

Encouraging the Adoption of Rescue Dogs Strategic Plan

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The experience of dog ownership has been shown to have both physical and psychological benefits for owners, including reduced stress and cholesterol, lower cortisol levels and increased socialization (Marston & Bennett, 2003, p. 229). Millions of dogs are available for adoption in the U.S. from shelters, and while there is a widespread belief that rescue dogs are problematic, sick or dangerous, the majority of these dogs are in shelters for non-health or behavior-related reasons (Neidhart & Boyd, 2002). There is an emerging trend among young, financially stable dog owners toward shelter dog adoption, particularly with those who are in highly-populated areas with shelters in close proximity to their homes (Patronek, 2009). The goal of this campaign is to capitalize on this trend by educating these potential adopters about shelter dogs and their positive health, community and social benefits, to encourage them to rescue a shelter dog.

This campaign targets educated Internet users in the U.S. under the age of 40, living in cities or highly-populated areas, and who are in the contemplative or preparation stages of getting a dog (Prochaska, Redding, & Evers, 2008). The target audience has some post-secondary education and an above-median average household income, and regular access to the Internet (Zickuhr & Smith, 2012). Ideally, this target group has used the Internet to research pet adoption-related topics in the past six months. The campaign encourages this group rescue a dog from a local shelter program, rather than buying a dog from a volume breeder, pet shop or puppy mill.

The campaign uses the transtheoretical model (TTM) to target the consciousness-raising opportunities of the audience in the appropriate steps in the processes of change, and the social cognitive theory (SCT), focusing on environmental and situational factors that influence pet adoption behaviors (Prochaska et al., 2008; McAlister, Perry, & Parcel, 2008). These theories are appropriate for this campaign based on the understanding of the goals and motivations of this

demographic, including their social awareness and interest in supporting their community and charitable efforts, their lack of barriers to pet adoption, and their access to, and regular use of, the Internet (Robinson, Wysocka, & Hand, 2007).

Strategic Plan

To encourage the desired behavior, this campaign will present data on the benefits of owning a dog and disseminate positive messages about pet adoption and shelter dogs. The campaign will detail the trend of shelter pet adoption by the target demographic, as well as their behavior and social motivations for purchasing decisions. Through targeted Internet advertising, the campaign will reach the demographic with educational and motivational messages about pet adoption, encouraging them to reap the physical and psychological benefits of pet ownership, while also achieving their overall socially conscious goals of contributing to the good of their community.

Messages

Benefits of dog ownership. The outcome expectations concept of the social cognitive theory explores a person's beliefs about the value of performing a behavior that they are considering (McAlister et al., 2008). In this case, the research establishes physiological value of dog ownership for the audience by detailing the benefits, and setting positive outcome expectations. The positive health impacts of dog ownership on owners in the U.K. (34% of households), Australia (40%) and the U.S. (38%) were studied by Marston and Bennett (2003), with research structured around eight questions on why these subjects adopted dogs, and the perceived benefits of these human-canine relationships. The researchers found that dog ownership has physical and psychological benefits for owners that are "physically measurable," including reduced stress, lower cholesterol and cortisol levels, and decreased blood pressure, and increases in endorphins, prolactin and oxytocin (Marston & Bennett, 2003, p. 229). Dogs were also shown to lower

anxiety and increase relaxation for their owners, as well as foster increased social interaction (Marston & Bennett, 2003).

McConnell, Brown, Shoda, Slayton, & Martin (2011) conducted an anonymous online survey of 217 pet owners and non-owners with a mean age of 31 over a two-week period through a university email system, to determine the differences in levels of wellness between the owners and non-owners. The researchers found that pet owners reported less depression and loneliness, higher self-esteem, and higher levels of physical fitness, exercise and subjective happiness, than non-dog owners (McConnell et al., 2011). The results from both of these studies help to set positive outcome expectations for members of the target audience considering getting a dog, illustrating a key concept of the social cognitive theory.

Pros of shelter dogs and adoption. The transtheoretical model shows that one process of those in the contemplative and preparation stages of change is consciousness-raising, where subjects are seeking facts and information to support their anticipated behavior (Prochaska et al., 2008). This campaign will target those in these stages of considering dog adoption, to encourage this choice with messaging that explains why most dogs are in shelters, and shares positive experiences of those who have rescued shelter dogs. The research of New, Salman, Scarlett, Kass, Vaughn, Scherr, and Kelch (1999) combats a widespread stereotype that shelter dogs are sick, difficult or dangerous. Over one year, the authors used a standard questionnaire to interview a random sample of dog relinquishers in 12 animal shelters, located in California, Colorado, Tennessee, Kentucky, New Jersey and New York, to find out why they had surrendered their 330 total dogs (New et al., 1999). The top three reasons were because the owners moved (42.7%), had landlord issues (38.8%) or had changing circumstances with nowhere to keep the dogs (12.7%) (New et al., 1999).

Support for the pros of shelter dog adoption and satisfaction is provided by research of Neidhart and Boyd (2002), who surveyed 698 shelter dog adopters in Arizona and New Mexico at two weeks, six months and one year after adoption. More than 90% were very satisfied with their pet a year later, and 96% were satisfied with the adoption process and would do it again (Neidhart & Boyd, 2002). Additionally, six months after the adoptions, 90% of the dogs were reported healthy, and a year after the adoptions, the majority of the dogs (77%) had no reported problems with behavior (Neidhart & Boyd, 2002). This information provides solid, consciousness-raising data to those in the contemplative and preparation stages of change, seeking information on why to perform a behavior – in this case, considering pet adoption -- as defined by the TTM.

Demographic trend and lack of barriers to shelter pet adoption. The facilitation construct of the SCT is the catalyst for this message, relying on the resources and logistical ability of the target demographic to adopt shelter dogs (McAlister et al., 2008). There is evidence that the target audience is adopting shelter pets, and a lack of financial and environmental barriers that would prevent adoption, as the target audience has the fiscal means to care for a shelter pet, and they are physically close to adoption opportunities. In a survey by the Spectrem Group investment firm of their pet-owning clients with an annual household income of \$200,000 or higher, 36 percent adopted their dogs, compared to less than 30 percent from a breeder or pet store (Spectrem, 2014). Of these adopters, 42% were under the age of 40 (Spectrem, 2014).

In his study of the three geospatially diverse shelters run by the Boston Animal Rescue League, Patronek (2009) found that of the 1,563 shelter dog adoptions between 2005 and 2007, shelter dog adopters were predominantly households of young married couples with children with an above-average median household income of \$67,242. Spatial proximity to a shelter had a

strong association with adoption, as 61% of the dog adopters were in urban neighborhoods that were less than six miles from a shelter (Patronek, 2009). These examples support the facilitation construct of the SCT model, as they demonstrate the resources available to the target audience that would easily facilitate the adoption of shelter dogs, and also show the existence of this trend within the demographic.

Behavioral motivations of target audience. The collective efficacy construct of the SCT demonstrates a group's beliefs in their ability to create outcomes through their combined behavior (McAlister et al., 2008). The messaging for this section relies on this theory to tap into the demographic's community consciousness and ethically-driven behaviors, with the desired outcome of the group benefiting their community, animals and society as a whole by rescuing animals in need. According to the Humane Society (2014), the top cited reason to adopt a pet is to save the animal from euthanasia, followed closely by supporting the shelter's good work in the community and denying support to puppy mills or volume breeders, making shelter pet adoption an ideal, ethical behavior for the social goals of the target audience (para. 2, 5). In their research of the results of the multi-year surveys from the Monitoring the Future (MtF) study of high school seniors since 1976 (N=.5 million), as well as the American Freshman (AF) survey of college students since 1966 (N=8.7 million), Twenge, Campbell and Freeman (2012) found that those born in 1979 and after are more likely to participate in activities and causes that benefit their local communities than previous generations. Of those born since 1979, 50.9% listed participation in programs that support the community as a key life goal, and an average of 64.35% listed helping need-based causes as a priority (Twenge et al., 2012).

In an analysis of questionnaires self-completed by 1,203 Australian and Indonesian Millennials about the ethics behind their purchase behaviors, a direct positive correlation was

found between the subjects' awareness of a cause and its effect on their purchases (Bucic, Harris, & Arli, 2012). Social and personal implications were key considerations for those surveyed, with the number one-ranking motivator for an ethical purchase being that society would benefit in the long run if people made buying decisions that favored a specific ethical issue (Bucic et al., 2012). In particular among the Australian sample of questionnaires from 807 university students, 89% had made a cause-related purchase, and perceived social positive (31.5%) and personal positive (35.9%) benefits were the top influencers of behaviors and actions on the local level (Bucic et al., 2012). These studies support the SCT concept of collective efficacy in that those in the target demographic are aware of the social implications of their purchase behaviors, and have a desire to affect societal outcomes. For the purposes of this campaign, the demographic would be achieving their overall goal of benefiting their community and society by supporting shelters and adopting a rescue dog.

Channel

Targeted Internet advertising. The transtheoretical model illustrates that those in the contemplative and preparation phases in the consciousness-raising process of change are looking for information and data to support their behavior decision (Prochaska et al., 2008). The campaign will capitalize on this by communicating with those in the key audience who have access to, and regularly use, the Internet, and have used it to do online searches about pet adoption or pet-related issues in the past six months, by way of thoughtful, educational targeted advertising with informative, fact-based messaging. This is an effective method to reach the audience since most in this demographic are going online, per the Pew Research study of American adults who use the Internet (Zickuhr & Smith, 2012). Of 916 cell phone-conducted interviews in July and August 2011 for the study, 94% of those aged 18-29, and 87% of those

aged 30-49, regularly use the Internet, and 76% and 70% of them have broadband access at home, respectively (Zickuhr & Smith, 2012). Of these, 97% have an annual household income of \$75,000+, 88% have some college experience and 94% have a college degree (Zickuhr & Smith, 2012).

Robinson, Wysocka and Hand (2007) studied the performances of a random sampling of 209 banner ads from 14 advertisers over a three-month period for communication effectiveness and click-through rates. The researchers found that large banner ads (360X240 pixels) housed on sites relevant to the ad topics, received 495% more click-throughs than the standard-sized banner (Robinson et al., 2007). As far as messaging, those banners that had medium-length, educational, informative messaging had the best performance, and this was also true of ads that did not contain an incentive or promotional element (Robinson et al., 2007). The research into the target demographic's access to and usage of the Internet, as well as the types ads that are most successful for these Internet users, support the recommendation of targeted Internet advertising as an appropriate channel for disseminating messages to encourage shelter dog adoption to those who are considering this behavior.

Conclusion

The goal of this campaign is to encourage the adoption of shelter dogs by financially stable, educated, socially-conscious adults under 40 to consider adopting a dog from a shelter. By understanding the target audience's behavior motivations, their financial and environmental access to shelter dogs and their Internet use, this campaign is built around constructs of the social cognitive theory and transtheoretical model to create compelling messages through an appropriate channel to reach this audience. Research for the campaign revealed a dog adoption trend among the demographic, so the campaign endeavors to support and continue this trend by

illustrating the benefits of dog ownership, debunking myths about rescue dogs, and highlighting the physiological, ethical and social benefits of adopting a dog from a shelter.

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