Seattle Animal Shelter:
Furry 5K Fundraising Event

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Since 1999, the Seattle Animal Shelter, a municipal animal control agency, has hosted an innovative community run that encourages participants to run or walk with their dogs. The event, called the Furry 5K, raises funds to provide veterinary care and enrichment for the animals who are cared for by animal control.

Stats

Here are the numbers for 2008.

Participants running or walking:

- 3,000 people
- 1,500 dogs
- 1 cat

Net proceeds: over $78,000.

How Cool is That?

We're impressed with the way the Seattle Animal Shelter (SAS) took a very popular local activity — running — and added a brand new component — running with your dog (or cat, apparently) — to come up with a winning combination.

Adopt or Adapt

The Furry 5K has been tremendously successful as a fund- and friend-raiser for SAS. However, SAS leaders caution that there are many charity runs out there supporting good causes. It's important to have a unique idea as well as the extensive volunteer support needed to pull off an event of this kind.

Who They Are and What They Do

The publicly funded Seattle Animal Shelter cares for approximately 7,000 stray and owner-surrendered animals a year. Many of them arrive sick, injured, and in need of foster care. The Help the Animals Fund was formed in 1977 to raise private donations for veterinary care and to support the foster and volunteer programs at the shelter. In 1999, a group of volunteers headed by Irene Van Nostrand and Alan Ward started the Furry 5K, to raise funds and promote public awareness of the Help the Animals Fund.

Although there were many dog walks and human runs in the Puget Sound area, this was the first to encourage serious runners to run with their animals. In addition to raising funds, the event:

- calls attention to the good work SAS is doing,
- encourages adoptions, and
- helps recruit the 400 plus volunteers who enrich the lives of the shelter animals through such programs as Dog Walking, Get Fit with Fido, Nine Lives (cat snuggling and healthcare), Fabulous Felines (off-site cat adoptions) Critter Care (enrichment for animals other than cats and dogs), and foster care.

How the Furry 5K Works

Race Day: The Furry 5K is held in Seattle's Seward Park from 10 am -1pm on the second Sunday in June. Walkers and runners participate.

Registration: About 50% participate with dogs, and 30% register to be timed. Participants can register the day of the event for $30. Pre-registration is $25. Participants receive a race number, t-shirt, timing chip, water and snacks. A $20 registration with no t-shirt is also available. Participants are encouraged to collect pledges.

Prizes: The race is followed by an awards ceremony, music and the opportunity to visit approximately 40 animal-related vendor booths. Prizes are awarded for overall first, second and third place men and women runners, top three dogs with men runners, and top three dogs with women runners. In addition, the teams raising the most donations are acknowledged.

Ingredients and Prep Work

People

According to Van Nostrand, SAS already had a large and well organized team of dedicated volunteers. This team tapped into their personal and professional expertise to plan the first event and rallied on the day of the event to make it happen. The event is still run primarily by volunteers but has significant staff support from Kara Main-Hester, SAS Manager of Volunteers and Fundraising.

Administrative staff members handle data entry and all funds from registrations, sponsorships, and donations. Animal control officers handle crowd control and enforce animal laws at the event.

Timeline

Although informal planning began in 1998, it took just 4 months from when the idea was approved to organize the first run in 1999. Planning now takes about seven months.

Costs

According to Van Nostrand, Ward obtained a significant sponsorship that covered all of the up-front costs the first year. Major expenses include:

- hiring a company to handle timing;

- graphic design for promotional materials and signage;
- advertising and t-shirts.

A budget summary with more detail is available to download from www.ASPCApro.org.

The first run attracted 1,600 participants and cleared $26,000. The second year, the run netted $43,000. It has been profitable every year..

Step by Step

1. Do your research.

To learn what would be involved in staging a run, Van Nostrand contacted an events management company with extensive experience planning and executing running events in the Seattle area. She also talked with the editor of Northwest Runner magazine to gauge the market for a dog/human run in the area.

2. Get your volunteers on board.

A run is an extremely labor intensive event. Van Nostrand and Ward pitched their idea to team leaders for SAS's large volunteer network and got their commitment to the project. Today, a core team of ten volunteers works on the event from December through June. In all, over 150 volunteers are involved.

3. Get staff approval.

After developing the plan and obtaining the necessary volunteer support, Van Nostrand and Ward took the idea to SAS Director Don Jordan. When he gave his approval, a brain-storming session was held to select a name and a date, and the planning went into high gear.

4. Develop an identity.

Because there are so many running events in the Seattle area, it was important to come up with a catchy name and unique logo that would set this event apart from the rest. The logo appears, not only on all promotional materials, but also on the race t-shirt given to runners and sold at the event.

Main-Hester stresses the importance of having the logo and other materials designed by a professional (preferably volunteering her services) who knows how to work with printers and t-shirt vendors.

5. Pick a location.

According to Main-Hester, there is a big difference between a park race and a road race.

- The Furry 5K is held in a beautiful city park with a 5K wooded loop trail along the shores of Lake Washington. Parking is on residential streets. SAS would love to increase the size of their event, but the park can accommodate only about 3,000 people.

- Moving it out of the park would involve closing streets, obtaining many more permits, and incurring substantial costs. Main-Hester estimates that they would have to attract 10,000 people to make a road race profitable.

6. Learn and follow all city regulations.

SAS is required to submit a detailed application for a special event permit and a park use permit and show proof that they have met special event insurance requirements. In addition, they must meet with the Department of Neighborhoods to discuss neighborhood impact. According to Main-Hester, keeping the lines of communication open with city departments is essential because regulations and personnel change.

7. Divide up the tasks and create volunteer committees to handle them.

An event that uses the talents of 150 volunteers requires a strong organization. The Furry 5K committees include:

- Marketing and Sponsorship,
- Entertainment,
- Vendors,
- Website and Graphics,
- Race Set-up,
- Logistics,
- Registration, and
- Volunteer Coordination.

All committee chairs report to and are managed by two volunteer Race Directors who work closely with Main-Hester.

8. Obtain sponsors.

According to race volunteers, getting sponsorships is always a challenge. There are many running events in the area, some of them national. As a local organization, SAS can't offer the kind of exposure that the national races can. In addition, as a government agency, SAS cannot endorse products or accept exclusive arrangements with vendors.

A detailed sponsorship proposal spells out the levels of sponsorship and their benefits. In 2008, sponsorships accounted for approximately $13,500 of the $122,000 in event income. A copy of the sponsorship proposal is available on www.ASPCApro.org.

9. Hire a timing company.

According to Main-Hester, establishing a strong and continuing relationship with a quality timing company is essential if you want to attract serious runners. The timing company handles the complex registration process, provides the specialized timing equipment, and times the runners.

10. Make registration as easy as possible.

Registrations account for over half of the event income, so promotion is key. In addition to fliers and press releases, SAS promotes the Furry 5K through its own website, www.furry5K.com. The site is designed and maintained by a volunteer who is a professional graphic designer.

Participants can pre-register (and save $5) by mail, or in person at six area stores selling running gear. They can avoid the registration crowds on race day by picking up their race packets and t-shirts in advance at any of the in-store locations or at SAS the day before the race.

SAS also works with Active.com (http://www.activenetwork.com/about/corporate-overview.htm), a national firm that, among other things, offers on-line pre-registration as well as a vehicle for making on-line donations. Main-Hester reports that donations "skyrocketed" when they began working with Active.com.

Results

The Numbers

In 2008, 3,000 people, 1,500 dogs and 1 cat ran or walked in the Furry 5K, grossing more than $122,000 and netting over $80,000 for the Help the Animals Fund. In 2009, Main-Hester expects to attract 3,500 people and 1,600 dogs.

According to SAS Director Don Jordan, the Furry 5K has made it possible for SAS to provide veterinary care for thousands of orphaned animals and increase animal adoptions by 68% since 2005.

In addition to raising funds, the Furry 5K promotes responsible pet ownership, educates the public about SAS and its wide ranging volunteer programs, promotes adoptions, and encourages owners to include their pets in outdoor activities.

Critical Factors

Race leaders identify the following as key to the success of the Furry 5K.

- Making the event good for the runners. Although there are a lot of walkers, it is encouraging serious runners to run with their dogs that makes this event unique. Many very talented runners participate, and the event gets a lot of support from the running community. It is therefore very important to keep this constituency happy.

- Respecting park users and neighbors. SAS staff and volunteers take pains to make sure that people parking on residential streets respect the neighbors and that participants control and clean up after their dogs.

- The existence of a large group of talented and dedicated volunteers.

- A good working relationship between the volunteers and the shelter staff.

- A good working relationship with the timing company.

- A good relationship with the stores that provide in-store registration.

- Enough qualified volunteers the day of the event to make the event pleasant for all participants.

Thinking Outside the Box

Encouraging serious runners to run with their dog engages a whole new group of people in the work of SAS while providing a new opportunity for dogs and people to have fun together.

Words of Wisdom

Be Aware of

- Managing an event like this is a lot to expect of volunteers. It can be hard to fill key positions. Sometimes volunteers don't come through, putting a major burden on the committee chairs.

- It may be difficult to get food vendors to participate. The Furry 5K provides water and post – run pastry and fruit snacks for the participants but no food or beverage is sold on site because permits for serving food are expensive and difficult to obtain. According to Main-Hester, people don't stay to experience the post-race activities as long as they would if there were food available.

- According to Van Nostrand, most event companies (including the one she consulted) steer groups away from runs with good reason. There are a lot of runs out there supporting good causes. It's difficult to come up with a unique event that will stand out from the rest. "We thought we had a unique idea and we knew our volunteers" she says. "We were right, but we were also very lucky". Van Nostrand admits that she receives many requests for advice about starting an event like the Furry 5K and often finds herself giving the same advice as the event companies.

Seattle Animal Shelter

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http://www.seattle.gov/animalshelter/

Director: Don Jordan

The Seattle Animal Shelter (SAS) cares for approximately 7,000 stray and owner-surrendered animals each year. In addition to providing clean, safe, and humane housing for impounded animals, reuniting lost pets with their owners and finding good new homes for over 2,700 abandoned pets, SAS educates citizens about responsible pet ownership, provides a low-cost spay/neuter program, and enforces ordinances relating to leash laws, scoop, laws, nuisance barking, vicious animals and animal cruelty.

Staff

36

Operating Budget

$2 million

Business Type

Municipal Animal Control