

# Operational Guide

## Public and Media Relations



AMERICAN HUMANE

*Protecting Children & Animals Since 1877*



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## Introduction

An animal shelter in Rhode Island makes national headlines when it creates a children's museum exhibit on pet care.

A shelter in Colorado gains national attention for the medical care provided to the only survivor of a horrific abuse case targeting puppies stolen from its facility.

An agency in California promotes American Humane's annual Be Kind to Animals Week™ and benefits from national media exposure.

These are just a few examples of the results of successful public relations campaigns that took place at animal care and control agencies across the country.

They demonstrate a few points about public relations (PR) often misunderstood by the general public and shelter administrators alike. Good PR is a planned, organized program that communicates a specific message to the public, like Be Kind to Animals Week™. This is called proactive PR, but PR can also be reactive. Reactive PR comes in your organization's response when a news report reveals controversial information, or it takes the form of the information you share when a disaster is imminent. In situations like these, it's important to judge if and how you can strengthen your organization's image in the community.

Whether proactive or reactive, PR requires creativity, quick thinking, good relationships with the media as well as an understanding of deadlines and the elements of a good story. To be effective, the PR person needs to be involved in all aspects of the agency's services and programs. That's the best way to continually find "stories" to tell about the

agency's functions and its value to the community.

Handling the promotions and public awareness of an agency can be a full-time job. However, not all agencies can afford a full-time PR person on staff. In some instances, agencies contract with an advertising agency or consulting firm that helps with a few projects annually or steps in during a crisis. Even the smallest of shelters, though, benefits from PR activities, and those responsibilities often fall to a volunteer or a staff member whose primary role is animal care. Regardless of who handles PR for your agency, make it an integral part of the attitudes and actions of all organizational employees, board members, and volunteers.

## The Need for PR

Animal care and control agencies play an essential role in the community. That means always needing visibility to promote important animal issues and to find homes for the animals in their care. Establishing a PR program for your agency requires time and is dependent upon a number of factors, including financial stability, good management, historical recordkeeping, and facility location. Agency organizers, boards of directors, management, and staff need to understand the implications of public relations for all their decisions and actions.

While it would not be appropriate for anyone to make a decision or carry out a program solely for its “PR value,” always consider the public relations impact of any and all programs. This impact varies, depending on local attitudes, the specific situation at hand, and the organization’s goals and policies. Whenever a new program or service is considered, take into account the public’s impression before making a decision to proceed.

While public relations is important in all businesses and organizations, animal care and control agencies must be especially careful with their public relations image for several specific reasons:

1. The public and media perceive many shelter activities from an emotional basis. Given the highly emotional and controversial nature of such issues as euthanasia, animal control, and animal rights, and given the layperson’s lack of knowledge and training in these areas, many programs and policies easily provoke debate and criticism.
2. For an animal shelter to become, and remain, financially stable, it depends

on the public’s positive perceptions, especially those of potential contributors and of the citizens who set municipal budgetary priorities. An effective public relations program helps the organization maintain funding levels and even achieve increased funding in an age of heightened competition and dwindling dollars.

3. Animal care and control agencies, especially those operating animal shelters, are public entities. Whether financial support comes from public or private sources, individuals who use the organization’s services expect a certain level of care, consideration, courtesy, and professionalism. Regardless of whether a particular animal is an unclaimed stray, a pet given up in good faith to be adopted, or a beloved animal needing to be humanely euthanized, the public expects animal care and control professionals to be compassionate and knowledgeable about animals. Therefore, the agency must always convey an attitude of responsible stewardship of the living creatures temporarily in its care.
4. Some shelters perform euthanasia. The public does not understand the reasons for euthanasia or the specific methods used. A positive PR program and a strong image can lessen the influence of the euthanasia debate and redirect the public to more positive, productive areas of the agency’s efforts.
5. A viable animal shelter, integrated into the tapestry of the community, can and should have a tremendous impact on many people and animals. In communities with successful, well-run

animal care and control programs, it is estimated that upwards of 11 percent of all the dogs and cats in that community pass through the shelter annually. The public is also impacted by the shelter's services, including licensing drives, lost-and-found activities, humane education programs, rabies clinics, fundraising events, and publicity. The sheer scope of an organization's activities alone is cause for an organized public relations effort.

6. Public relations is preventive maintenance. Shelters sometimes report being victims of a media "witch hunt" or feel like the target of "one-sided" press coverage. Reporters do have a responsibility to publish balanced and accurate information, but this can sometimes be detrimental to the shelter. Prior and consistently positive PR efforts, however, can offset any negative coverage that comes along. An established level of credibility in the minds of the public, the news media, and municipal officials can minimize criticism and damage to the organization's image.
7. Public relations improves the morale of those working for and with the organization. The Board of Directors, management, and staff may not always agree on priorities or procedures, and the public may sometimes disagree with shelter policies, but by maintaining a positive image and establishing frequent and positive visibility in the community, the shelter enhances the pride and commitment of the people involved with the organization. A positive image in the community makes it easier for employees to discuss their work with friends and neighbors. When people

have positive experiences with the shelter and convey these experiences to an employee, that employee takes pride in the organization and is less likely to "burn out" from the stress of shelter work.

8. Any work done regularly becomes familiar. Shelter officials and employees sometimes forget what their organization looks like to an outsider, particularly someone with an emotionally based problem, such as a lost dog, a citation given for an animal's behavior, or the grief from a dog or cat's death. An ongoing public relations program establishes an organization's public image of caring, professionalism, and credibility, instilling a sense of comfort and confidence.
9. Many people hold unrealistic, misinformed, or false views of what an animal shelter is and its role within the community. All shelter personnel hear criticism from time to time — "You kill animals there," "You care more about writing tickets than caring for animals," or "Why did you pick up my dog and not the German Shepherd loose?" Positive PR corrects these misunderstandings by helping the public understand the vital role the shelter plays in assisting the community's animals and humane caregivers.

Public relations is an important part of a shelter's education, publicity, and fundraising programs, as it is often the tool used to promote the agency's work. The way the public perceives the organization determines its general support, the amount of cooperation from officials and other

organizations, and its potential to grow and serve the community.

Without a public relations program, the animal shelter often finds itself unproductively “putting out fires”, defending its every action, fighting for its existence, and wasting valuable time, money, and energy better spent assisting animals and people. PR is not a cure-all, so do not expect it to miraculously change an organization’s image overnight. Yet, PR is an essential component that keeps the shelter’s services and programs in the public eye and builds a positive reputation in the community.

## **What is PR?**

Public relations is a distinctive management function to establish and maintain lines of communication between an agency and its public and to act as an early warning system to anticipate trends and problems.

### ***Delivering Consistent Messages***

Use specifically designated spokespersons to create a positive image in the community for your agency or organization. Most people know the reputation of an agency through the image of the spokesperson appearing on radio or television, in the newspaper, or at special events. Constant turnover in the media spokesperson position conveys an image of instability within the organization. The spokesperson can be a PR professional, an executive director, a trained employee, a chairman of a committee, or the president of the board.

Consistency in message is also important. Therefore, always use well-defined key messages in articles and interviews, and be consistent with the name and mission of your organization.

### ***Thinking Before Speaking***

The person designated for this role must be well versed in the mission of the organization and in its policies and stances on controversial issues. Generally, the executive director and board supervise the PR person/spokespeople and give specific approval before making any public statements about major programs or controversial positions. To do the job well, the executive director and board must entrust the individual(s) selected to use good, sound judgment to represent the interests of the organization.

## ***Connecting to Community Leaders***

PR depends heavily on meeting the people in positions of influence in other organizations. These people often include executives of major corporations and local businesses, media personalities, foundation officials, government legislators, and powerful leaders in the community. In all cases, nothing substitutes for face-to-face contact. However, the importance of good writing and telephone skills and repeated follow-up contact cannot be overemphasized. So, hire a PR person skilled at representing the organization in individual as well as group settings.

### ***Keeping Constant Contact***

Once a dialogue is established, it must be nurtured constantly. Follow-ups and thank-you letters keep the agency in the minds and priorities of other organizations and individuals. If your PR person leaves, in order to maintain a sense of continuity, personally introduce the successor to all the important people with whom the organization interacts regularly.

Ongoing media exposure keeps the organization in front of the public. Just because the local paper publishes one good article doesn't mean your organization should slow down its media outreach. The public's very short memory makes regular articles and press releases vital to staying in your community's eye.

### ***Giving, Not Just Getting***

Unfortunately, many animal welfare organizations expect or almost feel entitled to contributions of time, money, publicity, or assistance. After all, you work for a good cause. Why wouldn't everyone want to help? In reality, however, these relationships should always be a two-way

street: People give to get something in return. That might mean the personal satisfaction of helping animals, a receipt for tax deductions, much-needed exposure for an individual or company, or even a chance to increase a company's client-base. For example, an automobile dealership donates a car for a raffle because the community appreciates support for your organization, and it hopes the donation may sway decisions to buy a car from that dealership. A hotel donates a meeting room for your annual meeting thinking that the influential members of your board may bring other groups to the hotel at a later date. A newspaper prints an animal-related story because of the potential to increase readership and circulation. Veterinarians provide free examinations for animals adopted from the shelter in order to build new practitioner-client relationships.

PR strives for cooperative relationships where everyone benefits. Keeping the lines of communication open with individuals and organizations in your community is essential to establishing and maintaining the give-and-take relationship necessary for successful PR.

### ***Being Attentive to Different Audiences***

Your organization communicates with many different groups, so PR must be responsive to the people who use your facilities and programs, as well as to the employees, board, government leaders, activists, corporate sector, media, contributors, potential contributors, professional groups in allied fields, and the general public. Your PR spokesperson must be flexible and able to communicate with all these diverse and often contradictory groups, while keeping your mission at the forefront.

### ***Serving as an Early Warning System***

Successful PR programs keep abreast of all developments in the field of animal care and control and serve as an early warning system for identifying opportunities as well as potential issues to be addressed. Having some notice about rising concerns that relate to the mission of your organization, your spokesperson can at least answer accusations and questions responsibly and authoritatively. The successful PR program also continually monitors internal activities to detect potential problems, such as outdated methods or equipment; an employee who is bad-mouthing the organization; or a technique that is no longer accepted by the public. A good PR person also trains the staff to recognize potential news stories. This extends the PR function for your organization and can uncover additional opportunities to talk about your good work in the community. Proactive PR is an important tool for raising awareness for your organization as well as helping you avoid controversies before they get out of control.

### ***Catching Trends and Problems***

The public is constantly changing, as are public values. Similarly, the animal care and control profession is rapidly advancing, with innovations in techniques reported regularly. Staying on top of those changes and how they impact and improve your organization is yet one more way to tell "your story" to key publics that support your work.

## **Characteristics of Effective Public Relations**

Public relations can be a full-time, part-time, occasional, or contractual responsibility, in an organization of any size. Regardless of the depth of the program, the person responsible for its fulfillment must be an outgoing, enthusiastic supporter of the program and must believe in the general purposes and principles of your organization. Several characteristics make PR programs more effective:

### ***Developing Cooperative Relationships***

Create collaborative programs with other institutions based upon the premise that each party involved gains something. Sometimes small compromises need to be made. At no time, however, should you compromise your mission or the values and ethics of your organization.

### ***Being Proactive, Not Reactive***

Emergency or crisis situations often place animal care and control organizations on the defensive, causing them to be reactive. Successful PR campaigns work proactively, rather than reactively. This strategy establishes communications and cooperation before something becomes controversial. Proactive campaigns create credibility, high visibility, and more widespread public acceptance of your organization's goals and programs.

### ***Increasing Exposure***

The public cannot relate to you unless they know you exist, so your organization needs to find ways to increase its visibility. Successful PR programs recognize that widespread exposure increases people's awareness of your organization. PR pros also know that even

bad publicity, handled well, can enhance your overall image and integrity. Exposure may include media broadcasts, newspaper reports, shopping mall exhibits, billboards, direct-mail campaigns, fundraising drives, public speaking engagements, humane education programs, and websites, to name a few. The key exposure strategy is to talk to anyone who will listen. Pass your business card around everywhere.

### ***Creating Your Profile***

Closely related to an organization's exposure or visibility is the nature of the exposure, or its profile. High-profile agencies maintain near-constant visibility. They usually stay on the cutting edge of new services and programs, show up frequently in the news, and even stir up controversy for the cause at times. Low-profile agencies take a different approach. They stay behind the scenes, quietly getting the job done. A high-profile approach is more effective to combat the public's low priority of animal care and control work and the organization's need to imbed itself as an integral part of the community.

### ***Focusing on the Positive***

PR programs look for the positive message in any issue and focus on ways to communicate that message to the public. Successful public relations programs know how to turn a negative message into a positive one. For example, instead of publicizing that your organization euthanized 10,000 animals last year, a successful PR program promotes the fact that 3,000 lovable pets found homes.

### ***Creating Credibility***

A successful PR person promotes the best interests of the organization. If the media or other business contacts come to know your PR person as dependable and

accurate, then your agency gains credibility and is likely the resource called by the media for story ideas or for comment on a negative story before it's printed or broadcast. Good or bad, the PR person must always respond to the media in a timely fashion with as much factual information as possible. Using "No Comment," withholding information, or not cooperating when a story is negative means you won't have the chance to present a balanced view of the issue. Plus, your positive stories won't get the coverage they deserve in the future.

### ***Maintaining Creativity***

Perhaps the hardest part of PR is continually coming up with innovative and creative ideas. Brainstorming sessions with your staff and volunteers keep the ideas flowing. Attending conferences and workshops with your professional peers also helps. Very often, agencies loan their creative ideas to other organizations in other markets, which provides a vast creative bank from which to draw. Even if an idea is not applicable now, keep a file of successful ideas for the future, and your agency will be ready to respond creatively to the next opportunity. Media and businesses always appreciate good humor, creative ideas, and suggestions. They see a lot of non-news stories and poorly written press releases come across their desks, so something different surely stands out.

## **Direct and Indirect Public Relations**

There are two general categories of public relations: direct and indirect. Direct public relations refers to the events and programs through which you plan to communicate your agency's message or mission. Examples of direct public relations include coordinating specific campaigns, conducting television interviews, hosting special events, and developing specific programs, like pet of the week, to raise awareness and benefit the animals under your care. These activities all serve to deliberately and actively improve your organization's image.

Indirect public relations is more affected by the internal workings of your organization, like telephone communications, employee relations, customer service, and public interaction. Look at indirect public relations as the little things that can make or break your organization. They can either enhance or undo all the good work a "direct" campaign accomplishes.

Essentially, indirect PR is the public's perception of your organization's everyday activities. Is the staff pleasant? Can you reach the person you are calling? Is the agency responsive to community needs? Indirect public relations means experiencing your organization with new eyes, so you can recognize and understand how someone might react to the organization and staff.

### ***Indirect Public Relations***

#### **Location, Location, Location**

Many animal care and control agencies are, unfortunately, locked into inconvenient locations behind the sewage treatment plant or on a deserted road that

is miles from town, simply because that's where land was available. The public may have a difficult time finding the shelter, even with directions. Are there ways you can compensate for this? Many shelters make up for a poor location by putting up signs that clearly mark the way to their facility, or by hosting regular offsite adoptions in malls or retail pet supply stores.

Other ideas include:

- Listing your agency in the yellow pages with a map and directions
- Running advertisements in the newspaper alerting people to your location
- Creating a brochure or flyer that you can leave at retail stores with easy-to-follow directions
- Always including a map and directions in any promotional material or flyers

#### **Visual Cues**

The public forms a first impression of your agency as soon as they walk through the front door. Is your shelter the kind of place you would want to visit if it were in another town? Is your facility clean, neat, and sanitary? Is the public hit with a blast of fecal odor when they walk in your door? Will they smell mustiness, urine, and wet animals? Will they see animal waste, piled-up newspapers, dust, insects, week-old coffee cups, rusty cages, abandoned vehicles, peeling paint, and assorted junk when they visit? The image you create affects the public's perception of your agency and the well-being of animals in your care.

#### **On the Road**

Keep vehicles presentable. Your vehicles don't have to be the latest model, nor do your cages need to be brand new, so long

as they both appear clean and well-maintained. Wash the cages and trucks regularly. Keep cabs clean of old coffee cups, scraps of paper, food wrappers, and other garbage. Fix any dents and bumps in vehicles. Dingy, damaged vehicles give the impression that you don't take care of your equipment, which may translate in the public's mind to a lack of care for animals, too. Make sure all agency trucks, vans, and cars have clear and easy-to-read signage.

### **Welcome**

When a frantic pet owner walks in the door, who will greet them? Will it be a caring, courteous, informative, and helpful animal care and control professional? Or someone who appears callous, short-tempered, and too busy to take the time to address the concerns of visitors? Each person feels their problem is unique and of the highest priority when they call or visit the shelter. Maintaining a professional attitude, regardless of the stresses of the job, can be difficult. Interactions with the public, the most important form of indirect PR, can make or break your organization's public image. No amount of direct PR can counter people's negative experiences at your facility.

### **Telephone Manners**

Most of the time, people call because they need information or have a problem they can't solve. Of course, many problems cannot be resolved over the telephone, and the already-irritated caller often considers the answer unsatisfactory. Yet, the people answering the phone must convey a sense of caring, helpfulness, and knowledge, whether that knowledge is first-hand or available through the appropriate referral to other departments or agencies. Require staff answering the phones to identify the agency and themselves — "ABC Humane

Society. This is Jane." Also, don't leave people on hold for too long.

Keep a count of how many inquiries you receive each day (the answer may astound you) to determine whether your current phone system meets your needs.

Some other techniques for improving telephone communications include:

- Having your local phone company present a workshop for your employees on good telecommunication skills
- Installing voice-mail services to collect messages for staff
- Using recorded messages for routine information, like hours, directions, and adoption fees that can be accessed through the system during or after hours

### **No Response, No Support**

Not responding to telephone calls or letters turns even the most loyal supporter and animal lover away. If someone cares enough to call or write about a problem, then they deserve a response. While that response may be little more than a thank you for the suggestion, idea, or problem brought to your attention, a response letter or phone call simply says that the contact was important enough to consider during your busy day.

### **Accessibility**

Everyone in animal care and control is busy, but unfortunately, some people insulate themselves from the outside world. Employees and interested members of the public must feel that they can reach someone in management. There are ways, of course, to screen calls or to have other people write return letters, but the public needs to feel that there is a visible leader they can contact easily.

## **Mistakes**

In any shelter that deals with large numbers of animals, mistakes can occur: an aggressive dog is adopted and bites the new owner, or an employee misunderstands a customer's request. When mistakes occur, admit them honestly, discipline appropriately, and do not try to cover up the truth or hide records. As any agency charged with the care of animals, it is imperative that you provide accurate information and keep records of all transactions. In most cases, the stored records are never needed, but occasionally a lawsuit occurs or a media person wants information on a specific animal.

## **Corruption**

Unfortunately, people at some agencies have misappropriated money or animals or committed other crimes. Not only is that agency condemned to a lasting battle to change its local image, but the scandal hurts other humane agencies and individuals nationwide. If your agency has had any criminal activity, take appropriate action before embarking on a PR program.

## **Professional-Looking Materials**

Forms, records, brochures, newsletters, and educational handouts all reflect the caliber and charter of your organization as a whole. You can produce attractive printed materials economically. The organization using poorly copied forms or recycled newsprint, blurred photographs, and smudged stationery looks cheap and poorly run. People do not contribute money to nor invest their time and energies in an operation that appears unprofessional. Change your image through creative letterhead and a professional-looking newsletter: It doesn't have to cost a lot. You can use a printing

company or purchase desktop publishing software to accomplish this task.

## **Staff Contact**

Executive directors sometimes fail to keep in touch with their employees. This is especially problematic in larger agencies with multiple or satellite facilities. The executive director may set policy, but she can't say whether or not the staff is implementing it. An executive director should keep the lines of communication open by touring the facility daily and talking to employees. Visit with staff, hold regular meetings, ask for input from staff on improvements, and find out how their work is changing and evolving day by day. Managers who lock themselves in their offices often lose touch with the agency's work.

## **Problems and Complaints**

Whether large or small, the nature of the work means there will always be a crisis to handle. Delaying action on one small crisis may lead to another. Also, if problems aren't solved in a timely manner, then the public may view the agency as unsuccessful in achieving its mission to help animals. Address all problems and complaints in a timely manner. Train all volunteers, employees, management, and board members to recognize their role in establishing the image of the organization.

A person using the agency's services may develop a lifelong impression about the agency based on one contact. Whether the contact was positive (a lost pet returned, an animal rescued) or negative (a potential adopter who is refused a pet), your staff's attitude leaves a lasting impression. If the person and the pet are treated with respect, dignity, fairness, compassion, and professionalism, the agency may have a supporter for years to come. Word-of-

mouth is still the best form of advertising. Anything that goes wrong with indirect forms of public relations adversely affects your ability to handle and coordinate direct public relations programs.

### **Direct Public Relations**

Direct public relations are those deliberate activities undertaken to educate the community about the organization, attract people to the facility, solicit contributions of money or services, and increase the level of awareness about the agency and its purposes. This guide discusses various types of public relations tools, namely fundraising, public speaking, audio-visual presentations, shelter tours, printed communications, and websites. Obviously, there is substantial overlap between these topics and some subjects closely related to public relations (such as fund development, humane education, and publicity). However, these subjects are extensive enough that they are covered in other sections of American Humane's Operational Guides.

Base all PR campaigns on the premise that everyone involved benefits from the relationship. The store that donates paint for the rebuilding of the shelter's barn contributes in exchange for publicity. The woman endowing a new kitten wing at the shelter wants the building named for her late husband. Veterinarians participate in a free rabies clinic because of the potential for future client referrals. Overall, PR involves exposure, coordination, and cooperation.

PR campaigns can be coordinated with many diverse groups, if the groups can find common ground. Shelters philosophically opposed to pet breeding can still work with local breed clubs on areas of common interest: promoting

responsible pet ownership, for example, or lobbying for increased cruelty penalties. Even though serious confrontations between pet shops and humane societies crop up over puppy mills, responsible pet shop owners may conduct fundraising programs to help the shelter or distribute shelter-generated humane education brochures in the stores.

Here are some proven ideas that continue to work for agencies:

### **Pet of the Week**

Probably the most consistent public relations program at many agencies is a regular "Pet of the Week" feature in the Saturday or Sunday newspaper, or on television, in which an adoptable shelter pet is featured. The photo's caption explains the adoption procedures and background information about the animal. The "Pet of the Week" feature is a classic example of how everyone benefits. The newspaper fills a space with a very popular feature. (Many people write to tell the newspaper how much they appreciate the profiles.) The shelter gets exposure, and a homeless animal often finds a home.

"Pet of the Week" features are most commonly seen in newspapers, but many radio and television stations also host similar promotions. Again, everyone benefits from this relationship: the television or radio station gets a quick, easy-to-produce feature, the audience gets entertainment and information, and the shelter receives exposure and possibly a home for the featured animal. Once a routine is established, this program is easy to maintain.

### **Lost and Found**

Probably the second most consistent public relations program used by animal

shelters is a community lost and found program. Many shelters experience considerable success in reuniting lost animals with their owners through print and electronic media and websites. Ideally, the shelter provides a list each day of all strays brought to the shelter plus all the found pets reported and kept temporarily at a finders' home. This list is then delivered to the newspaper for publication or the electronic media to be read over the air. The advantages of this program are mutual. The media provides its audience with news affecting the community, the shelter gains exposure, and the lost animals are reunited with their families.

As for the Internet, more shelters now develop websites (see section on Internet websites), which prominently feature lost and found services. By listing descriptions of the animals and the location where they were found or picked up, pet owners can track down their beloved pet even when the shelter is closed. To be effective, these listings should be updated every other day, if not daily. Alternatively, check out Pets911 and Petfinder to post a description of found or lost animals. These organizations also offer assistance for website development, if your agency doesn't have the resources to create and maintain one.

### **Pets on Parade**

The next step up from the short, pet-of-the-week feature is the opportunity to develop a half-hour program for a local cable station. An informative 30-minute program allows you to present many important pet tips, humane issues, as well as pets available for adoption. Ask if the cable station can help you find sponsors for the show too. It's great for everyone. The station gets a half-hour of relatively simple local programming. The advertisers

get response to their ads and corporate goodwill for supporting a local charity, and the shelter gets exposure and an opportunity to educate the public and help many animals find homes.

Even if your television station cannot commit a half-hour block of time for a show, there are other creative ways to gain television exposure. Many stations produce local children's shows and early morning shows. The hosts of these shows are always looking for local talent who can talk about things of interest to the community. It is not unusual to find such a program having a guest once a month or even more frequently. Contact the producers and propose your idea.

### **“Spokescat” or “Spokesdog”**

Many people have come to equate an agency with the one personality who continually appears on radio and TV and in the newspaper. This phenomenon is what motivates advertisers to pay celebrities thousands of dollars to become corporate images for their products, or for local businesses to use the same personalities regularly in all their ads.

There is no reason why this personality must be human. The shelter can have a “spokescat” or “spokesdog” (or both) for various assignments. One Colorado shelter, for example, made extensive use of their “mascot,” an orange tabby named “J.R. Mewing” to provide one newspaper with an annual summary of humane society activities for their year-in-review tabloid. “J.R.” was also official spokescat for the agency's promotion of American Humane's national Adopt-A-Cat month and occasionally issued his own news releases. Whenever a photographer came by for feature photos, “J.R.” was available.

Animal representatives for the organization can take many forms. One shelter in New Mexico makes extensive use of “Charlie Brown,” an abused dog who was rescued by the shelter. Meanwhile, the animal control agency across town uses an eyeless Pekinese for education programs. A Virginia SPCA uses dogs and cats to “sign” personal letters that appear in the newsletter in response to those received by the shelter.

### **Awards**

People love to receive recognition for their contributions of time and talent. The animal shelter is in an excellent position to present unique, creative awards to commend special people who in turn carry good impressions of the shelter back into the community. Annual dinners provide excellent opportunities to present plaques and special certificates to the businesses, news media, broadcasters, volunteers, and others who helped out during the year.

Depending on local policies and the award given, the local media may actually attend and cover the presentation as a news item. Make sure you give them plenty of notice along with the specifics of when and where the event will take place and details about award recipients. Make sure you know the best address (e-mail or snail mail) to send follow-up information and photographs.

How can you make creative awards? There are infinite possibilities. One shelter in Washington State gives out “Purple Bone” awards to recognize shelter employees. The award is an inexpensive nylon dog bone glued onto purple felt with silver fringe and a small plaque. Other award ideas include engraving a stainless steel watering dish (can be given to a human or animal volunteer), leashes, or

collars. One shelter created two special award certificates for “pet-ucational accomplishments”: one was called the “Bark-a-laureate” (also known as a “Dogtorate of Humanities”) and the other was called the “Meowsters Degree.” These mock diplomas are a fun and catchy way to reward special people and animals.

Recognize those volunteers or sponsors who have helped you achieve a lofty goal, and don’t forget staff, board members, animals, like those that work in pet-facilitated therapy, and even the media. Many shelters annually recognize a “Journalist of the Year” who covers shelter and animal welfare issues. If this award is evenly distributed among numerous media outlets, it becomes a source of media pride and cause for continued media support.

### **Specific Campaigns**

As more charities compete for public awareness and contributions, the animal shelter must be increasingly more creative in its staging of fundraising and educational events. Even popular booths and displays at the county fair or the shopping mall can lack pizzazz and seldom raise significant funds.

Think about the event and what your agency might do to make the display or your presence more noteworthy. For example, one humane society in California manned a display at the annual fair for years with mixed results. Then, one year, two dogs died after being left in hot cars while their owners toured the festival. The next year the shelter organized a pet-sitting service, caring for animals while their owners visited the exhibits. No animals were lost; the owners were pleased; and the shelter got widespread

publicity and the chance to educate people about the dangers of hot cars.

There are many types of charity events that can be staged to raise money and gain public awareness. These events fall into two categories.

- Fundraising appeals to a small, select group of people who are almost fanatical in their specific, narrow interest, and who will pay for the opportunity to practice that interest
- Fundraising appeals to a mass audience who may know little about the work of the organization, but who care enough for the cause to participate, as long as minimal outlay of time, imagination, and money are involved

### **Small Audiences**

Here are some events that might qualify as fundraising appeals to small select groups:

A shelter in California hosts an annual run for the animals where joggers pay an entry fee to participate in a marathon, with proceeds going to the humane society. This appeals to a select group (runners) who pays entry fees to practice and participate in a hobby. All they ask for in return is a t-shirt and a well-organized race. There are professional race organizers across the country who stage such events in exchange for a percentage of the proceeds. Similar tournaments can be organized using bowlers, pilots, balloonists, softball leagues, dart players, and other aficionados of sports and hobbies.

One shelter even participated in a fundraising program among patrons of different bars and businesses who paid

entry fees to race outhouses across a one-mile course.

In a “Hands-On” contest, an automobile dealer gives away a new car to the person who can keep both hands on the car the longest, nonstop (bathroom breaks permitted). Participants pay an entry fee that goes to the humane society. The dealer gets news coverage and favorable publicity (“free advertising”), the shelter gets donations, and one lucky participant drives off in a new car.

A humane society in Hawaii has raised thousands of dollars by staging a “Fantasies in Chocolate” event. Hotels and restaurants pay an entry fee and contribute chefs’ special concoctions, all using chocolate. People with a sweet tooth pay to spend an afternoon sampling the results, and prizes are awarded for the tastiest creations. There is lots of publicity, lots of money, and everyone leaves feeling happy (and full).

Don’t limit yourself to ideas that are used only by animal shelters. If a fundraising promotion idea works for any charitable organization, it will probably also work for an animal shelter. For example, one Girl Scout council raised several thousand dollars by building a portable 18-hole miniature golf course in the lobby of a hotel, charging businesses to sponsor “watering hole” bars, and making entrants pay a fee to indulge their hobby in February. The results were fantastic: the council was overwhelmed with people wanting to pay and play, deluged with offers from hotels wishing to provide the space, and inundated with contributions of lumber, paint, and tools to build the course.

In another example, several chapters of the Multiple Sclerosis Society raised funds by having an annual ugliest bartender contest. Patrons of local taverns contribute to declare their favorite bartender as the “ugliest” in town. Bars raise thousands of dollars each year for this worthwhile cause.

Some shelters arrange for humane vacations, where wealthy supporters take a trip somehow connected with the society’s concern for wildlife or global humane issues, and a portion of the cost of the trip benefits the shelter. (Be careful that the expedition does not appear to take money away from direct relief work for the animals at your shelter.)

### **Mass Audiences**

Programs designed to attract a large audience carry messages to educate the public and to raise funds from a large number of participants who are willing to put out a little money for an event. While the primary purpose may be fundraising, the other benefits are the opportunity to gain a sizeable contact list of people familiar with the organization who may be receptive to future fundraising efforts.

Here are some events that might qualify for appeals to a mass audience:

A popular event is the mutt show where people (primarily children) enter their pets in contests to judge the longest tail in town, the shortest legs, the spottiest or ugliest dog, and so forth. Prizes are awarded, and every child receives a certificate of participation. With children and animals, good media turnout is usually assured. Usually a photographer or cameraperson will be assigned to attend and capture the visual story.

Some variations on mutt shows include the owner/pet look-a-like and celebrity look-a-like contests; the photo contest where owners merely submit their photos with their pets for a fee; or the best portrayal of an animal contest where contestants get to imitate their favorite animal.

Another idea for an outdoor event is the “Fido Frisbee-Fetching-Fracas” for people and their Frisbee-catching canines. (Dogs are judged on grace, style, and the ability to return the Frisbee to the thrower.)

Raffles can be successful fundraisers, especially if your organization has a large corps of volunteers or an auxiliary to sell the tickets. Check state laws on raffles before you begin, since laws regarding such events can be complicated.

### **Humane Marketing**

All sorts of specialty items can be manufactured to convey the humane message for the agency. Many groups provide restaurants with “doggie bags” preprinted with information about the organization. Often, these bags also carry advertising for a commercial sponsor who pays the printing costs.

Many shelters have their own t-shirts that boast catchy humane messages. Some agencies distribute “litter bags” for cars that feature educational messages about the problem of unwanted pet “litters” and overpopulation.

Place eye-catching dog banks at restaurant checkout counters and elsewhere for spare change contributions.

Make bumper stickers with messages like “I break for animals” or “Support your local cat (and dog) house.”

Societies in Missouri and West Virginia distribute pocket calendars with the society's name and address imprinted.

Some groups manufacture their own ID tags for people wishing to register their pets with the shelter for lost-and-found purposes. Others automatically place ID tags on each animal leaving the shelter.

One shelter in Washington makes pet insurance policies available to employees and members.

## **Public Speaking**

One of the keys to successful public relations is talking to anyone who will listen. The spokesperson should be outgoing, charismatic, and have a detailed knowledge of the organization, its purpose, the law, and the behavior of the animals involved. This person must be prepared to talk to everyone from preschoolers to a committee of bankers, council of sheep ranchers, or a sorority.

Psychologists have found that one of the most primal human fears is that of standing up before an audience of strangers and speaking. Not everyone can be a public speaker, but for those who can speak well, public relations is a viable career. Just be sure to exude self-confidence and make eye contact. Remember the audience is bashful too; that's why they're in the audience. If you can overcome your fears, project confidence in yourself and your organization, and connect with your listeners, you're well on your way toward a successful presentation.

### ***Opportunities to Speak***

There are many opportunities to speak in public about your organization. Probably the most common is the after-dinner (or breakfast or lunch) speech to the service clubs in the community, such as the Lions, Kiwanis, and Jaycees. Chambers of commerce usually maintain a list of service clubs in town. Remember, the president of each club changes annually, and the program chairman usually changes monthly. Send a letter each year to the presidents of these organizations letting them know you're available to give a presentation. These organizations usually need to fill 50 or so programs each year, so they are always looking for informative, interesting, and unusual speakers.

Service clubs are not the only audiences anxious to hear your story. Neighborhood groups concerned about leash law enforcement in their immediate neighborhood or how to solve barking dog complaints make good audiences too. Fraternities and sororities are always looking for new community service projects. Safety councils want to know about the public health and safety aspects of pets. College groups may want to discuss the ethical issues in animal stewardship.

### ***What to Say***

To begin, write an outline of what you plan to cover. Practice in front of a mirror. When you get up on the podium or at the head table, do not read a prepared speech — you are not the U.S. President delivering a foreign policy address. You are a concerned professional with a unique problem, talking to people who are just like you and who are interested in what you have to say. You can refer to notes, or perhaps some index cards, but the important thing is to establish and maintain eye contact with your audience. If you continually look at your notes or the back wall, your audience will not watch or listen.

Think about speeches you have heard before and what you liked about them. Was it the way the speaker moved about the room? Was it the way his or her voice changed and used intonation to keep the audience alert? Was the presentation about dull, dry statistics, or amazing facts and things you never thought about before? Did you feel like you were being lectured to, or did you have the opportunity to ask questions and interact with the speaker and others in the audience? Did the speaker entertain you? Were there a few jokes interspersed in the program to keep things

lively? Effective speakers use all these techniques to keep their audiences alert, awake, interactive, and informed.

Keep your talk brief and to the point. Stick to 15-20 minutes for an after- or before-dinner speech. Always allow time for questions and answers, and stay after the meeting to talk one-on-one to people with specific or detailed problems.

Your speech can cover a variety of things, including what your shelter does; why you need a shelter in your community, if you don't already have one; a specific new program you've just started; a project you need funding for; a particular problem in the community; or a new direction the organization is going.

Whatever the topic, don't waste time. When you get to the podium, you have only a few seconds to get the audience's attention and make them decide subconsciously whether or not they're going to listen to you. A joke may be appropriate in some circumstances to relax the crowd and get them interested. At another time, it may be unnecessary.

If you need to recite a lot of statistics, a visual aid may be required, either in a Powerpoint presentation or as a handout. Most people cannot remember long lists of information. If the information is important for them to keep, give the audience a handout.

Do not make a sales pitch, asking for contributions. It's more effective to give a presentation familiarizing the audience with a whole program or a specific project, and then send a formal request in writing through appropriate channels asking for a contribution.

Always send a thank you letter afterwards to the person who invited you to speak. Offer to speak again and briefly mention the topics you could present in the future.

Once you get on the speaking circuit of service clubs and other organizations, you'll find that word-of-mouth will secure even more speaking engagements. Individuals in the audience may also be members of church groups, neighborhood associations, and other organizations that need speakers. Let your audience know you're available to talk to any group.

Keep a file of all your presentations along with the dates, the contact persons, and the subjects you discussed. That way, if you are called back to speak again, you won't duplicate your previous program, and you can update them on what has transpired since you saw them last.

Many communities have a speaker's bureau where people wishing to address community audiences list themselves and their topics for quick reference. It is not unusual, for example, for a convention to come to your town and have its after-dinner speaker cancel at the last minute. The convention organizers need a quick replacement and often turn to a local speaker's bureau for ideas.

### **Audio-Visual Presentations**

People commonly ask whether to use audio-visual materials. The decision to use videos, slides, or charts varies, depending on the audience, the content of the program, and the length. A 90-minute training session for local letter carriers and meter readers, advising them how to avoid being bitten on the job, is different from the 15-minute after-lunch speech to the local Rotary Club. A three-hour session with an ad hoc mayor's committee on why

a new shelter is needed is different from a 45-minute presentation to third-graders. Use some common sense, and put yourself in the position of the audience. What do they want to hear? What format will be most effective, given your limitations and strengths? Always make sure your equipment works prior to the presentation. Use audio-visual materials only if you feel comfortable doing so and if the material is appropriate for the audience.

Once you make the decision to use audio-visual materials in your public speaking programs, you must decide what type to use, how to use them, and when to use them. The choices are almost infinite, and the creative public relations professional will find many opportunities to maximize impact. You can create your own audio-visual materials or ask a printer or advertising agency to help with the process. They may even donate time to prepare a program or provide it at cost. Also, local universities and community colleges are filled with communications students looking for volunteer work and class projects.

Videotape is a common audio-visual used on the speaking circuit. If you have public service announcements or other programs on video, share them with your audience. Some local and national humane groups also sell videos on a variety of educational and promotional topics. Most shelters rely on Powerpoint slide presentations, primarily because they are economical to produce and can be updated easily. You can even develop a soundtrack or add narration to accompany the slide presentation.

## **Step-by-Step PowerPoint Presentation**

Think about the story you want to tell as the first step in creating a presentation. What do you want to say and in what order do you want to say it? Do you want to tell your organization's history? Do you want to highlight the need for a new facility or a particular program? Do you want to explore an ethical idea? Do you want to show humane treatment of wildlife, livestock, and non-domesticated animals? Do you want to describe the ordinances affecting animals in your community?

Who will your audience be? Is your program designed primarily for school-age children or businessmen and women? One of the nice things about slide shows is that you can present a good show to both children and adults with only minor modifications in the narration, leaving the visual images intact. Expect wide differences in educational levels and attention spans even among children. Thankfully, with PowerPoint slide programs you can customize each presentation to the level of your audience merely by changing your language slightly.

Once you decide on your topic and your intended audience, think of what would be the most effective way to demonstrate it. A program about shelter activities, for example, should show eight or ten photos of people at work with the animals rather than one long boring photo of the shelter or the director sitting behind the desk pointing to a chart on the wall. A close-up of a puppy has more emotional impact than a wide shot of dozens of dogs in kennels.

String the slides and the narrative together in a coherent order. Make each slide stand on its own merit. For photographs, use a telephoto lenses to capture the images close-up, and fill the frame with action.

There are two ways to create a slide program. Either write out a script and then create slides to illustrate it, or start with a group of slides and write the script around what you already have, perhaps creating more slides to fill in the gaps. You also need to consider your timing. Figure out how long you want the program to be and then use the appropriate number of slides, or let the number of slides dictate the length of the presentation.

### **Setting Up AV Equipment**

Arrive early. This will give you a chance to look the room over, check the seating arrangements, locate the electrical outlets, see if there is a microphone, and select the best possible location for your screen and projector.

### **Check Lighting**

Turn off all the lights to see if the room is dark enough for your Powerpoint slides to show clearly on the screen. Also, you should know where the light switches are, and whether you can turn all the lights on and off at the same location. If there are drapes in the room, check them beforehand to see how effective they are at blocking light. If you are not satisfied, look for the best place to set up the screen so it receives the fewest possible rays from outside. This might require changing the seating arrangements or making people shift their seats after the meal.

Audiences prefer a few words of explanation and an apology than a losing battle with the sunshine. If necessary, move to another room.

### **Place Equipment**

If possible, set up your own projector beforehand. If you can't set up completely at first, decide exactly where the projector will go and either hold the space with a small table or put the projector on a movable cart. Get as much of the setup done as early as possible. Make sure you can elevate the projector to reach the screen without undue distortion.

Locate the nearest electrical outlet. Test it. Just because it's there doesn't mean it works, or that it will work when the lights go out. If you have to use an extension cord, place it so people won't trip over it, or tape it to the floor.

### **Test Equipment**

Power up your projector and laptop. Know how the machine works, so you can have the equipment turned on but perhaps fade the screen to black while you wait to be introduced. This way the audience will not experience the glare of a bright, white empty screen. Don't forget to use an opening title slide with your organization's name and logo.

### **Making the Presentation**

Use audio-visual materials as tools to help you communicate messages, but do not allow them to be your entire presentation. Rather, audiovisuals should support your message.

### **Covering Your Bases**

Keep a library of your unused slides. If you need to produce a new program on the fly, you can incorporate slides already on file.

Maintain actual slide shows on CD ROM as well as on your hard drive in case you have something go wrong with your laptop and have to use a substitute.

Avoid photographing anything that would date your program, such as license plates, cars, calendars, fad fashions and hairstyles, or shirts with messages that may be inappropriate in a few years. It may require some advanced planning, but in the long run, your program will have a longer shelf life.

### **Shelter Tours**

The shelter tour is an integral part of humane education and public relations programs. It familiarizes people with your location, programs, needs, and capabilities. Whether your facility is large or small, all shelters should include shelter tours as part of their regular programs.

When redesigning or rebuilding your shelter, consider how tour traffic flows in the architectural design. If you are locked into an existing floor plan, map out the most effective way to move tour groups through the facility, so they can see the shelter in a logical order. One idea is to have a large map of the shelter printed on a sign or as a handout to help visitors orient themselves.

Your shelter is an educational experience in itself. One modern concept turns the entire shelter into a learning experience, complete with displays and educational material for both instructional and self-teaching purposes. Some shelters use farm animals and non-releasable wildlife available for hands-on experiences. These farm areas can be particularly meaningful for urban children who may have never seen wildlife or livestock. Some shelters provide a viewing window into the spay/neuter clinic, so visitors can watch an actual operation and learn about pet overpopulation. Other shelters provide hands-on activities for children in special

rooms similar to those found at children's museums. These programs provide tactile experiences for children and give the accompanying adults a refresher on animal care and humane issues.

### **Tour Tips**

Here are some pointers for successful shelter tours:

#### **Schedule Appointments**

Conducting a tour takes about 45-60 minutes if it's a planned, educational experience. Do not give a tour to the preschool teacher who strolls in with a class looking for some quick entertainment. Require that appointments be made in advance. It's not only common courtesy but also necessary for proper planning. Decline the tour as nicely as possible, explaining why the timing is not good for the animals or the children and suggesting a better time.

However, if a representative from another shelter or an important dignitary wanders in, try to give them an individualized tour whenever possible.

There may be certain times of the day when you do not want to conduct tours, such as before the cages are cleaned or when animals are being euthanized. Schedule appointments accordingly, and then make sure everything is in order before the group arrives. Alert staff whenever a group will be on the premises.

#### **Explain the Rules**

Certain ground rules are necessary, depending on the type and size of the tour group. Explain the rules in advance of the tour. Children (and sometimes a few adults) need to be told to keep their hands out of the cages and to walk in a quiet, orderly fashion, preferably holding on to a

partner. Strategically space adult supervisors to open doors and collect stragglers. Special needs children may have additional, specific requirements. You may allow questions as you go along, or you may prefer to save them until the end.

This is an educational program, not a recreational program. Ask teachers and troop leaders to explain to the children what to expect before they arrive at the shelter. Afterwards, these same adults can reinforce the shelter learning experience with take-home materials from your agency.

### **Plan the Program**

Plan the program so that you know what you are doing every step of the way (and so that someone can fill in for you if you are not at work that day).

Always practice what you preach. If you are taking an animal from a cage to demonstrate kindness, make sure you hold the animal properly. Keep the groups away from distractions or any situation that requires more explanation than you have time to give, such as a dog escaping from its kennel or an injured animal being treated for pain.

Don't forget to intersperse humane messages in your tour. This is an ideal time to educate visitors about such topics as pet overpopulation, proper pet parenting, humane training methods, and tagging/microchipping.

### **Suggested Tour Format**

- Orientation lecture (15 minutes)
  - What a humane society/animal control agency is
  - What it does

- Why the community needs you
- Statistics on the animals handled and the types of animals receiving care
- Basic animal care
- Demonstration of proper ways to handle pets
- Guidelines and safety measures to observe
- Tour of shelter (30 minutes)
  - Receiving desk
  - Lost and found
  - Kennel areas (include opportunities to touch the animals)
  - Adoption areas
  - Educational rooms
  - Demonstrate animal restraint and capture equipment (if applicable)
  - Interior of rescue vehicles
  - Farm animals (if applicable)
- Conclusion (15 minutes)
  - Lecture or video (optional)
  - Question and answer
  - Refreshments (optional)
  - Distribution of literature

### **Discussing Euthanasia**

What about discussing euthanasia? There is no set rule on this. General practice is to not bring up the question for children below fourth grade. However, if children ask the question, do not avoid it. Answer their questions honestly.

Never show the euthanasia room and disposal operations to tour groups. However, allow individual adult dignitaries who wish to see the euthanasia facilities to do so.

## Printed Materials

Your printed materials shape the public's overall impression of your organization, so it's imperative that these materials reflect your agency's expertise. Create all printed materials, from the forms in your lost-and-found area to the brochures given to schoolchildren, to convey an attitude of professionalism. If your materials look too expensive, donors will think you are spending your resources unwisely; if they look too cheap, they will think your organization is not yet worthy of major support.

In addition to the multitude of forms and records that the animal shelter uses daily, prepare a wide range of brochures, booklets, handouts, and notices for widespread distribution. These may include:

- Adoption kits
- Annual reports
- Bilingual materials
- Bookmarks
- Bumper stickers
- Business cards
- Capital campaign fact sheets
- Coloring books
- Digests of local and state laws
- Direct-mail solicitations
- Dog training tips
- Door hangers
- Fact sheets
- Guide to shelter services
- Holiday cards
- Letterhead
- Pet license renewal notices
- Membership cards & acknowledgements
- Membership promotions
- Overpopulation pamphlets
- Pet alert wallet cards/decals
- Pet care tips
- Pet cemetery brochures

- Seasonal pet care reminders
- Veterinary or spay clinic procedures

## Newsletters

Many shelters publish a regular newsletter for the benefit of their donors. Many shelters find newsletters to be an effective means of communicating important messages and gaining volunteer support, new donors, and donations of money, supplies, and equipment. Newsletters advise donors and the general public of proper animal care, new issues in the animal protection field, progress made by the organization, and specific tips for various holidays and seasons.

A number of organizations accept advertising to help pay for the cost of publication. If you are considering this step, check with your post office about possible complications with the Postal Service. Pieces with too much paid advertising cannot be mailed at a nonprofit bulk rate, for example.

Newsletters can range in scope from an informal one-sheet flyer to an elaborate four-color magazine. They can be published monthly, bimonthly, quarterly, or semi-annually. Before you decide to publish a newsletter, be sure you have enough information to fill it regularly and that you have enough time to put it all together. If your newsletter depends on submissions from other people, consider preparing a standard information form that can be filled out and submitted. This form could include the deadlines for submitting information; reminders that submissions must be brief, clear, and of interest to the group as a whole; examples of newsworthy items; and a name and telephone number for the contact person. If you accept photographs, tell your

contributors what kinds of photos you want and the format you require.

Newsletters can be printed in a wide variety of formats, from a folded flyer that can be self-mailed or stuffed in a business envelope, to the 8.5 x 11 magazine style. One shelter prints its annual newsletter on a giant 25 x 22 inch poster that folds into sixths for mailing. The poster opens up to become a calendar.

You may also want to consider not printing at all but sending out a strictly emailed newsletter to your supporters.

Before printing, estimate how many copies you will need to send to members, donors, the board, the media, and for other possible PR opportunities. Keep a newsletter list on file that will allow you or a printer to print labels for mailing. If you are not using a mail house to send out the publication, visit the post office to find out how to bulk mail your publication. In general, bulk mail must be sorted by zip code according to postal regulations and sent to the bulk mail facility with an appropriate form and pre-payment. Check with your postmaster for details.

To ensure readability of your newsletter: Always keep the number of different typefaces and the use of bold and italics to a minimum. Keep articles short. Use graphics and catchy headlines ... and remember, white space is your friend. A newsletter that appears gray because there are only a few very long articles is not enticing to read. However, one in which the articles are short and interspersed with cute graphics surrounded by lots of white space, will bring your readers in and accomplish your goal of sharing important information and messages about your

organization and the animals under your care.

## **Websites**

Today, PR professionals have another tool to reach the public — the Internet. In addition to the print and electronic media, make the Internet a part of any comprehensive PR plan. In fact, most PR professionals today say they would never consider a PR move without thinking about how the Internet will impact that decision or help them achieve their goal. Your website is like an electronic newsletter, except people from all over the world can access your information all the time. Websites have become the new medium where shelters can really strut their stuff. Shelters create websites that range from a single page of information, offering shelter hours and directions, to elaborate multi-linked pages with everything a pet owner could possibly want from an animal shelter. The former doesn't require too much work, but the latter may require a web designer to setup and maintain the site.

Do people visit humane websites? The answer is a resounding "Yes!" One shelter reports an average 10,000 hits per month on their website. While newspaper circulation numbers are higher in most major markets (which is one strong reason why you should still send out press releases), the website appeals to a smaller, yet more focused reader who is using the Internet to find very specific information about your organization.

## **Web Content**

The Internet is revolutionizing mass communication like never before, offering unprecedented creative opportunities for your shelter. You can put just about anything on a website, including

information on animal behavior, pet care, adoptions, low-cost spay/neuter programs, or directions to your shelter. In the process of searching for the information they want, the website visitor should also come across information that they need, such as information on membership, donations, volunteer opportunities, and upcoming special events. To build the resources your site offers, consider creating links to larger organizations like the American Humane Association. That way you aren't reinventing information that is already available.

Here's a look at what some humane agencies include on their website:

### **Advocacy**

If you do any local or state legislative work, use your website to keep constituents updated on current animal issues. It's a great place to post legislative alerts and to motivate people to write to their representatives concerning humane issues and laws. You can also link to American Humane's legislative page for the same information, at [www.AmericanHumane.org](http://www.AmericanHumane.org).

### **Adoption Information**

More shelters use the Internet to find homes for shelter animals. Many shelters take digital pictures of the animals and drop them into their web pages. A small amount of text about the animals usually accompanies the photo. Like the pet-of-the-week feature for television, an animal's chance of getting adopted increases if they are seen.

### **Animal Behavioral Assistance**

The goal is to keep animals in the home, whenever possible. People calling with pet behavior problems may not want to wait until someone can return their call. That's

why many shelters put responses to commonly asked behavioral questions on the website.

### **Capital Campaign**

Kicking off a campaign to build a new shelter or expand an existing one? Use the website to discuss the reasons for the expansion, even include architect's illustrations.

### **Contact Information**

Each page should contain information on how to contact your organization in person or by phone. Always provide a way for website visitors to contact you via email as well. The website is also a good place to download a map or directions to your shelter.

### **Description of Organization**

Here's a great place to give an overview of your shelter's services and programs. This can include text as well as photos. If you are a humane society, you could explain how you are different from an animal control agency, or you could offer a timeline of your agency's history or an overview of your role in the community.

### **Donations**

Some shelters create an area on their website that allows visitors to make a donation to the agency, make memorial contributions, or become a member. But check your state laws, since there are regulations regarding Internet contributions. You'll also need a secure site to protect your donors.

### **Links to Other Animal-Related Websites**

As more shelters create web pages, many choose to link their sites with other local and national groups with similar humane concerns.

### **Lost-and-Found Department**

Because a website can be easily updated, many shelters list their lost-and-found animal reports on the website. This allows pet owners to search for their lost pets, even when the shelter is closed. Check out Pets911 for this service offered on a national level, at [www.pets911.org](http://www.pets911.org).

### **Low-Income Spay/Neuter Programs**

List all the low cost spay/neuter programs in your area as well as the veterinarians who participate in them.

### **Mission Statement**

Don't forget to post your mission statement and consider including a letter from your executive director or board chair.

### **News**

Websites often contain the same information that you would make available to the media, plus more. You can include news on your shelter and its activities, humane interest stories, articles on pet health and behavior, and other stories of interest to your community.

### **FAQ**

Create a question-and-answer page, known on the Internet as FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions), that answers the most commonly asked questions. Or offer substantial information on a variety of topics, such as moving with pets, adopting pets, or what to do if the cat is not using the litter box, for example.

### **Shopping**

Have a local gift shop you want to promote? Better yet, put some of the items on the website to attract customers. Some shelters are even linked to shopping websites that donate a portion of their sales from that website back to the shelter.

Check your state laws regarding the selling of items on a nonprofit website.

### **Special Events**

In addition to sending out press releases and other promotional materials regarding special events, promote upcoming events on your website. Those events may include dog obedience programs, dog walks, American Humane's Be Kind to Animals Week™ activities, and any other event that you want the general public to attend. American Humane offers calendar listings on its website as a member benefit to increase interest and attendance at your event. Provide all-inclusive information. In other words, the viewer should not have to call the shelter for more information, unless you require an RSVP or registration for an event. So, include directions, cost, and reason for the event in the website copy.

### **Tips**

Many people call the shelter with the same questions: How can I move with my pets? Why won't my cat use her litter box? Will my dog's personality change if I get him neutered? A web page is an ideal place to post any articles, brochures, or other materials on these common subjects. If you don't have the time or money to get this information up on a web page, then at least list what kind of brochures and other materials you have on various subjects and allow the visitor to call or send for the information or include a link to an organization like American Humane who has complete FAQ sections on its website, [www.AmericanHumane.org](http://www.AmericanHumane.org).

### **Volunteer Opportunities**

Many shelters report that they have gotten quite a few volunteers from people who made first contact through their website. That's why your website should be

informative and contain lots of photos of the agency, as well as a list of volunteer opportunities.

## **Planning a Website**

For starters, ask yourself the following questions:

1. Why are you developing a website?
2. What role will the website play in your agency's overall PR plan?
3. Who is your intended audience? Potential adopters, donors, members, pet owners, or volunteers? Identifying the audience helps you better meet the needs of your audiences.
4. What available resources (staff, money) can you put toward the design and maintenance of a web page? Do you have a PR person to write all the material? Do you have a graphic designer to create the web page? Who will be responsible for physically maintaining and updating the page on a regular basis? What kind of budget can you allocate to this new venture?
5. What is the planned start date for your web page, and how often do you plan to update it?

A site should be useful and have a purpose. Will it serve as a resource for people wanting to know more about your shelter, your services, or your history? Do you want visitors to access your website to reduce calls to the shelter, to get more animals adopted, or to find more volunteers? List your purposes and then develop pages that help you meet those criteria.

## **The Writing**

One of the biggest problems any website manager has is finding good content. Content is what brings your visitors to a site in the first place, and new content and updates are what bring them back. All of

your shelter's programs, services, and activities should become part of your website information.

Writing for the web means getting your message across as quickly as possible. Studies have shown that web readers usually skim over the information, rather than read it word for word. Copy should be brief and divided up on the page with graphics to keep the reader interested in browsing your site.

## **The Design**

A site should operate quickly, with each page downloading in 15 seconds. Use graphics, but also keep them to a minimum per page to allow for faster loading.

A site should be structured to allow visitors to navigate with ease. The easier it is to navigate, the more likely the visitor will stay and look, and even return later for more information.

Establish site-wide consistency rules. Use standard headers and footers for each of your web pages. Use a common font size and color for specialized text segments. Use the same background color throughout your site (white is most common). Use the same color for your text throughout your site (black is most common). Colored text on colored backgrounds can be a headache to read.

Developing methods for users to interact with your site is essential for creating a good website. User feedback is very important to improving your site. At a minimum, provide your email address so that users can contact you for more information.

Overall, keep the website design simple. You may want your website to have lots of fancy bells and whistles, but the truth is the simpler and easier you make it for visitors to explore, the more likely they will return again for information.

### **The Promotion**

After creating a website, be sure to get the word out. Promote the address of your website on all printed material, including press releases and business cards. Include it as a standard part of your regular address information on your letterhead.

Make it easy to find. Using your agency name, create a web address that will be easy for the public to remember. Some shelters use the entire name of the organization, while some use the first letters from their organization's name. For example, the Dumb Friends League can be found under the address [www.ddfl.org](http://www.ddfl.org). The Providence Animal Rescue League is under [www.parl.org](http://www.parl.org). And the American Humane Association's web address is shortened to [www.americanhumane.org](http://www.americanhumane.org).

To help people find your website, you will need to register key words with search engines. Keywords are words that someone might use to describe your site, such as animal, dog, cat, shelter, SPCA, humane, pet, adoption.

### **Maintaining a Website**

If you expect visitors to return, you must provide them with new information. No matter how well publicized your site is, if you don't maintain it, it will decline in popularity. Some ways to change and update the pages include:

- Enhancing and/or improving the design and flow of the page.
- Updating or adding information on activities, programs, and services.

- Keeping a calendar of upcoming and current events.
- Responding to visitor's comments and recommendations. Take any feedback you have received, reply as soon as possible, and thank the visitor.
- Correcting errors and design problems. If the feedback you receive contains ideas on improving your site or correcting errors, evaluate each one. If you plan to implement someone's suggestion, send them an e-mail so they can return to your site and see their idea in action.
- Changing the photos on the page. New photos, especially of recent events, will keep people checking back. Someone who attended an event will want to see if their picture or a picture of their pet is used on the page.
- Adding a "what's new" section, so you can confine most of your changes to one page. You can also place a small "new" graphic next to items that have recently been updated or added to your site.
- Being reliable, above all. If you promise monthly updates, make sure you live up to your word. Do not offer anything that you cannot deliver.
- And keep it simple. Creating new and complicated web pages will only mean more work for you.

## **Crisis Public Relations**

The emotional nature of humane work means that at some point your shelter will experience a crisis. Crisis potentials include a natural disaster that shut down your operations or a protest staged by a group of animal activists. You can anticipate some crises, but some come with no warning, such as a news story that contains erroneous information, or worse yet, correct information that reflects poorly on your agency.

Deterrence and preventive maintenance are the best forms of crisis management. Pay attention to operations in advance, so situations do not get out of control. Listen to what the public is saying about you and to what your employees are saying — they are often aware of potential problems long before they get out of hand. Build good relationships with your local media as well.

Here are some suggested steps to help you create an effective crisis PR plan:

### ***Establish Media Relationships***

Establish positive media relationships in advance. If a crisis does occur, the media should know who your key spokesperson is and how to reach them. Because they know you, they may be more receptive to hearing and presenting your side of the story.

### ***Define the Problem***

Determine what the problem or crisis is and define it, so that you can better solve the problem and create appropriate responses for the media.

### ***Analyze Your Strategies***

Once you define the problem, determine what personnel, data, and equipment is available (or should be) to resolve it.

Perhaps a study is needed to determine the scope of the problem. Perhaps the problem is a situation that has been festering and is the result of unheeded warnings. Perhaps the problem can be solved with more personnel or new equipment.

### ***Perform Damage Control***

When a real problem exists and exposure cannot be avoided, the best PR strategy is to take responsibility for the problem, address the concerns by making changes, and communicate with your key audiences so that they see how the changes address the problem. A variety of campaigns are possible. Certainly publicize changes and improvements in the problem area. If you are confident of the measures you have taken to solve the problem, invite the public or reporters to visit your facility and see the changes for themselves.

### ***Propose Alternative Solutions***

Don't be afraid to explore all the possible options, and assess each option in terms of your capabilities, goals, objectives, and priorities. The solution may require a change in board policy or the termination of an employee. Weigh all the issue's pros and cons, and calculate what effect your actions will have on the public's perception of your agency. PR people should be adept at predicting outcomes and should offer plans for handling any negative publicity.

### ***Establish a Chain of Command***

Create a list of the people who should be contacted in the event of a crisis, and establish a procedure for responding to the media. You may require that the PR person, executive director, president of the board, and other affected staff meet prior to issuing a response to the press. If this is the case, let the press know that you are not withholding information, but are

gathering information to answer their questions. Also establish who will be the spokesperson. Depending on the nature of the crisis, the executive director may want to handle the press, rather than the PR person.

### ***Implement the Plan***

Don't give the media an opportunity to speculate and note in the evening report that calls weren't returned. Return all calls promptly, even if you do not have all the answers yet. Let the media know when you expect to have more information, determine what their questions and area of focus are, and offer the name and title of the person who will be responding. If the issue has widespread impact and concern, use press conferences or public hearings as vehicles to communicate with the media all at the same time. You can still offer individual interviews with key spokespersons if the media is interested or have a special focus you didn't cover during the press conference.

### ***Analyze and Evaluate***

Measure your success, or failure, during and after the campaign. Use such indicators as media exposure, letters to the editor, editorials, contributions, hate mail, and other feedback.

### ***Additional Guidelines***

During a crisis, media relations are extremely important. If you have established good media relationships before a crisis, reporters often offer a more balanced view of the issue and include your position in the story. The image you convey to reporters may influence the eventual treatment of the agency by the media. Here are some guidelines for the PR professional or organization spokesperson:

**Don't be afraid to issue a written statement or press release.** This may be necessary to guarantee that everyone receives your exact wording regarding a difficult issue.

**Keep cool.** Being flip, angry, or defensive hurts your cause. Avoid being drawn into a shouting match with opponents. Don't take the issue personally. Stick to the issues and the facts during any debates.

**Answer questions as openly as possible.** If you do not know the answer, say so, and then find out the answer and get back to the reporter. Do not answer questions with "no comment" or any other response that might suggest you have something to hide. If a matter is "currently under investigation" or "in the courts" or a "matter of internal security" or "part of a classified personnel matter," say so. The media accept these responses as long as you give them reasonable and credible guidelines.

**Never consider what you are sharing with a reporter is "off the record."** Every word you say, even those that are "off the record," are subject to being used in the print or electronic media.

### ***Press Conference Tips***

#### **Before**

Identify a good location for a press conference or media interview. In most cases you'll want the name of your organization prominently displayed in the background.

A podium or cordoned-off area is preferred and will help control proximity and limit access to your speakers. Be prepared for inclement weather with a plan for an inside location or portable tent.

Prepare your key messages prior to the press conference but try not to read them unless specific facts and figures are being shared. Present copies of the press release to distribute to reinforce what was covered in the press conference. Include fact sheets, bios, and background information on your agency in the press kit you give to each media representative.

Have someone - staff or volunteer - collect business cards or at a minimum record which media outlets attended.

### **During**

Introduce each speaker and have them spell their name and give titles so that they are recorded with footage filmed and used in preparing the story back at the station.

Set the ground rules. Indicate how long the press conference will be, who will speak, and when and if questions will be allowed.

Stick to your ground rules. When time is up, step in and thank the media for coming and physically escort your speakers inside or to a predetermined location to which the media does not have access. Otherwise, thank them for coming and offer individual interviews to any interested reporters.

Coach speakers to show empathy for animals as well as the people impacted by the issues.

Stick to the facts. Never speculate if you don't know for certain something is happening or has happened. Offer first-hand information if at all possible. Direct reporters to other involved agencies for additional information such as local law enforcement, Office of Emergency Management, State Veterinarian, or legal counsel.

Don't lay blame. Stick to what your agency is doing and what you know to be fact. Don't point fingers because you never know whether you may need support from that organization sometime in the future.

Take responsibility, acknowledge errors, and detail the steps being taken to correct or address the situation, if appropriate.

Offer suggestions and ways for the community to help, such as with donations of funds or supplies that may be welcome as well as where and how donations can be made. Offer a toll-free number and/or web address as well as addresses of agency or emergency sheltering locations.

Make note of partners working with you. If you are cooperating in an investigation, include that agency in your key messages. If another agency is working with you responding to a disaster, recognize their efforts and thank them publicly.

Always appear professional on camera. If you are working a disaster, wear a polo shirt and khakis. Keep a uniform nearby so you can quickly change if you are dirty or wearing jeans and a T shirt.

Take off your sunglasses. Leaving them on implies you are hiding something. Viewers need to see your eyes and can better share your sense of urgency, compassion, or regret for what has transpired.

Take note of whether you are smiling or exhibiting a serious demeanor to match the event about which you are being interviewed. If you are sharing good news, smile. If animals are at risk or your agency has been targeted in an investigation, you don't want to appear to be taking things

lightly. Watch out for nervous laughter, another pitfall.

Respond to media deadlines. Ask when the reporter needs to file their story and make sure you get back to them before that deadline. Otherwise you risk not having your agency's position included in the story.

Never appear to cry wolf in calling a press conference. Make sure you have real news to share. New groundbreaking programs for your agency, response to a scandal, how your agency is managing a recent disaster are all newsworthy events. Hiring a new kennel technician or signing an exclusive agreement with a pet food manufacturer are not, and will only garner media scorn as wasting their time. You also risk that when you have real news to report they won't trust you to make the distinction when you call a press conference. Rather, use press releases to share hiring news and information about products and resources available from your agency. Save the press conference for serious and important issues of interest to your entire community.

One hallmark of public relations is the ability to turn a negative situation into a positive one. But it takes planning. In a crisis, the short-term exposure may seem devastating, but the long-range results of an effective PR plan may override negative exposure and actually provide a turning point for improvements. If the problem is dealt with compassionately and with a sincere desire to find the right solution, your agency may gain greater respect and recognition within the community, resulting in even greater support for the good work being done.

## Hiring a Public Relations Officer

Initially, public relations and publicity programs are often handled by volunteers, such as willing board members or individuals in the community with media or advertising experience. However, the organization may eventually consider hiring a part- or full-time public relations specialist. Other titles for this position include public relations manager, education and publicity director, public information officer, and community development specialist. The position may involve humane education, fund development, newsletters, and a wide variety of writing assignments. Consequently, you need a person with diverse interests and flexibility.

Choose an energetic person who has experience dealing with the public and the media. Having acquaintance with important people in the community, as well as professional contacts, is essential. The person may have a background in journalism, advertising, printing, or education.

Knowledge of animals and the shelter's operations is more easily gained than the ability to communicate with the public. Just because someone is an animal lover does not mean they can handle PR. But anyone who can do successful PR can learn about the product (your shelter and your issues) that he or she will be marketing.

Establish the public relations officer as a middle-management position, afforded the rights and responsibilities accompanying these duties. Your PR person should attend board meetings and important committee meetings. Since the job will rarely be a nine-to-five job, this person needs 24-hour

access to the office and should be able to reach senior management after hours in the event of a crisis.

Instruct staff to inform this person of interesting events that may be newsworthy. Give a certain degree of latitude, depending on employment policies, regarding compensatory time off. Allow a certain amount of autonomy, and properly define lines of communication with the board and executive director, areas of responsibility, and situations in which executive approval is needed.

The public relations person must have good judgment and a responsible overview of the agency's scope of operations. The public relations professional needs to be as accountable as everyone else within the organization. However, it is often extremely difficult to measure the total effect of the PR program. Accountable record-keeping, plus regular evaluations, help the agency keep on track and give the PR professional ways to measure progress. Records of interviews conducted, educational programs presented, nursing homes visited, inches of newspaper space or minutes of TV/radio airtime are all ways to measure a program's success. But these results don't always measure the impact PR activities have on the community's perception of the agency.

You may have a surge in membership or donations due to active PR, but how can you know? Some shelters conduct surveys of members or adopters to see what factors contributed to their support of the facility. Letters to the organization, letters to the editor of the newspaper, and phone calls from the public are all viable ways to determine if your efforts are meeting with public approval.

## **Public Relations Job Description**

The following is a suggested job description for a public relations person. Use this description as a guide to create your own.

### **General Purpose of Position**

To develop and administer a comprehensive PR program that furthers the mission and goals of the agency and that increases public awareness of the organization's roles and services in the community.

### **Duties and Responsibilities**

- Coordinates the creative development of all publications and other written materials distributed by the organization
- Develops and administers public service campaigns
- Writes and distributes newsworthy information to the media, and arranges all media appearances and interviews
- Responds to news media inquiries
- Provides assistance and training to all agency staff speaking with the media
- Oversees all media interviews
- Works closely with news media, community leaders, and others to increase public awareness of the organization and its roles, services, and objectives
- Coordinates and establishes consistent messages and activities for press releases, publications, and website content
- Oversees all Internet activities, works with the Webmaster and other employees to ensure that information gets on the website in a timely manner
- Makes PR presentations at the annual board meeting
- Acts as official spokesperson in conjunction with executive director,

president and other designated personnel, and represents the organization at meetings and functions as assigned

- Coordinates and handles the marketing and promotion of special events
- Attends meetings and corresponds with citizens, state and national organizations, governmental groups, and other humane and animal control agencies to gain new ideas and information pertaining to humane issues
- Keeps appropriate personnel informed of PR activities
- Develops the organization's crisis communication plan and implements the plan when a crisis occurs
- Maintains media contact information and creates press materials as needed
- Compiles news clips and website mentions in order to report quantity and quality of coverage to Board

### **Job Qualifications**

- Knowledge of the principles and practices associated with effective public relations communication
- Ability to establish good rapport with members of the media and vendors
- Ability to plan, organize, and carry out assignments effectively and in a timely manner
- Ability to communicate effectively, both orally and in writing
- Ability to develop effective PR materials, including their content, layout, and overall appearance
- Knowledge of publishing techniques as used in desktop publishing, the commercial printing industry, and online publishing
- Knowledge of desktop and online publishing methods and associated software

- Ability to prepare and maintain records and reports
- Ability to organize and prioritize tasks
- Ability to work on more than one task at a time

## Final PR Suggestions

**1. Always consider the role of human nature.** Even with the most professional of programs, PR persons often forget to reach their audiences on appropriate levels, or with psychologically acceptable messages. A successful PR program couches solutions in terms the audience can accept. For example, the reader of a booklet on pet overpopulation will be more likely to get his or her cat sterilized if the brochure explains the convenience and cost savings of spaying, rather than pointing a finger of blame at the reader.

**2. Use appropriate language.** There are times to speak in professional jargon and times to speak plainly. Know your audience, and write or speak accordingly. Similarly, there's a time and a place for raw data and bulging statistics, and a time for heartwarming stories that depict the purpose of the organization. People will react better to a story about an individual animal heroically rescued, or a dramatic photo of one abused pet, than to figures about how many thousands of animals you received this year. While statistics are professionally important, they often lack public appeal.

**3. Don't try to cover up the fact that you euthanize animals,** but also don't go out of your way to hit people over the head with the harsh realities, either. Euthanasia is a realistic fact of shelter work and is a consequence of an uncontrolled pet overpopulation, but is only a small part of what shelters do.

**4. Remember that your shelter does not have animal problems, it has people problems.**

**5. Agree to disagree with adversaries.** Work constructively with your opponents, recognizing that despite some philosophical differences, there may be points on which you both can agree and work together.

**6. Attend events** like luncheons, community meetings, chamber of commerce functions, media events, and other activities where people gather. Sometimes the best form of communication is one-on-one.

**7. Maintain one person as the official agency spokesperson.** Alert your employees to who that person is and what they should do if the media approaches them. Occasionally, you want staff or volunteers to be interviewed to convey their own version of an event. For example, a reporter may call an officer who just conducted a major investigation or rescue. While media wants to interview the officer, alert the PR person, so there are no surprises for the agency in the newspaper the next day or on the news that night.

**8. Be empathetic with the people you serve.** Recall what your own impression of the organization was before you joined, and conduct all your programs on that level.

**9. It's good to count the people you reach, but it's even more important to reach the people who count.** Develop lists of media, local and state officials, donors, and such. These are people who can make a difference for your agency by printing a story, changing a law, or supporting your cause. Build lists for blast faxes and emails to communicate with them often and when you need immediate access.

**10. Remember to send thank you letters and follow- up communications to the people who help you.**

**11. Be professional.** Deliver on every promise you make. Be punctual, appropriately dressed, and prepared to represent the organization at everything from a country barbecue to a black-tie dinner.

**12. Develop a proactive PR plan,** but also create a process for reactive responses.

**13. Be accessible.** Understand that public relations work involves weekends, evenings, and an endless stream of breakfast meetings. The person conducting these programs must have flexible time and travel capabilities. That means being available to the media as necessary, including at home when major stories develop.

**14. Be eclectic.** Exchange newsletters with other shelters and go to as many training conferences, seminars, and workshops in the animal field as possible. But don't limit yourself to innovations only in the animal field — see what other nonprofit or governmental agencies are doing. Borrow ideas from any source (making sure you do not infringe on any copyrights and give proper credit as necessary) that can help you in your job. Don't reinvent the wheel: see how someone else handled a similar problem.

**15. Avoid conflicts with other charities.** Your community should have a council of nonprofit organizations that meets regularly to share ideas. This is also a handy way to find out when other charities

are scheduling fundraising campaigns, so that your campaigns and special events don't conflict with other major nonprofit events.

**16. Piggyback your campaigns.** Today, there are many nationally celebrated "weeks" and "months" to call attention to animals and to professional humane work. American Humane's Be Kind to Animals Week™, held during the first full week in May, is one such example. Coordinate your activities with these events and take advantage of the national publicity that surrounds them.

**17. Keep good files.** Maintain files of professional contacts in the community, along with the names of their pets. Keep copies of all the clippings about your organization from local newspapers, and keep track of speeches you have presented to service clubs or other audiences, so you don't repeat yourself next year. Television stations or video clipping services may provide you with videotapes of programs in which you were featured, although there may be a charge for this. The best thing to do is find out when the program will be aired and videotape it yourself.

**18. Know who to contact for help.** There is an extensive network of publicity and public relations professionals in your community willing to assist you and share the benefit of their experiences. Contact public information officers at local businesses, military installations, and governmental departments. See if there is a press club or advertising federation in your area. There may be local chapters of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) or the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC).

## **MEDIA INTERVIEW AND PRESS CONFERENCE TIPS**

### **State and spell your name, title and the name of the organization**

State your name and spell it. State your title and the name of the organization. Make sure you provide the reporter or photo journalist with your business card. Include a copy of a press release if you are promoting an event or making a statement on an issue.

### **Make a brief opening statement**

Present your organization's position on a particular issue or details of an upcoming event. Date, time, location, what will be taking place.

### **Know your key messages**

What do you want people to know about your organization and your event/issue? Stick to those key points.

### **Practice speaking in front of a camera**

Use your organization's video camera and practice speaking in front of it. Ask a colleague to play the role of the reporter. Have them ask questions and respond speaking to that person, not looking at the camera. Critique yourself and have others give you constructive feedback.

### **Tell the truth**

Always tell the truth. The credibility of you and your organization are at stake. Take responsibility if something has happened to injure your organization's reputation. State the steps being taken to correct or address the problem. If you are only at the investigative stages, make that clear. If you are cooperating with other agencies conducting the investigation, make that clear.

### **Don't speculate**

Stick to the facts. Do not guess at why something has happened or why someone did something. State the facts and continue referring back to the facts or other agencies that might have additional information when you do not. Offer to gather additional information if you don't know something. It's okay to say you don't know the answer to a question.

### **Don't comment on others' opinions**

Stick to the positions held by your organization. Don't speculate as to the opinions of someone else or another organization. You only know for sure what's going on in your organization as shared by your Board and management. You represent those positions, not those of others.

### **Correct inaccurate information as soon as possible**

The faster you can correct information, the less likely someone else will pick up the same inaccurate information and state it as fact. Read magazines and newspapers, watch television news, listen to radio and check online resources often. This way you can monitor what the media is saying about your organization to make sure they have the facts straight. Make calls and e-mail media with corrected information.

**State the facts in simple terms, don't use jargon**

Pretend you are having a conversation with a friend or your grandmother. They won't understand your jargon or acronyms and neither will your audience. Keep things simple. Use short sentences. Use the complete name of specialized equipment, procedures, etc., rather than abbreviations or acronyms.

**Be professional and helpful, not confrontational**

Even in the most difficult of circumstances, always be professional and courteous with reporters. You want them to build a relationship with you and your organization so when you have good news to share or an event you want them to cover that they will remember how helpful you were.

**Remember you are never "off the record"**

Reporters sometimes try to appear friendly in order to get you to let down your guard and say something controversial. That will be then be used instead of the key points you really wanted to make. You are never "off" the record when talking with any reporter.

**Know your organization's accomplishments and safety record**

During crisis in particular, it's good to know the good work your organization has done. Use records like the number of adoptions, save rate, employee turnover (if good), number of on-site accidents (if low), and number of times something good or bad has happened in your statements to the media. Include other facts like how long your organization has been in business serving the community, how many disasters it has responded to and how long it has been a member of national associations like American Humane. These all convey credibility and a positive reputation.

**It's okay to say "I don't know"**

If you don't have an answer to a reporter's question, it's okay to say "I don't know." Offer to get back to them with the answer. Or suggest someone else they could contact for specifics. You don't have to be the expert on every issue. Stick to your key messages and your reason for wanting to participate in the interview. Your credibility and reputation are at stake if you try and fake an answer when you aren't sure.

**Be patient, repeat key facts**

The reporter who comes to interview you may not have been given all the background information so be patient with questions about what issue they are covering. Start at the beginning with why their audience should care and provide the facts and key messages. Always have additional copies of your press release and a press package if the reporter is new to you.

**Find a visual to reinforce your position**

Use props like signage for your organization, a vehicle with your logo, pet kennels/crates, an animal that illustrates a key point, or a model or poster that does the same. Television media always prefers something other than just your talking head on camera. Newspapers appreciate graphics or photographs that illustrate your point.

### **Respect deadlines**

When reporters call, they are often on deadlines as short as a few minutes or hours. Once you've established what the reporter wants to know, ask about his/her deadline. If you do not respond within this timeframe, your position will not be included in the story. If you have to research the issue or get your executive director briefed, you'll need to do so quickly. Have a plan in place for contacting key spokespeople quickly and a backup plan if that person is unavailable.

### **Be willing to serve as a resource**

Sometimes reporters are just looking for background information on a particular subject. Be willing to do the research and respond prior to their deadline. The next time they need an interview, you'll be the first person they call. They will also often give you a heads up when something controversial comes up and you'll have more time to respond.

### **Be confident**

You will always know more about the subject than the reporter. Present your knowledge with confidence. Appear to be the expert and that will come across in your interview.

### **Turn negative statements or questions around**

When asked a negative question, "how many animals does your agency euthanize each year?" turn the question around and answer with your key messages. "Euthanasia is reserved for animals that are unadoptable. Our staff works hard to rehabilitate animals who may initially appear to be unmanageable or who come to us with injuries or illnesses. Tagging or micro chipping is the best way to ensure family pets don't have to stay at the local shelter." If you are pushed with that particular question, "the number varies depending on how well spay/neuter programs are going and whether our community is looking to us first to adopt animals." Again, focus on your key messages such as adoption, spay/neuter, and tagging, and don't feel you must answer the exact question asked.

### **Avoid saying no comment**

Never say "no comment." It always implies you are hiding something or were the cause of a particular problem and are just not admitting it. Rather, indicate you don't have all the information and can get back to them, using language such as "it's premature . . .," "this is under investigation," "we looking into that", "we were unaware of that issue/problem and once we gather the facts will respond." A written statement is sometimes a good solution to responding to particularly sticky situations. Then you know the response won't be taken out of context.

### **Be a good listener**

Let the reporter pose the entire question before answering. If the question contains multiple parts, start with one then move on to the other aspects. If you are unclear, restate the question to the reporter. "Are you asking me if....?" Or "Did you mean to ask whether....?" Once you get confirmation, then answer the question.

### **Always use the last couple of minutes to restate your position**

At the end of the interview, the reporter will often ask if you have anything to add. Use this opportunity to restate your position in a different way. Remember short statements, referred to as

sound bites, will get the most air time. Spend some time preparing some of these before your interview.

### **Thank the reporter and media outlets**

During a crisis, the media is perhaps the best mechanism for communicating important messages about donations needed, dropping off food and supplies, shelter locations, assistance with transportation for farm animals, etc. Make sure you are working closely to get critical information out to the public. Make sure to thank the media for their help in these situations. Don't wait to get these messages out and remember to respond to their requests even though you may be swamped with operational issues. Also remember to thank reporters when they cover a controversial issue in a balanced way or have helped you get an important story out to your community about your agency. Ethically most won't accept gifts, but a thank you call, e-mail or note goes a long way to build good media relationships.

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## CRISIS MEDIA TIPS

In a crisis, reporters are looking for an authority figure to provide them with the most up-to-date, accurate information – and reaction to what others are saying about the situation. Do not speculate. Do not place blame. Do state the obvious and stick to the facts witnessed by you or approved by your Executive Director and/or Board of Directors.

### DO...

- Be sensitive; mention concern for people, animals, and the environment before mentioning concern for things – buildings, schedules, or products.
- Release only verified information that has been approved by your organization
- Promptly alert your local media of your response to the crisis
- Provide employees and your Board with regular information and updates first
- Notify key civic, regulatory, elected and other people important to your organization
- Escort media everywhere on-site at your facility or staging area
- Have someone designated as your spokesperson(s)
- Respect reporter's deadlines and respond quickly to inquiries
- Provide equal interview opportunities and facilities for print and broadcast media
- Be clear on what information can and cannot be released
- Express concern for the protection, health, and safety of people and animals

### DO NOT...

- Assume reporters are aware of your concern for people as well as the animals you serve.
- Speculate on impacts or causes
- Speculate on when you might resume normal operations
- Speculate on the outside effects of the crisis
- Speculate on the dollar value of the losses
- Release unverified and unapproved information
- Interfere with the legitimate duties of news reporters (they can report from public property like sidewalks)
- Purposely mislead reporters
- Surprise employees, regulators, or elected officials with information in the media
- Place blame for the crisis

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## PRESS CONFERENCE CHECKLIST

During a crisis, even routine activities take on an added complexity. Because there are so many other conflicting demands for attention, small details can be forgotten or overlooked.

### Spokesperson Preparation/Internal Notification

- \_\_\_ Brief spokesperson on key points and relevant information
- \_\_\_ Determine best time for news conference based on local news times/crisis issues
- \_\_\_ Review anticipated questions and answers with spokesperson
- \_\_\_ Prepare opening statement and review with spokesperson
- \_\_\_ Develop presentation materials; large graphic site map, overheads, etc.
- \_\_\_ Brief organization management on subject, spokesperson(s) and schedule of events for conference
- \_\_\_ Let all employees know beforehand that the press conference will be held, but ask that they do not attend; it is for press members only
- \_\_\_ Determine whether certain employees should be at the conference to answer specific technical questions

### Media Notification

- \_\_\_ Notify media of time and location of news conference, and stick to your time frame
- \_\_\_ Remind media the morning of the event with phone calls to determine whether you've made their schedule for that day
- \_\_\_ Compile prepared background information for reporters/photo journalists

### Background Information Kit Preparation

- \_\_\_ Include all previous news releases related to the event
- \_\_\_ Include company information, history, fact sheets, maps, statistics, applicable bios, etc.
- \_\_\_ Include printed copies of opening statement and other briefing materials

### Conference Facility Arrangement

- \_\_\_ Appoint someone to coordinate physical arrangements of press conference
- \_\_\_ Arrange organization signage in background of podium
- \_\_\_ Always have podium, table, caution tape or some kind of barrier between speakers and media
- \_\_\_ Determine electrical needs for microphones, speakers, outlet placement, junction boxes for TV, light locations and thermostat controls
- \_\_\_ Check that all microphones and audio visual equipment function in advance of conference

### Room Preparation

- \_\_\_ Arrange for charts, podium, tables, and chairs to be in place
- \_\_\_ Keep a log of stations/affiliates and names of journalists who attend
- \_\_\_ Place all news information and handout materials on tables

### Coordination of Event

- \_\_\_ Escort the media to the conference room
- \_\_\_ Ask for business cards and add to log
- \_\_\_ Distribute background materials, press materials, etc.
- \_\_\_ Open the conference by stating and spelling your name, and establishing the ground rules (length of event, when questions can be answered, who will be speaking and in what order)

- \_\_\_\_\_ Monitor questions and answers closely, and make any necessary clarification before the end of an event
- \_\_\_\_\_ Close the conference and thank the media for coming. Indicate whether additional interviews are available with key spokespersons. Arrange interviews in order of individual requests.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Have someone take notes of questions asked and answers given

**Follow-up**

- \_\_\_\_\_ Handle requests for follow-up information
- \_\_\_\_\_ Monitor the coverage received and contact news organizations as needed for correction of errors

## **A Checklist: Vital Communication Equipment and Systems:**

- \_\_\_\_\_ Develop a directory of the work and after-hours phone, pager, mobile and fax numbers for Executive Director and members of disaster team
- \_\_\_\_\_ Maintain a directory of the work, home, fax, pager and mobile telephone and communications numbers of key local, state, regional, and federal emergency, regulatory and elected officials
- \_\_\_\_\_ Update the directories each month
- \_\_\_\_\_ Pre-program fax machines and computer emails with media and management numbers
- \_\_\_\_\_ Pre-establish emergency “hotline” telephone numbers so employees and the public can call and get approved, emergency information. Determine who will record key messages
- \_\_\_\_\_ Ensure your website can be updated immediately in the case of a crisis
- \_\_\_\_\_ Make sure your disaster team has access to digital cameras, cassette recorders, a video camera and player, walkie-talkies, televisions, radios, computers, and office supplies –keep maintained and tested monthly in a pre-decided location
- \_\_\_\_\_ Carry extra cell phone batteries
- \_\_\_\_\_ Develop a handy, laminated pocket card of emergency numbers
- \_\_\_\_\_ Test emergency communications equipment and practice disaster response quarterly

The good news is that the technology for successful emergency communications (once extremely costly) is widely available. Telephones, computers, fax machines, cell phones, and pagers can be combined to provide non-stop, instant communication and teleconferencing capabilities:

- Telephone messages can be recorded for instant “broadcast” to multiple phones
- Telephone calls can activate pagers or be forwarded to other numbers and mobile units
- Computers and fax machines can be pre-programmed with mailing and telephone lists that send messages with one click of a mouse or the press of one button
- Wireless communications let you get and send electronic mail almost anywhere, at anytime
- Electronic messages to computer mailboxes can be displayed on pagers and PDAs
- Websites can make information widely available with the click of a mouse
- Inexpensive video and audio equipment can be attached to computers to provide your emergency center the ability to teleconference

Emergency communications systems include more than technology. They include information and preparation, too:

- Develop mailing and fax lists of key site, corporate, regulatory, state and elected officials who may need to be reached by emergency team members any time of day in the event of a crisis
- Identify key management who can respond on a rotating basis to ensure night, weekend and holiday availability. Identify key volunteers who can assist with your response.
- Publish a list of updated emergency-contact telephone, fax, and pager numbers every month
- Assign individuals to test your emergency communication list once a month
- Schedule quarterly unannounced emergency team drills to make sure the team can be mobilized within an hour at any hour
- Develop a list of local, regional, trade, and national media, and pre-program your office fax and computers

- Create a notebook of emergency numbers and information for each disaster team member
- Conduct a “mock” exercise quarterly; invite local and state emergency operations centers to participate (even if it’s just confirming “mock” notifications)
- Obtain the newsroom numbers of key local and regional print, radio, and television media
- Automate notification systems; fax machines, pagers

Remember, getting, verifying, and issuing accurate information is difficult in an emergency -- it is even more daunting if communications systems are incomplete, unprepared, poorly tested, and not maintained. Take pride in your “just-in-case” preparations – during regular disaster drills, offer briefings of your emergency preparations to local stakeholders.

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## YOU HAVE RIGHTS TOO!

### ***To know who is interviewing you...***

And what newspaper, magazine, television or radio station they represent.

### ***To be treated professionally...***

Tough questions, loaded and critical questions, rapid-fire questioning, and interruptions -- they're all fair game. But a reporter's demeanor should never be abusive.

### ***To physical comfort....***

During an interview, such as an appropriate setting, chair, make-up, lighting – as well as their assistance with putting on microphones and knowing when you're being interviewed.

### ***To establish ground rules...***

Even for a spontaneous interview. Media have deadlines and information needs; you have schedules and priorities. Go out of your way to meet the needs of both parties.

### ***Not to be physically threatened...***

Or impaired by hand-held lights or microphones shoved into your face.

### ***To make your own or obtain an audio or videotape...***

Of the interview. Always mention this to the reporter when you are taping the interview - this disarms the reporter slightly and may make them more careful about the interview process.

### ***To be heard...***

To be allowed to answer without the constant harassment of interruptions; nonetheless, it's your responsibility to be responsive, concise, and accurate.

### ***To get some of your points across...***

In the interview. Don't just answer the reporter's questions. Use questions to transition to your main messages but be aware of keeping the interview on track and don't offer provocative information if you are not prepared to follow through on all the answers.

### ***To have an accurate on-air introduction...***

By preparing your title and that of your organization in large easy-to-read type for the interviewer. If the introduction isn't correct, it is your responsibility to correct or clarify the introduction.

### ***To be quoted accurately...***

Remember, it's also your responsibility to communicate clearly.

### ***To have the basic intent...***

And tone of your answers come through in the final story.

### ***To make and correct a mistake...***

During an interview. If you lose concentration or get into a sentence that isn't turning out right, ask if you can stop and start again. Even governors, actors, and anchors sometimes need a second "take".

***To do better next time...***

Even Presidents can improve on their media skills; a crisis is no time to debut an amateur, untrained spokesperson. Allow, however, a little slack to even the seasoned pro.

***To terminate the interview...***

If any of the above rights have been violated; or significant patterns of violation continue. This is exceedingly rare! Don't leave without saying, politely, why, and know that that part of the interview will be used.