

A Crisis in Customer Service? Not So Much

A secret shopper program finds plenty to purr about—and some room for improvements



Last summer, Maddie's Fund and Petfinder worked together to put the sheltering and rescue field to the test via a series of phone calls, e-mails, and site visits. Their quest? To find out whether there is truly a crisis in customer service in our line of work, and to reward the groups that put their best feet—and their best paws—forward. Over the course of 10 weeks, Petfinder Foundation staff “secret shopped” a series of rescues and shelters selected at random from *Petfinder.com* member groups. They awarded those organizations whose staff and volunteers performed well with a total of \$50,000.

In a series of interviews excerpted here, *Animal Sheltering* editor Carrie Allan talked to Richard Avanzino, president of Maddie's Fund; Kim Saunders, *Petfinder.com* vice president for shelter outreach; and executive director Liz Neuschatz and program manager Lisa Robinson of the Petfinder Foundation about why they invested time and money in the project, what they found, and what they hope to do next.

Animal Sheltering: Why did Petfinder think this was an important program to do?

Kim Saunders: We've been working for a long time to come up with creative ways to encourage groups to improve their customer service. We all know why.

Have you had particular reports about problems?

Saunders: Obviously, tons of people come to Petfinder, find the pet of their dreams, leave happy, send a happy tale, and it's all good. But we also occasionally hear from people who say, “I wanted to adopt, I tried to reach out, nobody would get back to me, so I went to a pet store.” Or “I tried to reach out, I got someone, they weren't helpful, they didn't seem to care that I was trying to do the right thing, so I went to a breeder.” And those are heartbreaking for us, because if our shelters and rescues knew that was the outcome they'd be horrified, but they don't necessarily put those things together. So



we've been trying to come up with ways to try to gently get that message across and hit it home, particularly with the Ad Council campaign that [The Humane Society of the United States] and Maddie's Fund are working on, we thought, *Here is this amazing opportunity for adoptable pets ... reaching all these members of the public who maybe never considered adoption before.* And hopefully it's going to increase in droves the people who are going to be going to shelters and rescues, showing up in the lobby, calling, and then I thought, *Oh, no. They are so not ready for this.* So that's how this came up. We've been talking with Maddie's over time about what we could do, and the Ad Council campaign was really the impetus that told us we really need to do something right away. So this whole idea about a secret adopter seemed fair and genuine: It's an actual experience that anyone walking in off the street could have, and it allows us to give feedback to say, “Here was someone who for all intents and purposes was ready to bring a pet into their home, and based on the experience they had—if they went to one of the folks who were our winners—they would have left with a pet. But if not, who knows what would have happened then?”

So the calls were entirely focused on the adoption function of shelters and rescues?

Saunders: We decided to focus on adoption so it would be easy to compare, and the calls were all basically the same: The secret shoppers would look online, see Fluffy, and call and say, “I'd like to get some information on Fluffy, and I think I might want to adopt,” so it was kind of even across the playing field.

[q&a]

Did you give your people a script?

Saunders: For the e-mails and phone calls, Lisa Robinson at our foundation did those herself, and she did have a script to work from. So it was sort of standardized. For the in-person visits, there was only one winner a week, and those folks had a little more leeway; it was a little more subjective, and what we told them was the same idea: “Look on



the website, see a pet you might be interested in, go in and see what your experience is like. Walk into the shelter, when you reach someone, ask about that pet, and see. And we asked them to consider, after their experience there, would they recommend that shelter to a friend or family member who was looking to get a pet? That was the thing. We had a lot of great experiences, and our secret adopters absolutely *loved* doing it. There were a few nonwinners. I want to say that six of the secret shoppers [made the award] on the first try, and the remaining ones awarded to the second shelter they visited. The folks who didn't give the award on the first try, it was [because of issues like] they'd walk in and the people behind the desk were busy chatting with each other and basically didn't give them the time of day until they walked up deliberately and were like, “Ahem!” And even then the people would be like, “Yeah, you can go down the hall.”

So it was more lack of attention than actual hostility or deliberate rudeness?

Saunders: Yeah, it was, and to different degrees. Some were just sort of lackadaisical, but there were some where the secret adopter was pretty intent, kept trying to find more people and asking questions, and kept get-

ting blown off at every turn, to the extent that one even told them, “Why don't you maybe come back tomorrow?”

So overall, what was your impression?

Were you pleasantly surprised?

Saunders: Yeah, I think we were. Because, you know the old story that when someone's happy they tell one person and when they're

not, they tell way more? We were concerned that because we were hearing these experiences multiple times that there were many, many more out there, that it was rampant. And based on our experiences, I don't think it

was. It is an issue, and all of our shelters and rescues could stand to take a good look at themselves and do everything to improve, but I do think that part of what we're finding is that the unhappy folks are speaking up the loudest. Which doesn't make it less important—it may make it *more* important if they're out there telling their friends and families, “Don't go to a shelter; those people are terrible.” We don't want that. Also, based on some of the reports, we wondered whether it would turn out to be rescue groups, which are sort of unregulated, that would turn out to be the culprits on these issues. And we really didn't find that; it was pretty steady across the board.

ASM: What was your impression about the results of the program?

Liz Neuschatz: I thought it was fantastic. We thought there might be some negatives, but people were excited about it, and a local group I know of actually had a meeting to tell their staff that this was happening and that everyone should be aware. And they said that while they wanted the grant, they mainly just wanted good customer service. If we can have that sort of impact on groups and get them talking about it and open the dialogue and reward groups for good customer service, then this program was definitely worth it.

Have you had any experiences with customer service at shelters?

Neuschatz: A while ago when I was trying to adopt a kitten for my kids, at the time I worked for *Petfinder.com*. And I said, “I'm the best home this kitten's going to get,” and [the shelter staff] were insistent that it go with its siblings. And I was like, “Are you kidding me? I have two kids, I work from home, I work for Petfinder, I have every good reference, I have other animals, and you're not going to adopt a cat to me?” And those cats grew old in the foster home. It's sad, and it's common. But there are people out there who really care and do a great job, and were really glad to be rewarded, because who's rewarding them? And in fact, we had a lot of e-mails to me saying, “Is this real, is this for real, are you really giving me \$500 for being nice?”

It's so hard for shelters because you do have to make judgments, but you have to find the line between making a reasonable judgment and checking these internal biases you may not even be aware of.

Neuschatz: Yeah, and with rescue, it's sometimes, “I have six foster cats in my house, and in theory I want to adopt them out—but really, no one is better than me.” That mentality. But we really hope that we can continue with some of this momentum.

ASM: Tell me about the process you went through with each group.

Lisa Robinson: What I did personally was when I called, and people would say that the cat had already been adopted, I would say, “OK, this is what I'm looking for. What can you tell me about adoption and other things, not just for the specific pet?” Because I wanted to give them every opportunity to tell me more and keep me engaged. Like, “What can you tell me about what I might need to think about before adoption?” Over 10 weeks, I made about 45-50 phone calls and we had 30 winners by phone.

Were there any overall trends or characteristics for which groups did better—animal control shelters, private humane societies, rescues?

Robinson: There weren't really any trends. The people who were the winners were really

passionate about what they did. For example, I called about one dog, and the people said, “Well, he’s not here, but we have another dog the same size,” and they were really excited to keep me talking and keep me on the phone. It was the same with the e-mails. I got a few that said, “Well, that cat’s been adopted, but the best thing to do is to set up an appointment and get you in here, and here’s some literature [about adoption].” The winners really tried to connect with you and tried to make you think about adopting a pet as a commitment, not just like buying flowers or something.

It sounds like you had mostly positive experiences. Did you encounter anything negative?

Robinson: The positive experiences were great, but some of the minor problems with the groups that weren’t awarded prizes were just those that really didn’t seem to want to engage me in a conversation. I’d call and say, “I’m looking for info on Rudy the cat—can you get me some information?” and they’d just say, “He’s adopted.” And I’d go, “Oh, OK ...” and would try to keep them in the conversation, and they just wouldn’t want to go further, really didn’t promote anything else. Also with the phone, a lot of them just didn’t answer—and I had checked their hours and their time zones and everything. And in terms of e-mails, we gave them a 24-hour turnaround, and a lot of them just didn’t respond, or responded with “That cat’s been adopted.”

What were your best experiences?

Robinson: My live visit was with a cat shelter, and it was just amazing. I went in, and I just said I was interested in adopting a cat, and they had a volunteer lead me around and show me everything about their facility and explain why different cats were in different areas. And they had cats with disabilities in a certain area, and they kind of encouraged me and said, “If you think this is something you could commit to, it’s great because they can get out of the shelter and it will give another cat an opportunity to get adopted, and these are cats that rarely get adopted.” I really liked how they encouraged me, but didn’t pressure me. And then the cat care manager came out and personally talked to me, and got down on the floor and encouraged me to hold all the cats. And they were so thrilled

to be awarded. That was the Hermitage Cat Shelter. There was also a phone experience [with the Summit County Animal Shelter] that was really great. I had called and said I was interested in a dog I’d seen on Petfinder, and he said “Absolutely,” and said he always liked to go sit with the dog when he talked to someone about them, so he went and sat with the dog and described him and his personality and his temperament, and said “He’s really special because of this,” and “These are things you need to think about when adopting him.” So he really gave personal attention to me and the dog. And then he said, “You might come in, and he might not mesh with your personality, but these are some other animals I can recommend for you.” And he said he was so glad I’d called about adoption ... he talked not only about the animal, but about the whole experience of adoption.

ASM: What made you decide to invest Maddie’s Fund money in this program?

Richard Avanzino: Well, we have a very generous benefactor, as you know: Dave Duffield, who’s created a couple of different companies, and he’s always identified himself as the founder, CEO, president, and “chief customer advocate.” He builds his successes on wonderful customer service. So it’s part of our genetic makeup. We believe to fulfill our mission as a cause, we have to have excellent customer service, because while we draw attention to the animals who need homes, unless the people are helped in making the match, we’re going to lose an opportunity, and sometimes that means a life taken. And that’s unacceptable. So we wanted to promote the best practices. Petfinder wanted to encourage better use of the technology tools they’ve been providing for these years—it’s a very successful search engine, but it can only be ultimately beneficial if people, once they’re drawn to the site and follow up, have the customer service that’s going to seal the deal.

What did you think about the results?

Avanzino: Well, I think it was encouraging, because we had been given some information that suggested something like 30 percent of the contacts initiated by the Petfinder user were not followed up with. Certainly our awards program had far better success than that, and to me, what’s exciting is that we can

chronicle those best practices, we can share that with all the folks in our cause, and allow them to use this information to assess where they stand with customer relations—are they at the top of the heap, in the middle, or somewhere behind? And here are some constructive ideas on how to get to the beginning of the line. We intend to do this on an ongoing basis—keeping customer service at the top of the priority list is terribly important. This is not just a one-off deal. To achieve our desired result, which is to build a No Kill Nation—which we think can be done certainly by 2015, if not within the three-year timeframe of the Shelter Pet Project—we need to have a fulfillment program, and that means great customer service.

Do you have an idea of how you’ll be continuing the program?

Avanzino: We haven’t had that discussion with Petfinder yet. Obviously they’re a partner in this, and a lot of the success is attributable to their follow-through and their administration of the grant, so we’ll obviously want to review with them. My guess would be that in the immediate future, we’ll be doing more of the same, but I think we’ll be benefiting from the experiences and the feedback we’re getting and adjust accordingly. But right now, this is a winner—it got a good amount of attention about the importance of this issue, and we’re going to be giving away a lot more money to a lot more agencies to put the carrot out there, but more importantly, to chronicle the good things that are being done so that others can benefit from it. I think the shelters—surprise!—find it nice to get some more money. But it’s not only the money that works—Petfinder is giving them some good public relations, because they’re getting a national award to hold themselves up as a model, which will hopefully encourage more contributions within their own community, improve their image, draw the traffic to their shelter, and make more delightful adoptions, which saves lives and starts new families, and loving relationships will abound. 

The complete list of winners is available at maddiesfund.org/Funded_Projects/Special_Projects/Custom_Service_Promotion.html.