

# Secrets of the Adoption Master



Everything you need to know about how to get animals out of shelters and into great new homes

**Mike Arms studied accounting, but he's never spent even a day crunching numbers. A "temporary" job at a humane society and a talent for marketing led him to create a whole new approach to finding homes for "orphaned" animals.**

**As the Director of Operations at North Shore Animal League in New York, he built the annual national Adoptathon concept.**

**Then, as president of California's Helen Woodward Animal Center, he revolutionized standard adoption policy that says, "Don't let people adopt pets as holiday gifts" by throwing open his doors at Christmas with "Home 4 the Holidays," another spectacular success.**

**Arms advises shelters and adoption groups across the country on how to get their animals out of cages and into homes. We spoke with him about the "business" of adoption and some of his tricks of the trade to get orphaned animals loving new families.**

*Best Friends: Shelters used to just hope people would come by to look for a new companion, but you go after new homes like you're selling valuable commodities!*

**Mike Arms:** I talk in business terms because this is a life-saving business. I think it's a crime that here we are in the year 2002, and only 17 percent of pets in American households come from animal shelters. That means 83 percent are still coming from backyard breeders, puppy mills, etc.

We have to learn how to be better than puppy mills, better than pet shops, better than anybody else when it comes to getting these animals into good homes. They deserve the best.

*BF: You always describe homeless pets as "orphans."*

**MA:** I've used that term for over 30 years. I don't like "unwanted." These dogs and cats are not unwanted – they're just orphans.

*BF: How did you start the Adoptathon?*

**MA:** I watched TV. I saw how marketing is done for other products. I saw marathons and telethons, and I wondered, "How much media attention would I draw if I did an adoptathon?"

I knew I needed the media to help me. So, I thought, I'm going to try it! I'm going to do the things other businesses do to generate publicity and sales. I'm going to keep my doors open for 36 hours straight doing adoptions and call the media and tell them. The media loved it, they got behind it, and we all had coffee and pizza at midnight. In that 36-hour period, we did 525 adoptions.

The next year, 1996, I invited shelters from all over the country to join me. Seven hundred shelters signed up, and between us, we did 12,000 adoptions the first weekend of May.

Today, 2,200 shelters in 19 countries have participated in that adoption weekend, and it just keeps growing.

*BF: Some shelters were suspicious of these "mass adoptions" at first. But I think some of them are even more suspicious of your Home 4 the Holidays campaign.*

**MA:** Look, if you try to fight human nature, you're just going to lose. You need to use human nature to your advantage, especially when it comes to adopting animals.

It's human nature that Janie or Jimmy writes to Santa that they want a puppy or a kitten. So their parents sit down and agree that the family is ready for a pet. To them, it's a great gift to give during the holiday season. It's the gift of life. It's not just for the child – it's for the whole family. But it's special for the child. No

child should grow up without having their own pet, their own loyal companion in their life, and the majority of this happens during the holiday season.

So if you're lucky enough to have a family come to your shelter, and you tell them, "Well, no, we're not going to let you adopt during this time of year, and the shelter is closed," then all you've done is send them to the puppy mill!

This is not an impulse adoption – not when the family makes a trip to your shelter. They want a family pet, and they're going to get one. And if they can't get one from you, they'll just go to a pet store or puppy mill for their new companion.

**BF:** *You've proven that Home 4 the Holidays works, but are other shelters getting the message?*

**MA:** It's funny because they are, but they're not all *quite* getting it. We just did a mailing for shelters to sign up for the 2002 event. One of the shelters called up and said, "Can we still be in the Home 4 the Holidays adoption campaign even though our shelter closes two days before Christmas?"

And one of my associates said, "Well, yes, but the whole idea is that you be open to adopt your orphans out on those days."

And the person on the phone said, "Well, it's so hard for us to compete with all the puppy mills because now they're advertising that they'll even have somebody dressed as Santa deliver the puppies to your home."

But that's *exactly* the point. That's what makes it so important that you compete *against* them! But instead of that, they're going to close! Shelters have to learn to become better at saving lives than anybody else is about selling their animals.

Incidentally, the first time we did Home 4 the Holidays here in San Diego County, an animal control officer told us that this was the first time in their history that they did not have to euthanize an animal during the holidays.



*"A pet is the gift of life. It's not just for the child, it's for the whole family. But it's special for the child."*

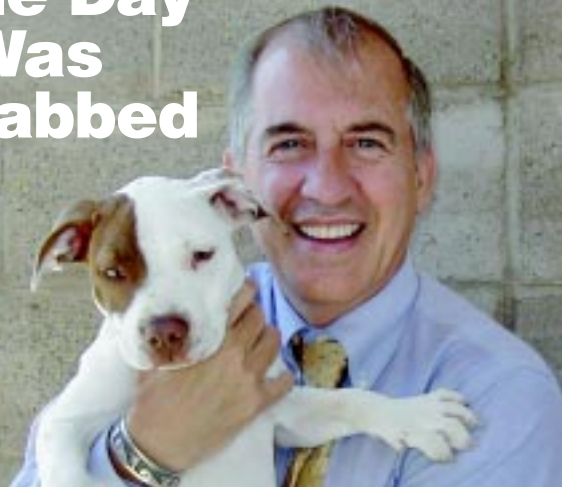
**BF:** *How do you screen out homes that might not be good for animals?*

**MA:** There are good pet owners and not-so-good pet owners, and there are ways that you can ascertain what's going on.

Find out what happened with their last pet. Find out if they have a veterinarian. If you're concerned, you can call the veterinarian and find out how they treated their last pet.

But I've seen staff turn people down just because of their appearance – not what's inside of them or how they act. You can't be that judgmental. They might be the best animal lovers in the world. So talk to them, and find out how they care about pets.

## The Day I Was Stabbed



### ► By Mike Arms

Working in the animal welfare field had gotten to me. I couldn't take all the cruelty and neglect I was seeing. I couldn't eat. I couldn't sleep. I'd lost 25 pounds. Finally, I handed in my notice.

Then a call came in that a dog was hit by a car on Davidson Avenue in the Bronx. So I said, "Well, let's get a driver out and get him."

"We don't have a driver available," someone told me. So I took off my suit jacket, put on a uniform jacket, and went myself.

When I got to Davidson Avenue, I saw him. I can picture him as if he were here today – this little black and tan, eight-month-old, shepherd/terrier mix. He was lying in the street, and he was bent backwards in half. Immediately I could tell that his back had been broken.

When I got out of the ambulance to pick up this little one, three guys came out of a doorway and asked, "What do you think you're doing?"

"This little guy's hurt bad, and I'm taking him to the hospital," I replied.

And they said, "You're not taking him any place."

And my response was, "Why? Is this your dog?"

And they said, "No. We have bets on how long it's going to live."

And I said, "Well, you folks are really sick."

I reached down and picked up this little one, and his brown eyes looked into my eyes, and we bonded. He felt safe, and he felt protected. I felt I had to help him any way I could.

When I turned my back to put him in the ambulance, I was suddenly hit over the head with a bat and these guys beat me, stabbed me twice, and left me in the street.

Well, this little one had one last act of kindness to give to mankind, and that was to crawl to me to lick me back to consciousness. And I cried. And I prayed at that moment that if I lived I would do everything in my life to enhance the quality of life of orphaned animals.

He didn't make it, but I know he's waiting for me on the other side of the Rainbow Bridge. I know I've kept my promise to him, and I continue every day of my life, with him in mind, to do everything I can to help orphaned animals.

A lot of people go through life without a purpose, without a mission. I feel so blessed. At least I was given a purpose.

**BF:** We've seen you explaining why you put two kittens in a cage and call them Peaches and Cream. Tell us about that.

**MA:** Any shelter can increase its adoption rate by at least 10 percent by doing double adoptions – especially during the kitten season!



*"The lowest adoption rate we have is when people adopt pairs of animals."*

I always tell people: Don't put one kitten in a cage. And don't put three kittens in a cage. Put *two* kittens in a cage. Use laminated cards and give them names like "Peaches and Cream" or "Peanut Butter and Jelly" or "Bonnie and Clyde" or "Heckyl and Jeckyl." Then stand back and watch as the families come in.

When they take Peanut Butter out of the cage, and Jelly looks sad, they can't do it – they just can't separate them. So they'll adopt the two of them.

And, speaking of returns, the lowest adoption return rate that we have is when people adopt pairs of animals.

**BF:** How about adopting older animals who are harder to place than puppies or kittens?

**MA:** It works for adult cats, too, putting them in friendly pairs.

And when you have puppies and kittens, don't put them up front. If you put them at the front, the older animals will never get a chance. So you put them in the back and draw people through to see all the adult animals first, and maybe one of these dogs or cats will remind them of a childhood pet they had.

Another thing is to put bandanas on darker-colored animals. Black ones are always the last to leave, so shelters end up with lots of black dogs who all look the same. You need to break that up with bandanas – red, green, yellow, and blue.

**BF:** What about the special-needs animals – the 17-year-old cat or 10-year-old dog?

**MA:** That's a little bit more complex, but it's all in how you sell the animal.

We had this little dog named Charlie, and he had a shunt disorder so he was never going to climb stairs. It just wasn't going to happen, and this was going to be something he was going to live with the rest of his life. The staff had been trying for 30 days to get someone to adopt Charlie, but the minute they would tell Charlie's story, people would keep walking.

So I took Charlie out and I'm sitting on the bench with him and some woman walks by and says, "Oh, what a cute dog!"

“You have to be better at retail than the puppy mills, the pet shops, and the backyard breeders.”

And I say, "Yeah, he's a wonderful dog." And I'm talking about all his great characteristics, and she's getting interested. She says, "Well, is he up for adoption?"

And I say, "Yeah, but only a real animal lover would adopt him." And she says, "Well, I'm an animal lover."

And I say, "I'm sure you're a wonderful human being, but this takes a person who really cares about animals." And then she becomes adamant and says, "I really care about animals."

And I say, "Ma'am, I'm really not trying to insult you, but Charlie is a great dog, and he needs somebody special." And she says, "Well, what's wrong with me?"

All I did was get her to bring out her real feelings. She did adopt Charlie, and she brought him back to me every single month for the next two years so I could see his progress.

You can't promote the negatives. You don't just run up to people and say, "This dog is 17 years old." That's going to be a turnoff. First, find out if someone's going to bond with him. Then find out from them, "Just how much of an animal lover are you?" And then you can really get into it.

**BF:** How do you make the shelter itself more adoption friendly?

**MA:** Watch how you display the animals. Don't put black dog, black dog, black dog, brown dog, brown dog, brown dog. Learn from the masters in marketing. Baskin Robbins gives you 31 different flavors to choose from. They create excitement. So do the same thing with the dogs: a black dog, a brown dog, a white dog, and a brown-and-white dog. Break it up so the eyes are looking at different colors along with the different personalities.



*"Put colored bandanas on black dogs to help them stand out a bit more."*

The other thing to watch is how the shelter is laid out. When somebody walks back to where the dogs are, and they all start barking, it can be scary. So we have people sign in at the desk. Then we call a volunteer or staff member to come out to the front desk, and they tell the people, "When we take you out to the dog area, the dogs are going to start showing off, and they're going to be barking and jumping up to get your attention. Don't be alarmed – they're just showing off!" Then the escort takes them out to the dogs, and they're not so intimidated.

**BF:** What about how cats are presented?

**MA:** I've gone to shelters where I've seen a lot of literature on the cat cages. People aren't there to adopt literature! So if you have all this stuff on the front of the cage, you're just making it more difficult to see the actual cat.

All you need is a small card identifying the cat – name and age. Keep all the other information somewhere else. Then, when someone is really interested, you can go and get all the details.

In fact, when you walk into a lot of shelters, you see cards on

“You need to be open when people are going shopping. That includes evenings, weekends, and holidays.”

the cages that have a lot of information that has nothing to do with adopting the pet. People want to know the name, age, breed, type, and if the animal is good with children. If it's a dog, they want to know if it's housebroken. They don't care about the date it was vaccinated or spayed. You can give them that kind of information as they're filling out the paperwork.

If you've got an animal who is always being passed over, make a small change – like changing his or her name. We had a great dog named Duke, and he'd just sit and sit and sit, day after day. Then we changed his name to Bobby Jo, and people thought the name was cute, so they'd stop more. Bobby Jo, Peggy Sue, or Billy Joe – for some reason, those names were catchy and cute, and the animal would get adopted.

It's funny how those things work. We don't know why, but they do.

**BF:** *A lot of people are going to change the name anyway, so it's definitely worth using a name with good connotations.*

**MA:** I've tried these things over the years and they all work.

My job is to help these animals, get them seen by the public, and stop people from taking animals from puppy mills or backyard breeders – to get them to give an orphan a chance.

To do that, I have to be better at retail than the puppy mills, pet shops, and backyard breeders.

But going to shelters around the country, you see how we're failing to attract people. Shelters say they work on a shoestring budget, so you walk in, and the place is dimly lit – they take out every other lightbulb and figure they're going to save on electricity that way. They use the cheapest paint they can find: battleship grey or tan. And then people don't want to go there because it's depressing. They don't see that when people go to the pet shop at the mall, it's bright, well lit, and painted in pastel colors. Those animals have a chance.

And our orphans deserve a chance, too. They deserve better than any pet shop. And if the shelters don't have the money, then they need to learn how to raise the money! That's their job.

It's my job to show them how to get these animals adopted. It's all our jobs to give the orphans the best chance we can.

**BF:** *When you have adoptathons and adoption fairs and things like that, don't you get a lot of returns from adoptions that don't work out?*

**MA:** Actually, our return rate has dropped, and that's because we're screening better.

When you increase the quantity of your adoptions, you don't decrease the quality. If you have good adoption policies, they're still good whether you do 10 adoptions or 1,000. Your return rate is only increased if you're doing poor adoptions to begin with.

If you're not counseling, screening, and educating, that's what causes an increase in returns. 🐾

For information about this year's Home 4 the Holidays campaign, visit [www.animalcenter.org](http://www.animalcenter.org) or call (858) 756-4117.

## Top Tips For Getting Those Orphans Moving!

**Be There.** You need to be open when people are going shopping. That includes evenings, weekends, and holidays – especially July 4th and Labor Day, when you have a big “sale!”

**Yes, We Have No Poodles!** If someone calls and asks you if you have a poodle, and you say “No”, then you just lost them! Always say: “We have new arrivals all the time. We can't keep up with them. You really have to come down and see.” Very often, people who think they're looking for one kind of pet will end up falling in love with another.

**Advertise.** Newspaper ads work the best. If Macy's stopped advertising, people would stop going there. Don't leave the breeders and pet stores to do all the advertising. And just as they're in the Yellow Pages under “Pet Stores,” so should you be. Your ad should be better looking than theirs and say, “A large selection of pets to choose from.”

**Get Creative.** There are lots of ways to advertise, too. For example, you can work with restaurants that have glass-top tables. Ask to place photos and stories of adoptable pets under the glass. When patrons come in, they'll often start going from table to table to see the different pets.

**Educate the New Family.** Counseling, screening, and educating reduce the number of returns. Increasing the quantity of your adoptions should never compromise the quality. Your return rate is only increased if you're doing poor adoptions to begin with.

**Weed Out the Riff Raff!** Always ask for two pieces of ID: a driver's license and a major credit card. People who don't have major credit cards are more transient. I learned, after years of doing follow-up mailings to people who had adopted, that most of the ones who no longer lived at the same address also didn't have a major credit card.

**Take the Animals to Where the People Are.** Malls are great places for adoptions. Advertise the adoption two weeks before. One way of doing this is to set up empty cages with pictures of pets on a marquee, announcing “Coming Soon” or “Coming in Two Weeks.” The first time we did this, we had 170 people waiting in line on the morning of the adoption! We made over 100 adoptions and were cleaned out. The mall loved it, too, because it brought more people.

**Generate Some Buzz.** About a year ago, animal control called us to say they had a nine-year-old Rottweiler who had just given birth to puppies. She'd been used for breeding, and her people didn't want to deal with her anymore. We picked her up and named her Valentine because it was close to Valentine's Day. Then we sent out a press release telling the media that we had a 63-year-old who gave birth to septuplets. The mom was 63 in “human” years, so it made a cute, funny story, and the media loved it. We not only adopted out all the puppies, but we got a home for the mom, too!