



Oregon Humane Society: User-Friendly Adoptions



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Oregon Humane Society

"User-friendly" adoption process



The shelter at the Oregon Humane Society (OHS) adopted out over 8500 animals in 2005. The shelter may adopt out as many as 50 animals a day on its busiest days.

Their customer-friendly approach to adoptions is intended to make the process as positive as possible for adopters, staff, and the animals.

OHS has also adapted its admission process to make intake a more customer-friendly and humane experience.

Stats

Since Oregon Humane Society has embraced an adoption process based on trust rather than on suspicion of potential adopters, the shelter has seen the following positive results:

- OHS finds home for 96% of their dogs and 80% of their cats. (The national averages are 25% for dogs and 20% for cats.)
- Working in the adoption area is much less tense for staff, and there are fewer conflicts.
- Community word of mouth has improved, and the number of complaints has fallen.

How Cool is That?

At ASPCA® National Outreach, we admire Oregon Humane Society's willingness to re-examine their methods. They had the courage to take an honest look at whether a rigid investigation of each potential adopter really benefited the animals in the shelter's care.

Adopt or Adapt

The cost of implementing a "user-friendly" adoption process can be very small. The essential resources are free: open minds and a vision that can take in the big picture of serving all the adoptable animals you care for.

Oregon Humane Society: The Whole Story

"User-friendly" adoption process

As one of the oldest humane societies in the U.S., the Oregon Humane Society (founded 1868) has participated in the evolution of both the public attitudes toward companion animals and shelters' approaches to adoption screening.

In the late 1990s, Oregon Humane Society (OHS) recognized that most people do value their companion animals. And, significantly, they also recognized that most people could become satisfactory pet owners with support and education.

Oregon Humane Society established a stated goal of adopting more animals and providing humans with the information and support they needed to be successful.



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Who They Are and What They Do

Susan Mentley, Operations Director

Like staff at many other shelters, OHS staff were originally trained to be suspicious of potential adopters:

- They required adopters to complete an 8-page application
- Staff independently verified applicant information. They called landlords, required proof of home ownership, inspected yards for all dog adoptions, and so on.
- At times, the shelter had a policy of mandatory 24-hour holds to "weed out" casual adopters.

This process was contentious and stressful for both adopters and staff:

- Even adopters who "passed" found the experience rather negative. Often, both "passed" and "failed" adopters communicated their negative experience to friends, colleagues, and family.
- Adoption staff were stuck in the "bad guy" role of the gatekeeper to the animals needing homes.
- And most significantly, adoptable animals languished in the shelter or were euthanized for lack of adopters who could prove they met every requirement.

For OHS, the process of change began with a change in outlook. Operations Director Susan Mentley says, "We began to regard the public as a solution rather than a problem."

Ingredients and Prep Work

Prerequisites

Staff, board members, and volunteers who are willing to:

- Change their outlook regarding the trustworthiness of adopters
- Change the way they interact with adopters -- from interrogation to conversation and partnership

People

At OHS, staffing levels did not change. However, there was some staff turnover when the new process was implemented. Those who strongly disapproved of the new process and were unwilling to change their relationships with adopters ultimately left the organization.

Hiring practices changed. According to Susan Mentley, the organization actively looked for "enthusiastic, upbeat [candidates] who could communicate well and come to consensus on issues."

Up-front Costs and Startup Funding

At OHS, costs to implement the new approach were minimal. Expenditures to produce updated forms and other paperwork for the new process (if needed) might be the only up-front cost.

Timeline

The transition to a user-friendly adoption process took OHS approximately one year.

Step by Step

1. Obtain the buy-in of as many staff, board members, and volunteers as possible.

- Recognize that the change in attitude and outlook you are asking for may be extremely difficult for some people. Those who've been in the field a long time may have deeply ingrained assumptions about adoptions.
- Some who are initially resistant may change their attitude over time. And it is unfortunately possible that some people will be unable to make the transition.

2. Define the new process.

Confirm the adoption criteria. Susan Mentley says that at OHS, "the adoption criteria did not change dramatically. The way [they are] enforced changed."

- OHS's policy manual defines their adoption "non-negotiables," such not adopting to people who have a history of violence against animals or people.
- Identify any exceptions to the new process. For example, OHS still does a home visit to adopters who want to adopt a large, powerful dog.
- Clarify related policies: adoption hours, circumstances in which an adoption counselor should consult a supervisor, policies on holds, adoption fees, returns.

3. Prepare educational and supporting materials for adopters.

These materials should:

- Spell out your adoption process and policies
- Establish realistic expectations of the demands on a pet owner
- Assist in the animal's successful adjustment to a new home
- Make adopters aware of the resources that are available to help them if they encounter problems with their pet

OHS provides these materials in a packet when adopters come to the shelter. The OHS website also has extensive adoption information.

4. Train staff in the new process.

- Not only the adoption interview but all aspects of interaction with potential adopters should reflect a customer-service approach. At OHS, this has included:

- Limiting wait times for an adoption counselor at the shelter
- Directing callers interested in adoptions to the information available on the website. In addition, staff inform callers of the adoption hours
- During busy times, even providing entertainment in their lobby
- For subsequent hires, OHS pairs a new staffer with a trained staffer to train them in the process and to model the customer-service oriented approach.
- OHS recommends cross-training other staff in the adoption process.

Results

The Numbers

Since Oregon Humane Society has embraced an adoption process based on trust rather than on suspicion of potential adopters, the shelter has seen the following positive results:

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OHS has also seen a slight rise in the number of animals returned. However, they no longer look at returns as a failure. Instead they see opportunities:

- The adopter's experiences, good and bad, with the animal will help the shelter make a more appropriate match with the animal in the future.
- This information also helps the shelter understand the adopter better, enabling them to find an animal that will be successful in the adopter's home.

Critical Factors

Susan Mentley cites some changes in our culture making it possible to successfully introduce a more open process in adoptions:

- "People today are subjected to media information and advertising that promotes the fact that companion animals have value.
- "What would not have been possible twenty years ago is now achievable. People can be regarded as good and truthful, even if they dress and act differently than others."

Thinking Outside the Box

At ASPCA® National Outreach™, we're impressed that a venerable humane society was open to going beyond doing things a certain way "because that's how we've always done them."

In addition, Oregon Humane Society was able to recognize that for adoptions as a whole, the perfect had become the enemy of the good. Now, in each adoption, they look at whether they are improving the situation for the animal. For example, a dog that was previously chained and ignored might find being able to wander within a fenced yard with human attention to be a significant improvement. A dog that is used to sleeping in its owner's bedroom would not be expected to accept less in a new home.

Some Words of Wisdom

What Worked

- Regarding the public as truthful and sincere in their attempt to add an animal to their household
- Remembering that "animals are not as concerned about tangible items as humans and like attention no matter how strange or eccentric their human."

Be Prepared For

- Changing the outlook of some staff may be slow and difficult, and some staff may not change.
- Some adoption placements will still require careful investigation. Susan Mentley says, "We continue to place large, powerful dogs with care. Conditions that may be negotiable with other breeds are usually enforced with such dogs."
- Exotic birds require considerable adopter education about the special requirements of these species, their potential for disruptive behaviors, and their very long lives. The OHS website includes a separate adopter application for exotic birds.
- Returns may increase somewhat. Take the opportunity to learn more about the adopter and animal for future successful matches for both. Susan Mentley says, "Marriages do not always succeed, and that does not mean the participants are bad."

Your Next Steps

With the information we've provided, can you start a program like this one in your organization? [Click here](#) to send an e-mail to ASPCA® National Outreach with your feedback.

Oregon Humane Society: Thumbnail Sketch

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Founded in 1868, the Oregon Humane Society (OHS) is one of the oldest in the nation. OHS now serves the needs of over 13,000 animals each year. With over 80 staffers and a volunteer force of over 1,000, the Oregon Humane Society is dedicated to adopting out 100 percent of the animals turned into the shelter.

Their goal is to "build a community of compassion" through adoption of homeless pets, animal welfare legislation, humane education, abuse investigation, and community outreach and leadership.

Staff

83 paid staff, including:

- 6 admissions
- 10 adoptions
- 15 kennel
- 15 cattery
- 6 foster/outreach/behavior
- 3 cruelty investigators
- 3 behavior
- 25 administrative

Operating Budget

\$5.4 million annual operating budget.

Business Type

501(c)(3) non profit organization