# CREATING YOUR ADOPTION EXPERIENCE

Instructions and chat room answers.

Follow these steps to create a customer friendly adoption application process:

**Step One:**

- ✓ **Gather your people: include as many people as reasonably possible who are stakeholders in the adoption process**
- ✓ **Discuss your objectives and come to an agreement on what you would like to achieve. This could include many things such as:**
    - o Creating a customer friendly adoption application
    - o Asking better questions
    - o Changing your question style to elicit open ended discussions to spark conversation
    - o Becoming a resource for your adopters
    - o Other objectives for your organization
- ✓ **Gather your paperwork: start with your adoption application, then include any other paperwork relating to the adoption process**

**Step Two:**

- ✓ **Perform a language check. Is your application:**
    - o Friendly?
    - o Thankful?
    - o Grateful?
- ✓ **Watch for demanding words and strict language:**
    - o "Must"
    - o "Required"

**Step Three:**

- ✓ **Starting at the very top of the application, take <u>each and every</u> item that is on the application and answer the following questions:**
    - o Why do we ask this question?
    - o Is it important to know?

o Is it something we can control?
o Is there a better way to get or give information that can address this issue?

*Pro Tip: You can't control what a new pet parent will do after they adopt.*

*The moment you deny someone for something you have no control over, you've lost an opportunity to INFORM with love. Asking the question: "Will you allow your cat outdoors?" and denying everyone who says "yes" is only teaching people to answer "no" the next time they apply for a pet.*

*Or they may decide the adoption process is too judgmental and head right to the pet store to purchase a kitten. Ultimately, they will have learned nothing that you wish to share with them if keeping kittens indoors is important to your organization.*

**Step Four:**

✓ **Based on the information gathered above take each and every item and assign its importance to achieving your agreed upon goals:**
o Very important, edit to EMPOWER and INSPIRE as needed
o Somewhat important/can't control, edit as needed or consider removing and handling with a conversational style adoption counseling experience
o Not important/can't control, consider deleting from your application

*Pro Tip: Pilot!*

*Don't be afraid to delete a question! Do a pilot project or testing period for your new application of 90 days. After 90 days gather your team together and review the data to determine whether the removal of that question had any impact on your adoption process or the success of your adoptions.*

**Step Five:**

✓ **Prioritize! Assemble each item on your application in priority order with what is most important at the top.**

*Pro Tip: Being thankful and grateful is always a priority and good first impressions make a great lasting impression. For some adopters their first interaction with*

*your organization may be completing your adoption application. Including a stylish thank you, or an image that expresses your gratitude is a great way to turn a boring form into something special.*

**Finishing Step:**

- ✓ **Finalize your format and create your new form**
- ✓ **Agree to meet again in six months to a year to review your progress and consider even more improvements to your process**
- ✓ **Complete the exercise again if you're ready to continue to evolve your adopter experience**

Thought experiment:

As you craft your revised adoption application process, consider whether or not the word "application" is the right word for your new creation. Is it an application? Or is it:

- ✓ A questionnaire?
- ✓ A survey?
- ✓ A kitty conversation?

Sometimes giving a new name to the process is the perfect refresh to remind everyone on your team that things are new and improved.

*Pro Tip: Data data data!*

*Want to know if you've really made a difference? Collect before and after data to measure your success and continue to tweak your process. Comparing year-to-year performance is a good idea for cats if your intakes rise and fall with the seasons.*

For an example of a conversational style questionnaire view:

**Maui Humane Society Pet Adoption Questionnaire**
http://www.mauihumanesociety.org/UserFiles/File/What_We_Do/Adoptions/Pet%20Adoption%20Questionnaire%2011_2_17.pdf

# Q & A

<mark>Question:</mark> Is there a baseline for what is considered too high for fees from this study? … Is asking a fee equal to what has been invested to fully vet a cat considered too expensive? Theoretically, they will spend that much or more anyway.

<mark>Answer</mark> (Cameron Moore, Million Cat Challenge): Shari, yes, you will not be able to recoup the money invested into the animal you are rescuing and the longer you hold them trying to get that fee, the more money it will cost you. Every day you have that animal in your care increases your cost of care as well as their length of stay. It doesn't mean you can't ask for a donation when you have a fee waived or special priced event. Success attracts success and people do want to support lifesaving so the more you save, the more donations you will most likely receive.

<mark>Answer</mark> (Julie Levy, Million Cat Challenge): We can also check out what the "going rate" for new cat acquisition locally is. Here in Florida, a lot of people get their cats for free from friends, family, Craig's list, etc. So our competition is 'free' (of course we know our fully vetted cats are high-value and free isn't costless).

<mark>Answer</mark> (Susan Cosby, Presenter): Both Cameron and Julie make good points. I'd add that the work we do is philanthropic and when we care for animals, they are the beneficiaries of our charitable work. Finding a home for that pet, whether it's as a pet living in a house with a family, a barn or working cat, or a cat who is returned to the field for a TNR program, will not be a cash positive effort. As nonprofits with a charitable purpose, we should consider how our organizations can successfully save cats through greater donor support and fundraising and have less of a reliance on adoption fees.

This topic has always made me think about "soup kitchens" where hot meals are prepared for the homeless and hungry. We wouldn't charge homeless people to succeed in our mission, yet we have a history of charging people adoption fees to participate in saving animal lives, putting a price tag on a cat's life. If lower-to-

zero fees save more cats, figuring out how to rely less on adoption fees is a tremendous opportunity to save more lives!

For more on reduced fee adoptions read:

**Reduced fee adoptions: why they work**
https://network.bestfriends.org/resources/best-practices/reduced-fee-adoptions-why-they-work

**The truth about free pet adoptions**
http://chewonthis.maddiesfund.org/2017/08/the-truth-about-free-pet-adoptions/

Question: What are some sites I can place pictures and info for the cats I want to be adopted?

Answer (Susan Cosby, Presenter): Adoptapet.com and Petfinder.com are the two largest sites for pet searches. It is also common for people to search online for pets available for adoption in their area. If you have a website for your organization, you can post pets for adoption on your website and most animal management software helps make that process automatic now.

I'll add one caveat to this answer, however. Don't rely on photos online to get cats adopted. While it's a help and you should absolutely promote your cats everywhere you can, at as many locations in your community as you can.

Question: Is there data that shows the relationship between application length/strictness and return rates?

Answer (Susan Cosby, Presenter): Good question. While I'm not aware of any studies that measured application length, the ASPCA did compile data on fee-waived, conversation-based adoptions (link below) that found a 97% pet retention rate. There are a number of studies at this point each looking at different situations and measures of success.

**Huge FIR Event Reveals Success of Conversational, Fee-Waived Adoptions**
https://www.aspcapro.org/resource/saving-lives-research-data/huge-fir-event-reveals-success-conversational-fee-waived

What I can tell you from the experience of increasing adoption rates at several organizations is that commonly the NUMBER of returns goes up as you adopt more pets, the number of pets finding homes goes up even higher resulting in a lower RATE of returns. For example, it often looks like this:

Week 1: 10 pets adopted, 2 pets returned = 20% return rate

Week 2: 50 pets adopted, 6 pets returned = 12% return rate

In the second week there were more returned, but the return RATE declined, and more pets found homes. Sometimes this is perceived as *more returns* while the success of *more adoptions* is overlooked.

Next, I would pose the question – is a return a problem? In my mind it has never been an issue. It is a fantasy to believe that everyone can form a lifelong bond with an animal before introducing that pet into their home. Additionally, we should encourage returns. This allows people the confidence to know, if things don't work out we are there for them. It's good customer service. And it's best for the pet.

If you are concerned about returns because your rescue or shelter can't handle returning animals I would suggest instead of limiting your adopters through a severe screening process you develop advance plans to handle returns. This could be working out an agreement with a local boarding kennel, vet's office, or rescue. Or creating a foster home role that helps provide temporary care while a regular foster home or space in the kennels is found.

For more on returns read:

**Return is not a dirty word** https://www.animalsheltering.org/blog/return-not-dirty-word

**How does your return rate measure up**
https://www.aspcapro.org/blog/2017/05/05/how-does-your-return-rate-measure

**Satisfaction guaranteed**
https://www.aspcapro.org/blog/2010/11/11/satisfaction-guaranteed

I'm with a rescue and we seem to do our best to run off adopters rather than embrace them.   I have more of a shelter background having been long associated with Austin Animal Center.  Trying to change the culture in this rescue to improve our adoption rates. It takes us anywhere from three days to a couple of weeks to process an application because of personal references plus vet check who don't return our contacts so we have to try again and again sometimes.

==Answer== (Cameron Moore, Million Cat Challenge): Beth, I'm so glad you have an open mind and are trying to help your group embrace open adoptions and being a resource. You've got the right idea!! Definitely download Adopters Welcome (link below) and share with those in your group. Have them listen to this webinar once it's posted online too.

==Answer== (Susan Cosby, Presenter): Keep up the good work! It will pay off in the end. Here are some additional resources that can help encourage change. The HSUS Adopters Welcome program Cameron mentioned is a very thorough guide to embracing a customer friendly, open adoption process.

**Why shelters and rescue groups need to unstop the customer service bottleneck to save more lives** [http://chewonthis.maddiesfund.org/2017/06/why-shelters-and-rescue-groups-need-to-unstop-the-customer-service-bottleneck-to-save-more-lives/](http://chewonthis.maddiesfund.org/2017/06/why-shelters-and-rescue-groups-need-to-unstop-the-customer-service-bottleneck-to-save-more-lives/)

**Policy schmolicy** [https://www.aspcapro.org/blog/2015/09/23/policy-schmolicy](https://www.aspcapro.org/blog/2015/09/23/policy-schmolicy)

**HSUS Adopters Welcome program overview**
[https://www.animalsheltering.org/programs/adopters-welcome](https://www.animalsheltering.org/programs/adopters-welcome)

**Direct link to the Adopters Welcome manual downloadable pdfs**
[https://www.animalsheltering.org/page/adopters-welcome-manual](https://www.animalsheltering.org/page/adopters-welcome-manual)

**Best Friends Overcoming Adoption Barriers Research: Executive Summary**
http://cdn.bestfriends.org/s3fs-public/Adoption%20Barrier%20Study%20-%20Executive%20Summary.pdf

==Question:== We struggle with being a very small rural shelter where the community in general is not big on vetting--it's hard to find good adopters when over half of the applications have unaltered pets.

**Answer** (Cameron Moore, Million Cat Challenge): Amber, we have found that most people do want to do the right thing for their pet but typically do not have access to affordable vet care. So it's not because they don't care, but because they don't have access. You may want to look at what resources are available in your community and if you don't have good resources, look at options in neighboring communities. Maybe a mobile clinic can visit your town or a transport could be set up to take animals to a non-profit clinic.

**Answer** (Susan Cosby, Presenter): Cameron had great answers. I'll take it from a different angle - how about we turn this problem into an opportunity! Instead of viewing people with unaltered pets as an issue, I'd suggest it's an incredible opportunity to help change hearts and minds and become a resource. Here's a thought experiment:

Imagine instead of denying an application because there is an unsterilized pet at home, you make a point of adopting out spayed or neutered cats to those homes at every opportunity. The pets will be living examples of how sterilized cats are less likely to roam, yowl and cry, spray or have strong smelling urine. And BONUS no babies!

Now you've made a friend in that adopter, and you are aware they have unsterilized pets at home. So when you develop spay and neuter opportunities they are more likely to respond to your offers of assistance and guidance in caring for their existing pets. You've respected them as people, demonstrated trust, and that is much more likely to make them receptive to your gentle suggestions and the opportunities for pet care you provide.

And they tell their friends. And those friends tell their friends...

Now you've changed the community!

For additional information on changing the community read:

**What is Pets for Life?** http://www.humanesociety.org/about/departments/pets-for-life/what_is_pfl.html?credit=web_id238582932

**Tools to bring Pets for Life to your community**
https://www.animalsheltering.org/page/tools-bring-pets-life-your-community

Up next, together we change the WORLD!

#ALLTHECATS