

RH Dougherty Award

Excellence in communication – Bathurst Regional Council - Happy Tails

Overall Communication Strategy

Council operates a Small Animal Pound, which is the drop off point for strays and unwanted animals for the LGA. Space at the facility is limited and in 2017 an average of 26% of cats and 47% of dogs surrendered to the pound were rehomed.

Locally, there was a lack of awareness amongst the community that Council re-homed animals surrendered to the pound (when appropriate) and this resulted in a lower than desired re-homing rate.

The growth of Council's digital audience, via both our corporate website and Facebook page, was seen as an opportunity to launch an online education campaign about pet adoption and re-homing from the pound – project Happy Tails. This program sits neatly with the other educational programs run by Council's rangers. These include programs such as the subsidised pet desexing program. This program is offered to low income earners which helps prevent unwanted litters of kittens and puppies being surrendered to the pound. Council also runs an annual Pet Expo which includes workshops with an animal behaviouralist and a range of information about responsible pet ownership.

In early 2018 Council launched its animal adoption campaign - Happy Tails - via Facebook. The Facebook posts are supported by an updated information page on the BRC corporate website. The site now offers more details about the animals up for adoption (and a direct link from the website's front page), photos, adoption costs and associated information about pet registration, the Small Animal Pound operating hours, and other frequently asked questions. Previously this information was hard to find and was limited in detail. Council's digital message board in the Civic Centre foyer also became a focal point for the campaign using photos of animals up for adoption and a message to talk to customer service staff about pet adoption.

A digital heavy focus for the campaign was determined to be the most cost-effective method of reaching the largest possible audience because of high likelihood of the content being liked and shared.

Strategy Development

Council had previously taken an ad-hoc approach to raising awareness of pet adoption from the pound with infrequent advertising in traditional media. There was a reliance on word of mouth about pet adoptions from the Small Animal Pound with a resultant low uptake. It was obvious that there was a need to reach a larger audience if we were to change success rates and a digital campaign was seen as being the most effective way to achieve this.

Budget

The project has been implemented with zero budget. It has been a project that has been incorporated in the Communications team operations with support from Council's rangers. Council's

Digital Communications Officer (DCO) is responsible for taking photos for Facebook and the website and sourcing the required content each week on animals available for adoption and re-homing. The DCO also reworked the pound information available on the website.

Distribution methods

The Pound re-homing project is digitally focused with a regular pound updated included in Council's social media calendar for the corporate Facebook account. This Facebook post is supported by updated information and detail on the Council website. This information includes photos of the animals included in the Facebook post and the details about the costs associated with pet adoption. The digital display board in the Council foyer is then a constant visual reminder to those coming into the Council Chambers to talk to customer service staff about pet adoption from the Small Animal Pound.

Communication of Message

Happy Tails relies on the use of Facebook posts to deliver Council's messages around pet adoption and re-homing. The posts are created using photos of the animals at the pound available for adoption, and they are each given a name. This gives each of the animals a personality that people can relate to and encourages a feeling of familiarity. Our aim is to then increase the number of enquiries from the community to the pound and increase re-homing rates. Potential pet owners now ring (or visit) and enquire about specific animal by name and seek details about the adoption process. A link is also provided to the website to answer some of the frequently asked questions around pet adoption – costs, registration, microchipping and additional information about the pet such as sex, breed and age.

Facebook posts are also grouped into particular themes such as, 'Feel Good Furiday', 'Help Me I'm Lost' and 'Please Adopt Me'. We also created short videos for animals that were struggling to find homes. Feel Good Furiday posts for example feature content about successful rehoming, while the Please Adopt Me posts feature those animals currently available for adoption.

The reach of the Facebook posts has increased as a result of this approach. Comments often use the animal's name, again reinforcing the need and desire among those looking for a pet to take action and rehome the featured animal.

One post featured Bea and Annie whose owners had to go into a nursing home. Bea, a 7 year old foxie and Annie a 14 year old kelpie needed to be rehomed together. The post described two beautifully tempered best friends with Bea often found using Annie as a snuggly cushion. The result – a successful rehoming and a whopping 709 shares, 122 comments, a reach of 55,000 and more than 9,000 post clicks.

Happy Tails also includes a follow up component (Feel Good Furiday), where we encourage new pet owners to share photos of their newest family member in their new home. This user generated content is helping Council build relationships with its Facebook followers who have established themselves as advocates for Council and the Small Animal Pound.

Results

As a result of the campaign, the rate of re-homing has increased by 22%. In 2017, 26% of cats and 47% of dogs brought into the pound were either rehomed or returned to their owners; an average rehoming rate of 26.5%.

In 2018, 30% of cats and 67% of dogs brought into the pound were re-homed or returned to their owners; an average rehoming rate of 48.5%. An increase of 22% in a 12 month period.

From January 2017 to December 2017 the Small Animal Pound successfully rehomed 2 cats and 59 dogs. This is compared to the period from January 2018 to December 2018 when staff were able to rehome 24 cats and 87 dogs.

It should be noted that the majority of cats surrendered or found are feral and cannot be re-homed, however, the domestic cats brought in, thanks to our campaign have a high chance of being re-homed or returned to their owners.

Again, not all dogs at the pound are able to be rehomed or adopted if they are deemed to be aggressive or dangerous to place with new owners.

Already this year (2019) there have been 54 animals (22 cats and 32 dogs) successfully re-homed or reunited with owners. It is anticipated the results will exceed the numbers from last year due to the continuation of the campaign.

In comparison, in 2014 – 2015 the RSPCA's national rehoming rate for dogs was 33.58% and cats 50.27%. In 2015-2016 the RSPCA rehomed 36.7% of dogs and 56.11% of cats. By comparison in 2017-2018 figures released by the RSPCA show that nationally 60.79% of cats were rehomed and for dogs it was 36.94% (<https://www.rspca.org.au/facts/annual-statistics-2015-16/published-statistics>). These figures show a relatively modest increase year on year; whereas Happy Tails has been responsible for a 22% average increase in rehoming rates in the space of 12 months.

One of the benefits of the increase in re-homing rates is the increase in pet registrations and microchipping. All animals re-homed from the pound are required to be microchipped and registered, which long-term will also assist in ensuring lost or straying pets can be re-united with their owners.

Our social media campaign started in 2018, however, there were posts sporadically throughout 2017 to promote the pound and animals for adoption. An overview and revamp of the social media campaign included giving the animals names, 'Feel Good Furiday', 'Help Me I'm Lost' and 'Please Adopt Me'. We also created short videos for animals that were struggling to find homes. Our reach in 2017 was 123,165 and in 2018 it was 596,408 (384% increase). Our engagement in 2017 was 17,998 and in 2018 it was 111,739 (520% increase). Average post engagement for 2017 was 14.61% and in 2018 it was 18.74%. There were 715 shares in 2017 and 3,793 shares in 2018 (430% increase).

The social media posts also include a link to the small animal page on council's website. Visits to the Small Animal Pound page on the website have increased from 6779 in 2017 to 7032 in 2018.

In this period Council's Facebook page has grown from:

- January 2017: 4177 likes
- January 2018: 5365 likes
- January 2019: 6663 likes

Evaluation

A series of statistical measures were implemented to evaluate the success of Happy Tails.

These include:

- Evaluating rehoming rates and measuring the growth (as tracked via the Companion Animal Register)
- Assessing impact of Facebook posts – engagement, reach, likes & shares and tracking growth
- Visits to website Small Animal Pound page and measuring the growth

As described above, we have been able to show a positive result for the campaign from the data collected from each of these methods.

Rehoming rates have increased by 22% from 2017 to 2018; Facebook reach for the Happy Tails post has increased by 384% and engagement by 520%; while website visits are also up from 6779 in 2017 to 7032 in 2018.

Unique Features

While a pet rehoming project is not unique, the approach taken includes naming each of the animals available for adoption – gives them an online persona helps create a sense of urgency around rehoming. It makes the animals easier to identify and encourages a conversation among those on Facebook about rehoming. It is a call to action for those looking for a pet to make contact with the Small Animal Pound and to rescue identified animals. We often see as a result questions on Facebook and to our rangers at the pound about specific animals using the online persona that has been created for them.

Happy Tails also encourages the creation of user generated content with Facebook posts encouraging people to share photos of their adopted pets in their new homes. User generated content also increases the level of engagement we are able to achieve with our community who then become advocates for Council and the Small Animal Pound and the rehoming/adoption service. Establishing a connection with our Facebook audience through Happy Tails has assisted in creating advocates who champion our brand in this arena.

The project is helping position Council as a provider of a full range of services in the area of Ranger Services from animal control, the operation of the Small Animal Pound, the regulation of companion animals and off-leash areas but also in the promotion of responsible pet ownership through our education programs and now also as a trusted source for pet adoption that many more in the community are aware of.