

Learn from your dog

Your dog can teach you everything you need to know about running an animal shelter like a business.

Your dog understands how to greet every visitor as a valued friend. No one makes more friends, faster, than any good dog--and even the loneliest person can often make friends just by getting a dog.

Dogs sell themselves to adopters, given half a chance. If your shelter is not successfully adopting out dogs, in a community where people commonly keep dogs, then you need to pay more attention to how dogs themselves make people fall in love with them, and give them more opportunity to do it.

Your dog knows how to give the impression at all times of being reliable, trustworthy, comforting, and loyal.

The three most important aspects of selling anything, from real estate to ideas, are image, utility, and price. Dogs are born knowing how to sell themselves, using all three of these concepts at once.

Image is how you feel about yourself. There is a saying in India that, "Whenever we are unhappy, God sends a dog." Dogs make most people feel better, most of the time. They play, they wag their tails, they come up to be petted, and they will forgive any offense from someone who usually treats them kindly.

Utility is whether or not something is useful. For just a word of praise, your dog will do anything useful that he or she can figure out how to do. The hardest part of dog training is just getting the dog to understand what you want the dog to do. Once the dog understands, the job will never be neglected or forgotten.

Price is the first thing people ask about in making any decision to acquire something, and is the last thing they think about. Dogs realize that. They give you loving attention before making any demands at all. They introduce themselves as your dog, so enthusiastically that the price you pay for adopting and keeping them seems more like fulfilling a familial obligation than like spending hard-earned money. You adopt a dog because the dog has already become part of your family, on sight and sniff.

Your dog understands follow-up service, too. Your dog didn't just go home with you assuming that everything was going to be perfect. Your dog, or any dog, knows that although most people are decent and well-meaning, most are quite ignorant about dog needs and behavior. Therefore your dog is a patient and forgiving teacher. A dog never assumes that anyone is too stupid to learn.

You are probably here because of lessons your dog taught you. You can help keep hundreds of dogs in homes just by helping dogs to teach their people the things you have already learned. Every dog you help to stay in a home is a dog who not only will not come to your shelter, but also will repay your kindness by helping to sell other people on the value of your work.

Your dog knows how to facilitate adoptions, raise funds, and win community support– but that is far from being everything your dog can teach you about shelter management.

For example, your dog knows how to handle paid staff and volunteers.

Your dog understands whom to admit to the pack, which is essentially everyone willing and able to contribute to the strength of the pack, and whom to drive off as a threat and a troublemaker. Rarely will your dog misjudge people.

Every dog, at all times, know his or her place in the pack hierarchy, and will play the appropriate role. Every dog understands how to cooperate within a pack, how to earn status, and how to inspire and motivate others.

Your dog also knows inventory management. There is not another dog, cat, bowl of food, place to sleep, or anything else that would interest a dog that your dog does not keep close track of. Your dog realizes that this is indispensable knowledge. You must be able to account for all of the animals and all of the resources entrusted to you at all times, in order to earn and maintain donor confidence, without which you cannot survive as a nonprofit institution.

Your dog does not know how to keep a double-entry ledger or use a computer, but if your dog did, you would never have to worry again about the accuracy of your accounting. Neither would the dog-loving public ever doubt your truthfulness.

You have to learn to keep written records of everything you do

precisely because your dog cannot do it for you, and cannot vouch for what you do with money, property, or veterinary drugs. You must learn to document your activities well enough to withstand any amount of suspicious sniffing from people who do not understand the motives of a person who loves animals.

Think of this as the fundamental law of shelter management:

I will translate into human terms what my dog would do. When in doubt, I will consult my dog.

Animal shelters do for dogs, cats, and other animals what dogs would do if dogs had opposable thumbs, and could learn to write and use tools.

I have a theory that humans operate animal shelters by way of paying off a debt. Our ancestors could never have outlived sabre-toothed tigers and the Ice Ages if dogs had not protected them and kept them warm. When humans learned to cultivate grain, and cats were needed to help control the depredations of mice and rats, dogs admitted cats to our family circle.

People who think dogs and cats are ancient enemies have not watched how they work together. Dogs and cats of the same household or extended "pack" will routinely nurse each other's orphaned young, and cases of dogs risking and even losing their lives to try to save cats from housefires are nearly as common as cases of dogs exercising such courage on behalf of humans.

Cats, in turn, will hasten to comfort a frightened or despondent dog of the same household.

Both cats and dogs together take care of us, and without them, we could never have built civilization.

Perhaps our relationship with dogs and cats began because dogs understood that they would need the help of a species with opposable thumbs and technological capabilities, in order to realize their dream of plenty of food and affection for every canine.

Later, dogs included cats in the deal because cats too were necessary.

Whatever happened, dogs taught us our principles of social organization, which prevailed among canine species for millions of

years before humans existed.

Dogs made an immense business investment in humans, and can continue to be our helpers and mentors, especially in what concerns them, if we only have the intelligence to pay attention.

With that thought in mind, I am here merely to articulate some ideas with greater specificity than your dog can manage in human language.

It is commonly observed that people tend to resemble the animals they choose as companions. For example, while I do not look much like any of our three dogs or 18 cats, you may not be surprised to know that we also have a pair of jackasses. They also have long legs, grey beards, big noses, and pony tails, and are lifelong vegetarians.

New Hampshire animal advocate Peter Marsh observed a few years ago that "People who rescue feral or abandoned or abused animals also tend to resemble the animals they help in the psychological sense. Just as feral or abandoned animals or animals who have been abused tend to be frightened and furtive, so we ourselves are often frightened and furtive, and fear the public will think badly of us because we have too many animals, or 'waste' our efforts on animals instead of people, or must euthanize some animals. We don't invite people into our shelters because we think they won't understand what they see.

"Therefore they don't understand why we can't give lifetime care to every animal someone dumps on us, or why we are always stressed out and blaming pet keepers for being irresponsible--and we don't get the help we need to change things. I further submit," Marsh finished, "that it is time we opened the doors."

The importance of attracting and welcoming visitors to your shelter cannot be over-emphasized. People have to see your animals in order to fall in love with them. People have to see your work in order to appreciate it. People have to know who you are, where you are, and how valuable your services are, before they can be persuaded to give you volunteer time, food, building materials, or money.

Attracting visitors is the surest way for any animal shelter to raise more money. The more visitors a shelter has, the more volunteers and donors it will attract. Even one-time visitors to shelters and sanctuaries donate, on average, at many times the level of non-visitors, and can be encouraged to donate more through effective outreach, whether by direct mail or personal contact.

Successfully attracting visitors who become regular donors begins with presentation. Every shelter should welcome visitors with an attractive sign. This is your equivalent of your dog's wagging tail. The sign should state the name of the organization, the hours of operation, the mailing address, and a telephone number that will be answered as close to 24 hours a day, seven days a week, as you can possibly manage.

Be aware that people are most likely going to be looking for a lost pet, or trying to adopt a pet, when they are not at work. It is more important to be accessible during the evenings and on weekends than during morning business hours.

Likewise, people are most likely to call you about a crisis they are having with an animal during the evening or on a weekend--and it is right then, when the crisis is still going on, that you have the best chance to intervene to keep a dog or cat in a home.

Adoption-and-reclaim hours should include afternoons and evenings, all seven days of the week if possible.

Visiting hours can be briefer, but are very important to offer. Visiting hours are the times when people can come to get acquainted just out of curiosity, not under some sort of stress or duress. Visiting hours need to be publicized with the same vigor as if you were promoting a sports event or a theatrical performance. Your dogs and cats will provide the entertainment. Your job is to invite the public to come and enjoy it--and you have to make sure that the dogs and cats get the opportunity to make them feel so good about coming that they want to come back.

Welcoming visitors, incidentally, is among the easiest jobs to delegate to volunteers--especially young volunteers, such as high school students. Greeters should be assigned to show a specific sequence of facilities to visitors, ending at whatever attraction seems most successful at inspiring donations, with a list of answers to frequently asked questions. More complex questions can be referred to senior staff--but most questions will be repetitively asked, and will concern either features and policies of the facility, or the life histories of resident animals.

The story of each animal should end with a succinct mention of how much it costs you to keep each animal for a day, a week, or a month,

along with the cost of sterilization surgery, vaccinations, and any other necessary treatment that the animal receives.

Each question is a chance to solicit funds, by explaining how donations make doing whatever you are doing possible, and how obtaining more support could enable you to do more things, in a better manner.

Any shelter without prominent donation cans needs to add some, so that visitors can discreetly contribute whatever money they have in their pockets whenever they feel the impulse.

You should also have pamphlets for visitors explaining how and where to send money, how to donate material goods, what goods are welcome, and how to leave a bequest to your organization. Each pamphlet should include a pre-addressed donation envelope, so that visitors can send you contributions later.

The more items people take to read later, distributed with a self-addressed envelope (postage-paid, if possible), the more money a shelter will receive. The envelopes make donating easy, and ensure that all donations are sent to the right place.

Start saying "thank you" even before you get your first donations from people--just as your dog would. Bounce up and down and wag your tail when prospective donors even look at you. Thanking donors increases response--including when prospective donors see others being thanked.

On your shelter grounds, an attractive sign or plaque should acknowledge every donated item. Prominent thank-yous not only encourage donors to give again, but also inspire others to contribute.

Success sells success. Any community big enough and rich enough to have traffic congestion on market days is quite big enough and rich enough to support basic humane services, including low-cost vaccination, sterilization, animal rescue, and emergency sheltering--and I must emphasize that sheltering animals should only be an emergency response.

If you are doing an adequate job of preventing surplus dog and cat births by means of sterilization, 95% of the animals in your community will never enter your shelter, even though they all benefit from the services and public education you provide.

Unfortunately, many shelter operators mentally equate soliciting funds with street-begging by the severely disadvantaged and destitute, not with obtaining voluntary support for essential community institutions. Even the people who most devotedly help animals in other ways are often unwilling to ask for money, because they do not wish to be seen as beggars.

Those who do ask tend to rely on descriptions of misery--and then they find that more people turn away in disgust and horror than actually contribute.

Take a lesson, again, from your dog. Your dog does not feel unwanted and unworthy when your dog solicits a pat on the head, a treat, a walk, or a meal. Rather, your dog knows you want to help because your dog is a fine dog, a good and loving dog, and you are a good and loving person. Your dog is confident that you think well of him, or her, and wish to reward your dog for excellent behavior.

Your dog gets what your dog wants and needs. Your shelter dogs and cats could get what they want and need, if you were even half as good at asking for it, beginning with having a positive attitude: you will get the contributions you need because you are worthy. You will prove that you are worthy by doing tricks, if necessary; but you will never doubt that good deeds will be rewarded.

The very strength of your expectation will help to persuade the prospective donor to live up to your hope.

Bear in mind that when you invite people into your shelter, you are inviting important guests not only into your animals' temporary home, but also into their own homes, in a sense, because they will form their impressions of how animals should be kept and how animals will affect their lives from what they see, smell, and hear.

If your shelter looks like a prison, stinks like a cesspool, and sounds like hell in full cry, you will never be successful, because no one wants to invite more misery and chaos into their lives.

There is no such thing as an animal shelter which cannot afford to be clean, neat, attractively lighted, odor-free, and quiet. The only kind of poverty that causes a shelter to be bleak, stinking, and intolerably noisy is poverty of the imagination.

Pay attention to what your animals seek out and ask for. Cats need

vertical space and a comfortable bed. Dogs crave company. They want to be part of a pack, so it is quite all right--indeed essential--to house small groups of compatible dogs together.

Any dog, moreover, will be psychologically and physically healthier--and more easily adopted--if kept in almost any kind of facility other than conventional cinder-block-and-chain-link runs with tin roofs.

If I was a mad scientist vivisector, trying to find out how fast I could drive dogs, cats, and people insane, I would put them all into a typical animal shelter, in which the cats cannot climb or escape the sound of barking, the dogs can only run madly back and forth and bark for exercise, the tin roof amplifies sound, and the air circulation is inferior to the air exchange level achieved by any functional flush toilet.

Animal shelters of conventional design unconsciously reflect the medieval practice of keeping hunting packs in otherwise empty stalls at the end of a horse stable.

When humane societies began sheltering dogs about 130 years ago, they blindly copied the arrangements of hunting kennels, not pausing to consider that hunter attitudes toward animals are fundamentally opposite to the humane ideal.

Shelters of 21st century design no longer have barred cages or narrow linear runs for dogs. Instead, each dog room is designed to hold small compatible groups of dogs, and the dogs are enclosed in storefront-grade shatterproof window glass. Stale air is pumped out from floor fronts and fresh air is blown in from outdoors at the top, to promptly remove odors, with air exchange at a rate of not less than a complete change every half hour.

Hong Kong SPCA shelter architect Jill Cheshire literally discovered the advantages of using glass instead of chain link fencing or bars by watching and listening to her dogs in various different environments.

"To lower the volume of noise inside a dog shelter," Cheshire says, "you have to realize that dogs see with their noses. Bars or chain link allow them to be stimulated by everything that goes on in your shelter. Because what stimulates them most is the presence of other dogs, and there are always other dogs in a shelter, they bark all the time. Then shelters often try to deal with the noise by restricting what their dogs can see. They end up putting their dogs inside boxes, with no visual stimulation at all--so what do they have left to do? They bark

some more.

"What we have learned to do instead," says Cheshire, "is to put the dogs inside glass, so that they can see everything but cannot smell anything. This encourages them to spend a lot of their time up looking around, using their other senses and being in front of their enclosures where the visitors will see them and maybe adopt them. If you look inside a glass-enclosed shelter, what you see are lots of alert and attentive dogs, who are always watching everything very carefully, but are rarely barking."

As a last word about the importance of odor control, please note that worldwide, more than 80% of animal protection donors and animal shelter volunteers are female. Most are between the ages of 20 and 50. Women in that age range have up to seven times the olfactory acuity of most men. If your facility stinks, you will be repelling the very people who otherwise would be most likely to support you.

Some struggling shelters may be contemplating shutting down, giving up, or at least restricting their services because they feel so overwhelmed by the demands on their very limited resources.

What they may not realize is that at the very time the demands on shelters are increasing, the opportunity to seek help is also greatest-- because the demand is in itself a powerful indication that the public has begun to recognize the value of what animal shelters do. This what you have been working for years to achieve: to gain public cooperation in getting homeless cats and dogs out of alleys, forests, fields and dumpsters, and getting every animal sterilized and vaccinated before he or she goes into an adoptive home.

Tell people now that you cannot help, and you will squander the years of effort you have put into getting this far. Tell people how they can help you, on the other hand, with the same enthusiasm your dog would put into it, and even some of the people who surrender animals to you can become donors and volunteers, helping you to succeed in your mission.

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