How to Win Friends and Influence People (to Help Animals)

Caryn Ginsberg’s new book teaches animal welfare advocates the tricks of social marketing

People in the nonprofit world often look askance at the bottom-line-driven practices of big business, preferring to focus instead on their desire to make the world a better place.

But Caryn Ginsberg of Arlington, Va., a consultant to animal welfare organizations, believes that shelters, rescues, and even individual animal advocates could all learn a thing or two from the strategies that businesses have developed to influence millions of people to buy their goods and services.

In her new book, Animal Impact: Secrets Proven to Achieve Results and Move the World, Ginsberg explains how social marketing, which emerged in the 1970s, allowed many businesses to attract and retain customers. Ginsberg shows how animal advocates can benefit from applying social marketing principles to influence people to change their behavior—such as adopting a shelter pet, having their animals spayed or neutered, or choosing to buy more humane products like cage-free eggs.

Ginsberg lays out a seven-step framework, the ACHIEVE change system, to show how to move people through a process of changing their behavior. Each letter of ACHIEVE stands for a different social marketing principle. For example, A is for “Action and Audience,” C is for “Create Benefits and Cut Barriers,” etc. She introduces readers to animal advocates who’ve used these approaches, and delves into the mechanics of successful campaigns.

Through her consulting practice, Priority Ventures Group, Ginsberg has worked on a broad range of animal welfare issues with The HSUS, the ASPCA, PetSmart Charities, Farm Sanctuary, and others.

In the edited interview that follows, Ginsberg talks about her new book, and how it can help animal welfare advocates, with Animal Sheltering staff writer Jim Baker.
[q&a]

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essarily see that a practice that a business uses can benefit us. And for those folks, I like to use an analogy of a hammer—that marketing is no different from a hammer. You can use a hammer to build an affordable home, or to hang a beautiful picture on the wall, or you can use it to smash somebody over the head, or to ruin a statue. It isn’t that the hammer itself is good or bad; it’s the intent or the skill of the people who use it. So the wonderful people in the animal protection field have the opportunity to take this tool of marketing, and use it for good in a very powerful way.

You talk about looking to business practices, especially marketing strategies, and applying them to our field. Why is that useful?

When you think about who gets people to do things, day in and day out in this country, it’s businesses. And since the early ’70s, these practices have been adopted successfully in nonprofit fields. I would say the leaders in social marketing—adapting the business practices for socially beneficial [goals]—are the public health organizations. So the Centers for Disease Control, anything anti-smoking, anti-drunk driving, anything that’s about changing people’s behavior, has been putting social marketing to work. There are whole groups of people around the world using business marketing practices to make the world a better place. Businesses know that people are customers, and that people change when they choose to do so, and when they see it in their interest to do so.

Can you talk about your ACHIEVE change system?

Each of the seven letters in the word ACHIEVE stands for one of the key points of marketing that shelters, rescues, and other groups can put to work to help animals. So for example, the “I” stands for “I Am Not My Target Audience.” We forget sometimes that we aren’t the same as the people we’re trying to influence. We pass something around, and everyone says, “Oh, it’s a great ad, let’s put it out.” But we don’t necessarily test it with the audience we’re trying to influence, to see if they like it. … We as animal protection advocates like humor in spay/neuter, because it sort of lightens the darkness of what we’re up to. [But] we took sample ads that showed illustrations, that showed cartoons that used humor, and they got very negative feedback. When you think about it, people see spay/neuter as a serious medical procedure for their animals. They’re looking for professionalism, and they’re looking for trust. It would be as if we were to see an ad on TV with a lot of humor, saying, “Ha ha ha, come in for your vasectomy,” or “Ha ha ha, come in for tubal ligation”—we’d be appalled! Would we run down to a facility that used that kind of promotion?

One point you make is that some activists make the mistake of having events that raise awareness of a problem, but then they stop. They don’t take the next step, to cause people to take action. It’s not enough to arouse emotion, or make people aware of a problem. And again, we know this intuitively, because we’ve raised a lot of awareness, and that doesn’t mean that people do what we’d like them to do. Look at changes you’ve made in your life. Did you suddenly wake up one day, and the minute you heard about it, you started recycling, or you started buying organic food? There’s this process, again, where we think about the benefits and barriers. Sometimes we make people aware of an issue in a way that turns them off, and drives them away from our issues, and that’s particularly common.

You give many examples in the book of successful animal advocacy campaigns, such as The HSUS’s cage-free egg efforts on college campuses. It strikes me that they don’t set out to demonize or antagonize any of the stakeholders. It doesn’t help us to make enemies. If people think that we are rotten, and that we don’t like people, or that we’re out to get people, that doesn’t help us help animals. Because none of
Caryn Ginsberg helped The HSUS develop effective messaging for its Gulf Coast campaign. Research showed that the most compelling way to urge people to spay or neuter their pets was to link the overpopulation issue to how their own unaltered animals might be contributing to the problem.

How could people who work in sheltering and rescue find your book helpful? We could be talking about efforts to increase adoptions or awareness of the need to spay/neuter pets, or a push to pass an anti-tethering ordinance.

On any of those issues, a shelter, having read the book and understanding the ACHIEVE framework, can look at an existing effort. Let's just look at adoption. You could start with a diagnostic, to go through each of the steps to say, in what way do our current efforts match up successfully against this step, or not measure up against this step? So if “A” is “Action and Audience”—action: Are we clearly asking for the adoption? Are we treating people as an audience, and addressing them, “What’s in it for me?” But the “C” is about creating benefits and cutting barriers. We need to tip the scales. Imagine a balanced scale, and when we ask people to adopt, they’re thinking about the positives: “Well, I can help an animal, and maybe it could be less expensive.” But then they’re thinking about some of the negatives: “Is the shelter animal going to be sick, is the shelter going to be a good place to go?” And again, it’s as they think about it, it’s not how we think about it. We need to help them tip the scales by seeing those benefits as being bigger than the barriers. AS

Caryn Ginsberg will be presenting at Animal Care Expo 2012, May 21-24 in Las Vegas. Her session is called “Influence Secrets for Animal Protection: Why People Don’t Get It and What you Can Do.” Learn more about Expo at animalsheltering.org/expo. Find out more about Ginsberg’s work at priorityventures.com.