

Marketing a Campaign for the Animals

At first glance, Utah seems an unlikely choice to become the first no-kill state in the nation. But as well as being a mecca for the hi-tech industry (and the nation's Jell-O capital!), Utah is fast gaining a reputation as the most successful, forward-thinking state for homeless pets.

The seeds of the No More Homeless Pets in Utah (NMHPU) campaign were sown in 1994 when Gregory Castle, one of the founders of Best Friends, put together Utah's Week for the Animals, a seven-day celebration of animal welfare, including low-cost spay/neuter, school programs, and an award ceremony. In the years that followed, the organizations that joined the event became the core of a coalition that now includes every humane society, city and county shelter, and most of the private rescue and spay/neuter groups around the state.

NMHPU is just completing its second year of a five-year campaign to bring an end to the killing of homeless dogs and cats. The campaign receives significant support from Maddie's Fund, the \$200-million foundation that offers funding to communities that can organize comprehensive programs like this one.

The campaign has a staff of 27, headed up by Gregory and his wife, Julie, who serves as Program Director.

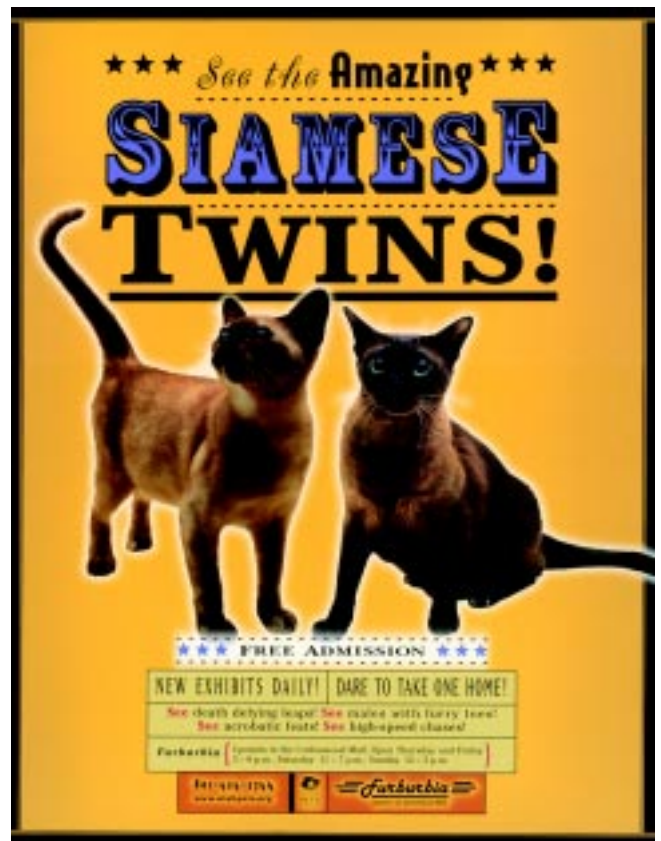
Julie Castle, who comes from a marketing background, is the driving force behind the innovative – some say revolutionary – approaches that the campaign is taking to ensure that every adoptable dog and cat can be guaranteed a good home. She sat down with the *Best Friends* magazine staff to talk about it.

BEST FRIENDS: You worked with several marketing companies before you met Gregory and came to Best Friends. How does your background influence this campaign for the animals?

JULIE CASTLE: We market No More Homeless Pets like any product sold to consumers. We've researched who is our target audience, and we're marketing our basic "products," which are spay/neuter and adoption, to those people.

BF: So who exactly is your target audience?

JC: For spay/neuter, it's basically women who are 35 to 50 years old, in the \$25,000-and-below income bracket, with two or



three children and, of course, a pet. Women are usually the people who drive household decisions. And one thing we discovered in our research is that people in this category typically wait until their pets are two to three years old before getting them fixed. So, that's obviously something we want them to change.

For adoption, it's a slightly wealthier demographic. Once again, it's the women who drive the decision, but in this case, they have a slightly higher household income, are 35 to 55 years old, have a college education, and have two kids. We surveyed a lot of these people on the phone, and found that most of them had only one pet. So we've geared all of our advertising toward "getting your pet a buddy."

BF: Starting with spay/neuter, how do you design a campaign that's appealing to your "consumers"?

JC: Currently, our best campaign is the Super Fix. We do weeklong Super Fix drives in a specific county, roll out the mobile clinic, and get as many vets as possible to lower their prices for the campaign. We plaster the town with banners, direct mail, and posters, and make a big event out of it. We just did this in Cache County and fixed about 900 animals with seven vets.

BF: Is there a particular advertising medium that works better than others?

JC: It depends what you're looking for. Humane groups often assume that TV is the Holy Grail for everything, but it really isn't. For spay/neuter, the mail works best for us. We have a very targeted audience, and we can reach them directly with a flyer that lands right in their home. Our low-cost spay/neuter campaign is primarily directed toward lower-income people. We want to make it easy and inexpensive for the woman of the household to take Fido or Fluffy to the vet or mobile clinic.

For adoptions, we've recently done very well with banner ads on the Web sites of the big local newspapers. People click over from there to our Web site (www.utahpets.org) and see all the



animals for adoption. The higher-income people we're targeting to adopt animals tend to be Internet users. Last time we put banner ads on the Web sites of the Salt Lake Tribune and the Desert News, we got 14,000 views on our adoption site in a month.

Radio is also good for adoption events – particularly, again, radio stations that appeal to our target group of higher-income women aged 35 to 50.

BF: What's the key thing for people to bear in mind when they want to use this kind of commercial approach for a local No More Homeless Pets campaign?

JC: We started with the notion of mainstreaming animal welfare. For most Americans, it's still a fringe movement. Or they view it as being a scary animal rights thing. We try to mainstream our events in every way – even down to the graphics. That means we need to think like average people think.

That's the big thing I learned in commercial marketing: *Know your audience.*

BF: What are the practical applications to that?

JC: When we do a super adoption, we make it look just like a neighborhood fair. We make all our community outreach events fun. We always have some kind of entertainment, with food and bands, something that interests people in coming to see what the excitement is about.

We also compete directly with pet stores in the malls. Our main

adoption center, Furburbia, is a store in the Cottonwood shopping mall, donated by the mall management. It looks like a regular pet store, except that all the animals are from shelters and are up for adoption. Lots of people go to the mall to buy a puppy or kitten, so that's where our adoption center needs to be.

And there's one other really important thing we do at all our events: we survey everything! Every person who comes to an event is offered a survey. We've even done focus groups, which can be good, too.

BF: How do surveys really help?

JC: We ask people how they heard about the spay/neuter or adoption event, and we ask them about themselves. What pets have they had? Did they let them breed? What's their income bracket? Things like that. The answers tell us what's working best in terms of reaching people and how we can improve getting our message out.

We're already finding homes for 13 animals per 1,000 people in Utah. (That's the best success rate in the country, by the way. San Francisco comes in second with nine animals per 1,000 people.) But our surveys are showing that there's a lot more potential for adoptions in one important area along the Wasatch Front: the East Bench. They're not coming to our events as much as we'd like. We believe they're still going to pet stores and breeders. That's a really important piece of information, and we're planning some new marketing initiative there.

BF: What sorts of things haven't worked?

JC: Bumper decals didn't work. And we did posters for Furburbia and talked about putting them up in vets' offices and stores, but never quite got around to doing that. We did press releases and put messages in utility bills, which worked in some markets, but not others.

Then we thought of the mail, which really did work. It took us a long time to figure out that direct mail was the key to the Big Fix, our mobile clinic.

Any campaign is going to try things that are just not going to work. The most important thing is to learn from everything you do – and don't make the same mistakes. Also, it's vital to keep in mind that every community is different. What works in Salt Lake City may not work in Southern Utah, so you have to be prepared



Gregory and Julie Castle at a Super Adoption Day.

for that. Programs need to be tried, shaped, and then re-shaped, and not just abandoned when they don't have great success immediately.

BF: *You and your staff spent three days at a corporate-style business retreat. Does that kind of thing really help?*

JC: Absolutely. One thing we've found is that because we want to help all the animals everywhere, we end up getting scattered and wasting precious resources by trying to do everything and help every animal at once. So we've been working with a company that helps develop business strategies so we can keep the focus on doing things that will bring the highest number of spay/neuters, the most and the best adoptions, and the least number of animals being euthanized at shelters. If a project or program doesn't fit into that, then we have to chuck it for the moment.

For example, down south in St. George, Utah, we just had a great Super Adoption, which found homes for 109 dogs and cats. We put quite a lot of work into that and were very pleased with it. But then we saw the latest monthly figures from Salt Lake County, which has the highest population in the state. They showed that the shelter euthanization rate there was actually *up* four percent over the same period in 1999, while the rest of the state was down 20 percent.

That means our efforts in Salt Lake County need to be more focused and take precedence. We always have to ask ourselves: What's the most important thing that needs to get done?

BF: *How long does it take to roll out a Super Adoption or a Super Fix?*

JC: We're finding it gets easier each time. For a Super Adoption, we start about six months ahead of time. For a countywide, low-cost, weeklong Big Fix, we need about three months. On a Big Fix, we start by surveying the vets to see who will participate. Then we get banners out. And so on.

In Utah, people tend to leave decisions, plans, and their schedule – right till the last minute. So we don't start ads until just two weeks before the event, so it doesn't get stale. In Los Angeles, by comparison, people tend to plan much further ahead. So if we were there, we'd roll out the banners, ads, etc., three or four weeks ahead of time.

BF: *Do you use outside marketing firms?*

JC: We've known Tim Williams, who's on the board of the Humane Society of Utah, for several years. He's the president of R&R Partners, an advertising firm that mainly does political campaigns and product branding. Tim understands animals' needs *and* advertising, so we're very lucky. Plus, R&R has donated about 70 percent of its work.

Bremer PR has been very helpful with our public relations. They give us advice, but we do most of the actual work – sending out the press releases, contacting the radio and TV stations, etc., ourselves. That saves a lot on costs.

And Bill Sartain of Focused Solutions, a marketing research company, helps us with our surveys.

BF: *How much volunteer help do you use?*

JC: A lot of humane groups think of volunteers as grunt work-



ers. Our volunteers include Alicia Bremer, our PR consultant, and Al Henderson, the former president of KSL-TV, the NBC affiliate. People like this have opened so many doors for us.

The one thing we don't ever ask volunteers to do, incidentally, is go on camera. That's because you need one or two regular spokespeople, and they need to be trained.

BF: *How can people start a community program if they don't have the backing of something like Maddie's Fund?*

JC: Every town has public relations, marketing, and advertising companies that want to pick up pro bono work. The firms that help us were all volunteering their services for several years before the real campaign began.

If you don't have funds for large advertising campaigns, there are still many relatively inexpensive methods you can use. Door hangers and flyers are good.

Networking is very important. Contact people you know in other communities who have started programs – especially if their community resembles yours. Ask what worked for them and how they did it. People are generally delighted to share information.

BF: *A lot of start-up humane groups are quite intimidated by the prospect of putting together some kind of coalition that involves all the other organizations. What's your best advice to them?*

JC: Just get started! People will join in when they see that it's a success. 🐾

There's more information on the No More Homeless Pets in Utah Web site at www.utahpets.org. Best Friends hosts No More Homeless Pets conferences twice a year. The next one will be held in Atlanta on October 25–27. Details are on the Best Friends Web site at www.bestfriends.org/nmhp/eventsfrm.htm.

The South Salt Lake Shelter

► By Greg Long

Arriving at the South Salt Lake (SSL) shelter early one morning, I was surprised to find Winnie Woodford, the Adoption Specialist, and Milton Buker, the Animal Control Officer, preparing an IV for a sick, dehydrated pup. I'm the animal control liaison for No More Homeless Pets in Utah, and while I've often seen private rescue groups nursing sick animals back to health with fluids, this was the first time I'd ever seen it done at an animal control facility. Winnie was able to nurse three pups back to health from parvo the week before, covering the expenses herself.

Winnie started volunteering at the shelter a year ago after seeing a news story about 60 cats they'd taken from an animal hoarder who had housed them in deplorable conditions. Last October, she was hired to help care for the animals.

No animal control officer I know is more respected and liked by both his peers *and* local animal rescue groups than Milton Buker. Most of his weekends are spent at adoption events with Winnie. Training certificates adorn the wall above his desk. He not only has the knowledge, but also the compassion to do his job. And the local community responds with so many donations of food and cat litter that SSL can share this good fortune with other shelters in need.

SSL is the eighth largest of Utah's animal control facilities, and the city of Holladay, which is in SSL's domain, now has the highest percentage of animals properly licensed. That means fewer animals coming in to the shelter and fewer having to be destroyed.

The animals at this shelter have truly lucked out. These folks have the vision and determination in their eyes and the light in their souls is there for anyone to see.