

Marketing Change

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

Maybe 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

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 three-day, 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**