an ongoing dispute in the field. Some argue that shelters should provide steep discounts in order to move animals out as quickly as possible, but you've argued the other side of that? MA: Working at both ends, from free pets to fees, I've learned that by giving free or low-cost pets, we devalue these wonderful animals. I've proven over and over again that by raising fees, we do not decrease adoptions. We need to stop immediately calling these animals "shelter dogs" and

"shelter cats"—we cannot continue in our



The "Chargers Puppies" were a litter of eight purebred bulldogs who came to the Helen Woodward Animal Center during NFL playoffs. Center staff named each of them after a Chargers player. All of the puppies—and 40 other pets—went home with families who'd picked up on the publicity.

behavior and word choice to devalue these animals. Animal shelters are the dinosaurs of the nonprofit world. When you think, we no longer have children orphanages in this country—we have "children's centers." We no longer have "old folks' homes" we have "assisted living" and "senior centers." We no longer have "garbage trucks"—we have "waste management." Yet we keep the stigma of the dog pound and animal shelter. Animal organizations need to run themselves as businesses, and the fee to adopt should be whatever the market will bear in your area.

Can you elaborate on why—and also discuss whether you feel this is always the proper strategy, or does it depend on the market/economy in a shelter's particular neighborhood? Do you ever believe in offering discounts or reduced rates for animals?

In my lectures around the world, I will always ask what adoption fees are. I will get answer of X for felines and X for canines. When I find there is no difference

between puppies and adults, kittens and adults, I explain we are the only industry where the new model is the same price as the old model. In each case, there have been hundreds of organizations that have increased the fees for the younger animals and have started variable prices for purebreds. They not only continued with their adoption growth, they succeeded in increasing their revenue.

The Helen Woodward Center largely through the IAMS Home for the Holidays program—has been a leader in moving shelters away from some of the old mythologies that led to adoption bans during Christmas and no black cat adoptions during Halloween. When did you start doubting those old truisms, and why? Was it based on research, or gut instinct? What has the effect been at your shelter?

To begin with, in speaking with peers from around the country, I found that a lot of facilities closed for the holidays only because



These two dogs, Basketball and Croquet, were a part of the "Sports Puppies," all of whom were named after various sports. Animals who are named as pairs catch adopters' attention, says Arms.

they wanted the holidays off. Following trends at North Shore, we were able to be open for adoptions 365 days a year. There is no question that puppy mill sales, as well as adoptions, increase in the month of December. Because this is a reality, if Billy or Janey put on their list for Santa that they would like their own puppy or kitten, Mom and Dad will discuss it. If they decide this is the right time to bring a new pet into their home, available facilities will have the chance to match them up with the right pet, mandate spay/neuter, and show how wonderful our services are. But by shutting your doors, you do not stop them from getting a pet—you just change where they will get the pet. Sending them to puppy mills and backyard breeders will just aid in contributing to the uneducated pet parents and the promotion of [unsterilized] animals. At a conference attended by at least 75 veterinarians, I posed the question, "Can any of you show me a case study where a puppy or kitten was dying of too much excitement on Christmas morning?" I had to wait for the laughter to die down before continuing. As far as banning black cat adoptions for Halloween, I've always felt that my staff should be professional enough to screen potential adopters to ascertain whether the cat was going into a

quality home or simply being adopted by witches and warlocks.

How do you feel about the issue of same-day adoptions? Do you think that making adopters wait for reference/ landlord checks is a major hindrance?

My answer to this question is two-part: One is a question and the other is an answer. "Do backyard breeders and puppy mills make you wait for the pet?" All organizations should have qualified adoption counselors with proper screening practices to aid families to bring the pet home the same day. However, I understand that some organizations, because of financial constraints, must wait until the animal is spayed/neutered before it goes home. If the adoptions occur on the same day, then waiting for references/landlord shouldn't be an issue.

One of your primary focuses has been on how shelters can better market their animals. Why do you think this has been such a weak spot in the past? What should shelters be doing better? In our culture and society, we put more emphasis on advertising toasters, pillowcases, shirts, and purebred animals than we do on marketing and advertising the wonderful animals we have at our facilities. Everyone knows of Macy's department store. And everyone realizes that they advertise almost daily, to have footsteps in their store. How in the world will the public know that we have a great selection of animals to choose from if we do not advertise and market? Perfect example: Most animal organizations advertise in the Yellow Pages under the headline "Animal Shelters." Understand: That is where people look when they want to relinquish a pet. When they want to get a pet, they look under pet shops. That is where we should be listed with a display ad saying we have wonderful cats, kittens, dogs, and puppies, purebreds, mixed breeds—the largest selection in the community to choose from. Keep in mind, the pet shops and backyard breeders are our toughest competition. We must win for the orphans' sake.

I'm constantly getting cute and funny adoption promotion press releases from the Oregon Humane Society— I'm on the other side of the country, and I still want to go there and adopt. Do you know of other groups that are doing a terrific job with creative adoption marketing? What do you like about their approaches?

I'm not familiar with their methodology, but I do know that when we advertised with display ads in the major newspapers in New York City [while I was at North Shore Animal League], we increased adoptions from 40 a week to 850 a week. It's simply that advertising and marketing work.

While you were at a previous job, there was a cruelty case that got a lot of attention: a cat who'd been badly burned. As frequently happens with cases that get a lot of media, many people came in wanting to adopt the burned cat or one of her kittens. You ended up adopting out close to 200 kittens simply by letting adopters believe they were each getting a kitten from the burned cat. Some might consider this deceptive. Can you talk a little bit about where you think the ethical line is when a small omission may save scores of lives?

We ended up adopting out close to 200 kittens because everyone came to the facility with the intent of taking home one of these highly publicized kittens. When people came in asking for these kittens, we just sent them to the kitten room. So many people left the facility believing they adopted one of Scarlett's kittens. I am a firm believer that we never adopt animals, they adopt us. From what I remember, we never admitted or denied these kittens were from Scarlett. We were just concerned that they were quality adoptions and the pets were going to receive proper care and a loving home. I have never received a complaint from an adopter or another organization about this promotion. It is very hard to find the ethical line because we learn from marketing strategies that work for different things. When we saw the Cabbage Patch Doll frenzy, we worked [with the same idea], stating that we were not going to have enough puppies and kittens for the holiday season. This caused lines of over 150 people deep waiting for us to open our doors. When you, for whatever reason, increase the quantity of families coming into your facility to adopt, this should never decrease your standards in your screening processes from quality adoptions. Quantity should never replace quality.

### Beyond the importance of external marketing, what are some of the best ways shelters can enhance the way their animals "show" while in the facility itself? Are there strategies you employ at the center that you've found to be successful?

The first thing we have to start with is the facility itself. When the facility opens for adoption, the place must look clean, be clean, and smell clean. Offensive odors could be a deterrent to a new adopter— [he could think] "This is what my home will smell like." Try ... using volunteers as escorts to show potential adopters interested in adult dogs your dog section. [The volunteers can explain] that the dogs are very excited to see people and will bark and jump in their cage, but not once they are on a leash being walked. Small animals like puppies, kittens, and cats that are housed in cages should be chest- to eye-level for better display. Do not put water bowls or litter pans in the front of the cage. We are trying to show our animals at their best. Try not to cover the cage doors with large signs [or other material that may] block the view of the pets. All animals should have a name, not a number. During kitten season, kittens should be displayed in pair-type names, such as Peanut Butter and Jelly, Bonnie and Clyde, Batman and Robin, etc. It's hard for families to break up pairs, and in many cases they will adopt both. This will increase your adoptions by 10 percent if done properly. In your dog kennel areas, try to break up the dogs by colors, tan dog next to white dog next to black dog. If there are times when you have too many black dogs, break up their color by placing bandanas on them. You would be surprised by how well that works. Sometimes when you have a dog staying at your kennel too long, change the pet's name. For some reason, names like "Betsy Sue" and "Billy Bob" catch potential adopters' attention. Never post negatives on your cage card—i.e. "not good with children," "history of medical problems," etc. You can discuss those situations once the potential adopter shows an interest in the particular animal.

#### What would you suggest to shelters that are operating in tiny media markets or on very low budgets? Are there some marketing secrets and strategies that can work for them?

What you can do is work with your local restaurants and supermarkets where community members frequently visit. Talk to the restaurants about using storyboard placemats with descriptions of your animals on them. If interested, they can get in touch with you. Be sure to use websites like Petfinder that really work.

### The Helen Woodward Center runs an educational program for shelter workers called ACES (Animal Center Education Services). What's the focus of that program and why did you decide to start it?

ACES covers all aspects of running an animal facility, not including cruelty prevention. It covers marketing, fundraising, volunteer recruitment and retention, education—including day camp, human re-



Mike Arms says that creative adoption promotions can help even low-budget shelters get more animals into loving homes.

sources, board member protocols, special events, public relations, combining them all into best business practices. These threeday, very intense workshops are free to attend to all participants. They occur generally every other month. The reason that I started this program is because I'm constantly being asked to provide these workshops all over the country and now many parts of the world. It seems more and more organizations need this assistance, and by coming here they get to see the work in progress. In fact, [in February we had] 35 participants from as far east as Puerto Rico and as far south as Oaxaca, Mexico.

## What do you think has been the field's biggest success?

Through the hard work of many organizations, laws have been developed to better protect these wonderful pets. In addition, many organizations are now learning to utilize the media to bring attention to the orphaned pets in their care.

#### What do you hope to see happen for animals in the next decade?

My hope is that all organizations can work together for the welfare of the orphaned pets in our care. That many will stop the "Mom and Pop" operations and run their organizations as a business. If we work together and have more control over placing spayed/neutered pets in the American households, we will not have to use our resources to clean up the mess that puppy mills and backyard breeders have created. AS