

They're Good Dogs Brent: Reviewing the Shelter Pet Project

Jacob R. Roche

University of Southern California

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When many people think of marketing campaigns for shelter pets, one campaign in particular springs to mind: a TV commercial that often plays late at night or in the middle of the day, featuring a montage of sad looking pets, many of them in bandages or behind bars, set to Sarah McLachlan's haunting song "Angel" ([werbehr], 2008). The ad, for the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, was launched in 2007 and helped raise close to \$30 million and attract 200,000 new donors over the next two years, making it the most successful campaign the ASPCA had launched (Strom, 2008).

The problem with the ad is exactly what makes it so good. According to Twose and Jones (2011), emotional ads tend to be more effective, and while the "Angel" ad was certainly effective at generating donations for the ASPCA, it may not have been as effective at getting people to adopt those sad looking pets from shelters. Even Sarah McLachlan herself says she can't bear to watch the ad, telling the Huffington Post that she changes the channel whenever the ad comes on because "it's just so depressing" (Brekke, 2014).

That may explain why, in 2008, while the ASPCA was experiencing record success with the "Angel" ad, of the 17 million people shopping for a pet, only 11 million said they preferred a shelter pet, and only 5 million actually adopted one (DraftFCB Chicago, 2010). It's easy for people to see an ad and make a donation over the phone to assuage their guilt – it's another thing to go down to a shelter and see the pets in person, huddled behind metal bars like prisoners, and come home with one that might be missing an eye or need expensive medical care, as the ad seems to suggest. As a result, millions of pets are euthanized every year simply because shelters are overcrowded.

Enter the Advertising Council, which in 2009 launched The Shelter Pet Project, a public service announcement campaign designed to fight the stereotypes that shelter pets are dangerous, misbehaved, or broken in some way, and that pets purchased from a breeder or a store are somehow safer. The Ad Council wanted to show that, in the words of one popular Twitter account, “they’re good dogs Brent” (WeRateDogs [dog_rates], 2016).

Campaign Background

The Ad Council

The Ad Council is a non-profit organization that partners with other non-profits and government agencies to recruit volunteer talent from the advertising and marketing world to create campaigns that further the social good (The Ad Council, 2017a). Founded in 1941 as The War Advertising Council, its inaugural campaign was to sell War Bonds, but it quickly changed its name after the war ended, and went on to launch numerous campaigns that would become household names over the years. The Ad Council is responsible for famous slogans and mascots like “Loose Lips Sink Ships,” Smokey the Bear, “A Mind Is a Terrible Thing to Waste,” and McGruff the Crime Dog.

The Ad Council maintains four core themes that it focuses on in its public service campaigns: education, family and community, health, and safety (The Ad Council, 2017b). Ideas for issues to address come from a variety of sources, including direct suggestions from individuals, other non-profits, corporations, and other members of the general public (The Ad Council, 2017b). The Ad Council also maintains an Advisory Committee on Public Issues, with 22 members and two co-chairs, “who represent the fields of research, academia, philanthropy, business, or public policy” (The Ad Council, 2017). Many issues and campaigns are considered, but to be accepted they must meet the following criteria:

- The issue should be of sufficient seriousness and public importance to warrant donations of space and time by the media
- The issue must offer a solution through an individual action
- The effort must be national in scope, so that the message has relevance to media audiences in communities throughout the nation
- The effort should be such that advertising can help achieve its objectives and those objectives can be measured
- The issue must be non-commercial, non-denominational, non-partisan, and not be designated to influence legislation. (The Ad Council, 2017)

The Shelter Pet Project

Despite its focus on the social good and the number of famous and successful campaigns it had launched in its nearly 70-year history, the Ad Council had never done an animal welfare campaign before The Shelter Pet Project, which is included as part of its “family and community” theme.

The campaign clearly meets the Ad Council’s criteria. Roughly seven million companion animals enter shelters each year, and about a quarter of them will be euthanized due to overcrowding (American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, 2017). Less than half of these animals will be adopted and only about 710,000 that enter as strays will be returned to their owners. Indeed, there are at least five times as many homeless animals as there are homeless people in the United States (Ethan Smith & Dauncey, 2009). Since shelters are usually non-profits or municipally-run, and given that pet ownership is consistent across most demographics, as well as agreement that pets are members of the family (Pew Research Center,

2010), this is an issue that is national, important, non-commercial, non-denominational, and non-partisan.

The Shelter Pet Project was designed to offer a simple solution to this problem by encouraging people to perform the simple, individual action of adopting a pet from a shelter. While accurate pet adoption statistics are difficult to obtain due to a lack of reporting requirements, a few sources existed that the Shelter Pet Project could use to measure its success, such as the American Veterinary Medical Association's "U.S. Pet Ownership & Demographics Sourcebook," and efforts have been made in recent years to collect more data from shelters and increase its accuracy (The Humane Society of the United States, n.d.-b).

Partner Organizations

For this campaign, the Ad Council partnered with two leading animal welfare organizations, The Humane Society of the United States and Maddie's Fund. The Humane Society is the nation's largest animal protection organization, providing care to more than 100,000 animals every year, working to train shelters and rescues, and advocating for animals through public policy and the court system (The Humane Society of the United States, n.d.-a). Maddie's Fund, dedicated to a vision of a "no-kill nation" (Maddie's Fund, 2015a, p. 3), provides grants for shelter medicine, adoption programs, and community projects.

The Shelter Pet Project also received volunteer advertising and marketing contributions from J. Walter Thompson Worldwide and DraftFCB. J. Walter Thompson offers its clients several services, including brand development, social media strategies, and data analytics. The agency has worked on campaigns for such companies as Johnson and Johnson, Nestle, and T. Rowe Price, and the Cannes Lions Global Creativity Report ranks the company as one of the top agencies in New York and one of the top cyber agencies in the world (J. Walter Thompson,

2016). DraftFCB, which later rebranded as FCB, has worked with Nestle, Coca-Cola, and Levi's, among other major brands, and has expertise in advertising, direct marketing, and other services (FCB, n.d.). FCB has won a variety of awards for its campaigns, including the Clio, Effie, and Webby Awards.

Campaign Elements

Target Audience

In order to determine the ideal target audience, the Shelter Pet Project conducted surveys of likely pet owners. The goal was to find a segment of the population that was planning to adopt a pet in the next year but was undecided about whether to adopt or purchase from a breeder (The Shelter Pet Project, n.d.). Through surveys conducted by MRI Doublebase and DraftFCB, the Shelter Pet Project identified five groups of consumers: "Non-pet," which had anxieties about owning a pet and no intention of obtaining one; "Lapsed," which had positive feelings about owning a pet but no intention of obtaining one; "Pro-breeder," which planned to obtain a pet from a breeder; "Swing Voter," which planned to obtain a pet but was considering multiple sources; and "Pro-adoption," which planned to obtain a pet from a shelter. Rather than preaching to the choir with the pro-adoption group, or banging its head against the wall with the first three groups, the Shelter Pet Project chose to focus on the Swing Voter group.

Swing Voters comprised a plurality of survey respondents, at 36 percent, and represented an estimated 41 million people nationwide (The Shelter Pet Project, n.d.). Of this group, 41 percent said they planned to acquire a pet in the next year. If the Shelter Pet Project could convince just one quarter of this group to adopt, it would accomplish its goal of saving three million pets from being euthanized each year.

Through its surveys, the Project found that many Swing Voters held negative stereotypes about shelter pets – that they misbehaved, were defective somehow, or were otherwise of lesser quality than pets from other sources (Markarian, 2009). Another negative view that Swing Voters held was that shelters were depressing (Maddie's Fund, 2009). The sheer number of sad looking animals in cages discouraged Swing Voters from visiting a shelter to save one, for fear of having to say no to all the others, and “what should be a happy family occasion starts to feel like a prison visit” (Maddie's Fund, 2009).

Message Design

The Shelter Pet Project decided that in order to increase shelter pet adoptions, it would need to combat the stereotypes that Swing Voters held. Unfortunately, simple appeals to logic, perhaps citing statistics about how safe these animals are, were unlikely to be effective. The campaign's surveys showed that Swing Voters felt afraid of shelter pets, “and you cannot talk people out of how they are feeling” (Block, 2011, p. 149). The campaign chose instead to make an emotional appeal.

One of the primary ways the Shelter Pet Project accomplished this was by reaching out to the “pro-adoption” group it had identified in its surveys. Rather than being a target of the campaign, this group could act as an ally. The Shelter Pet Project would capitalize on the principle of social proof (Cialdini, 2009), inviting pet owners who adopted from a shelter to tell their stories and show that these animals are safe and loving companions (Maddie's Fund, 2009). Rather than simply throwing money at shelters, the campaign would use these stories and the trust they could build to give shelters “social capital” (The Shelter Pet Project, n.d.).

With the rise of social media, the campaign had access to a number of rather prominent shelter pets, whose owners were more than willing to share their stories. One such pet was

Bento, also known as Keyboard Cat, whose YouTube video had over eight million views (The Shelter Pet Project [TheShelterPetProject], 2016a). Bento had also been featured in an ad for Wonderful Pistachios (Wonderful Pistachios, 2010) and even had a spot in a National Football League ad that aired during Super Bowl XLIX (Carolina Panthers [panthers], 2015). Other pets included Toast, a King Charles Spaniel with over 325,000 Instagram followers (The Shelter Pet Project [TheShelterPetProject], 2016b), and Hamilton, a pug with over 75,000 Instagram followers (The Shelter Pet Project [TheShelterPetProject], 2016).

These pets weren't just chosen for their celebrity, but also for their personality (The Shelter Pet Project, n.d.). Bento is styled like an 80s synth player, Toast is a fashion diva despite her tongue always hanging out even when her mouth is closed, and Hamilton is the "rags to riches tale" ([Hamilton Pug], n.d.) of an Ohio stray who became a New York socialite. Showing that shelter pets are not only safe to bring home, but have unique and fun personalities would help destigmatize the animals in the eyes of Swing Voters. The campaign also used the hashtag "#StartAStoryAdopt" to show Swing Voters that they, too, could have a story to tell with their shelter pet.

For pets that weren't quite as famous as Keyboard Cat, the campaign crafted stories for them and propagated them across multiple media channels. The Shelter Pet Project launched a website and accompanying online advertising portraying pets not as inmates needing assistance but as sassy singles looking for love (DraftFCB Chicago, 2010). The website included an interactive "Pet Personals" quiz to help visitors find the pet that was right for them (Figure 1). This helped turn the sometimes stressful experience of looking for a pet into a fun, interactive game, and also helped remove some of the guesswork prospective pet owners might be daunted

by. The website also featured “The Adopter Network,” where users could get questions answered by people who had already been through the adoption process.

Other channels the campaign used were billboard and print ads depicting some of the benign ways that pets can end up in shelters due to no fault of their own (Figure 2). While the circumstances behind a pet’s separation or abandonment might be serious – like divorce, or natural disaster – the ads were styled as three-panel comics with a simple, playful design and font scheme intended to keep the story focused on the pet’s innocence (Erin Smith, 2012), reminding viewers that “it’s not Kitty’s fault.”

Ads were also placed on radio and TV, with pets talking about some of the weird things their owners do, like sitting around without pants on or staring at their phones all day. Part of the appeal in these ads was that the animals are depicted as having their own thoughts and personalities, allowing them to be “slightly critical of their owners’ peculiar ways” (Cullers, 2011), but only as much as a trusted friend might be.

PET PERSONALS
DOG QUESTIONS BACK

1 HAVE YOU EVER HAD A FURRY ONE IN THE FAMILY? ☐ YES ☐ NO

2 HAS A DOG ALREADY CLAIMED YOUR HOME AS ITS TERRITORY? ☐ YES ☐ NO

3 DO YOU HAVE (NON-FURRY) LITTLE ONES RUNNING AROUND? ☐ YES ☐ NO

4 WHO WOULD YOU SAY YOU GET ALONG BETTER WITH? ☐ THE GUYS ☐ THE GIRLS ☐ I GET ALONG WITH EVERYBODY!

5 SURE, AGE IS JUST A NUMBER, BUT ROUGHLY WHAT

Figure 1

The campaign next reached out to corporate partners to help build a brand and identity for the pets. In 2013, Disney cross-promoted the Shelter Pet Project with some of its marketing for the film “Super Buddies” (featured super-powered puppies) using DVD inserts, trailers, and billboards (Maddie’s Fund, 2014b). Two posts on BuzzFeed in the same year, in easily-digested listicle format talking about pet super-powers, generated over 70,000 social media impressions.

Finally, the campaign used social media, inviting visitors to the website to connect with the Shelter Pet Project on Facebook, Twitter, Google+, YouTube, and Pinterest. In addition to sharing its own communications over social media, the Shelter Pet Project website included scripts visitors could use to promote the campaign on their own social media pages, prompting visitors to tell their own stories of successful pet adoption (The Shelter Pet Project, 2016).



Figure 2

Evaluation

In just the first two weeks, the campaign's videos were viewed over twenty thousand times (Maddie's Fund, 2014b), and in its first three months, the Shelter Pet Project generated over 13 million social media impressions. Over 73,000 users visited its "Pet Personals" site, 12 percent of whom went on to view more information about a particular pet (DraftFCB Chicago, 2010). Brand ambassadors, like NBC "Today" host Natalie Morales (Maddie's Fund, 2014b), also helped generate word of mouth, with two-thirds of website visits coming from referrals.

The Shelter Pet Project's audience continued to grow, with 1.2 million visitors to its website in 2013, spending an average of three minutes and eight seconds on the site (Maddie's Fund, 2014b). To date, the campaign's social media accounts on Facebook and Twitter have

289,000 and 53,000 followers, respectively. The Shelter Pet Project's videos on YouTube have been watched a cumulative 2.2 million times, with "Sand Box," one of the campaign's most popular and longest-running ads, having been watched almost 1.3 million times.

While website hits, Facebook likes, and social media impressions are one way the campaign has measured its success (Maddie's Fund, 2014b), the most important thing is the progress it is making on its goal of ending pet euthanasia through increased shelter adoption. As mentioned earlier, statistics are difficult to obtain due to a lack of consistent reporting from shelters, but according to the Shelter Pet Project itself, shelter pet euthanasia fell by 12 percent between 2009, when the campaign launched, and 2014 (Maddie's Fund, 2014a). According to the ASPCA, the drop is even more significant to date, with the organization estimating that only 1.5 million shelter animals are now euthanized each year, down from 2.6 million in 2011 (American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, 2017).

Since the campaign launched, efforts have also been made to compile better data relating to shelter pet adoption and euthanasia. Between 2008 and 2015, Maddie's Fund maintained a comparative database representing roughly five percent of all shelters in the United States (Maddie's Fund, 2015b). According to that database, euthanasias fell by a startling 68 percent from 2009 to 2015, with almost every year-over-year drop more dramatic than the last. This data represents only a small sample of total shelters, and may be due in part to better shelter medicine and a drop in overall intakes, but the database also shows a 19 percent rise in adoptions. In 2016, Maddie's Fund joined Shelter Animals Count, a collaborative effort of multiple animal welfare organizations to create a national database (Shelter Animals Count, 2017). According to that database, shelter euthanasia fell by 7 percent in 2016, the only year currently available, while adoptions increased by 28 percent.

Conclusion

Given the success of the campaign, it is no wonder that DraftFCB and J Walter Thompson have won a number of awards for their work with the Shelter Pet Project, including the Clio (CoMPANY films, 2012), the Echo (DraftFCB Chicago, 2010), and the Ad Council's own Goblet for Good (The Ad Council, 2016), the top award it gives out during its March ADness competition. In the eight years the campaign has been running, it has attracted tens of thousands of supporters, shared its message with millions of people, and helped save the lives of millions of animals.

That said, the Shelter Pet Project's work isn't finished. Even though shelter euthanasia has continued to decline, the campaign has not yet reached its goal of a "no-kill nation" in the United States. Fortunately, the Ad Council has a very long history of sticking with its campaigns, as evidenced by its wildfire prevention campaign, launched over 70 years ago.

Moving forward, the Shelter Pet Project is further embracing social media. Since the campaign launched in 2009, social media use in the United States has almost doubled (Pew Research Center, 2017), and a recent update to the campaign allows the pets themselves to post to social media, activating hashtags, emojis, and Snapchat-style background filters by playing with different toys, eating from different bowls, and walking on a light-up platform (The Shelter Pet Project, 2017). This is just one way the campaign is staying relevant to changing trends while still maintaining its core brand identity of playful ads focused on the pets and the stories they have to tell.

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