

A Guide To Create A Successful Adoption Experience

Adoption counseling is about making life long matches between people and pets. Your goal will be to use appropriate communication techniques to gather information and use that information to educate and assist the public in choosing a pet.

Do not judge a book by its cover. You never know who you are dealing with or what their background is no matter how they look.

Communication is the cornerstone to any placement program. Giving the potential adopter your undivided attention during the conversation process will enable you to make the proper educated and caring placement. Remember a life is in your hands. That loving, caring soul deserves your undivided attention.

Open ended questioning, active listening and discussion will help you build a positive rapport with the adopter and will help with the education process. The old saying do not judge a book by its cover is true, you never know who you are dealing with or what their background is no matter how they look. Judgmental attitudes, spouting facts only, accusations or accusatory tones and verbally attacking a potential adopter will only result in a mutually uncomfortable situation. Be aware of your own behavior, attitude, tones and body language. As always if you are not comfortable with a situation, or do not know the answer to a question – ask a fellow adoption counselor for help or your supervisor. There are no scripts, each situation is different – empower yourself to make the right decision.

Make Eye Contact and Smile!

Greet and Welcome Each and Every Customer

- Extend the appropriate greeting to every Customer with whom you come into contact with.
- Make Customers feel welcome by providing a special, differentiated greeting.
- After initial greeting go and check on Customer in the kennels or cat rooms to see if they need assistance. They should not have to come looking for you.

Seek Out Customer Contact

- It is the responsibility of every counselor to seek out Customers who need help or assistance.
 - Listen to Customers' needs
 - Answer Questions
 - Offer Assistance

Display Appropriate Body Language at All Times

- It is the responsibility of every Adoption Counselor to display approachable body language when on duty.
 - Attentive appearance
 - Good posture
 - Appropriate facial expression
 - Clean, neat, appropriate attire

Preserve or Enhance the Exceptional Customer Service Experience

- Always focus on the positive, rather than the rules and regulations.
- Talking about personal or job-related problems in front of customers is unacceptable.

Provide Immediate Service Recovery

- It is the responsibility of the Adoption Counselor to attempt, to the best of their abilities, to immediately resolve a Customer service issue before it becomes a Customer service problem.
- Always find the answer for the Customer and/or find another staff member who can help the Customer.

Thank Each and Every Customer

Do

- Have a positive attitude
- Remember to thank people
- Give people the benefit of the doubt
- Admit and apologize for errors/delays
- Get your facts straight
- React to ideas not the person
- Control your emotions
- Project genuine, active attention
- Hear others out
- Limit your own talking
- Think like the customer
- Encourage the customer to talk
- Be truly interested
- Identify yourself
- Keep things out of your mouth
- Be enthusiastic, yet sincere
- Smile, speak clearly
- Set expectations in a positive manner

Don't

- You must
- You have to
- Do you understand?
- The policy is...
- Vague words-very, later,
- It's not my fault
- Argue mentally
- Jump to conclusions
- Interrupt
- Rush the customer
- Be inconsiderate
- Mumble
- Talk too much
- Interrogate

Listening attentively

Agreeing with customers

Finding ways to praise customers

Frame any comments, reservations or advice as to not sound like a put down

When things get contentious, go get help

Have a cheerful approach

Get involved in the conversation

Know the animals in the shelter to help make good placements

Have Canned Answers to basic questions

Treat others the way you would like to be treated

Treat each customer like they were the first customer of the day

Do not allow your day to affect the way you treat a customer

Every interaction with a person is an educational opportunity

Do not use animal shelter/behavior jargon or codes when giving answers

Be flexible-Strive for a positive solution

Be responsive to criticism and be willing to change based on feedback

Be truthful and know your facts

Be friendly and inviting

Establish rapport immediately

Tone of voice and body language helps set the tone for the conversation

Fact: When two people interact, the potential for conflict is inevitable

Conflict Resolution Tips

1. Treat the other person with respect
2. An irate person wants to know that
 - Someone is listening
 - They are understood
 - They are important and appreciated
 - They are going to be helped
 - They are talking to the right person
3. You cannot win by being irate also. The one that stays calm has control.
4. Don't take things personally
5. State your point of view briefly
6. Say what you mean and mean what you say
7. Do not withhold important information
8. Use personal experiences
9. Collaborate problem solving
 - Define the problem in terms of needs not solutions
 - Make a distinction between means and ends by determining what the ultimate goal of the resolution is.
 - Brainstorm possible solutions
10. If you must say no; give an explanation, express your feelings, provide an alternative.
11. Focus on what you CAN do rather than on what you CAN'T do.

Interfacing with the public is not always an easy pursuit. Sometimes you are pressured for time and the customer may be particularly abrasive. Here are some suggestions and tools for effective communication to help you through the rough times.

Reflective Listening

Reflective listening or mirroring is a tool to help in communicating with customers. It is a way of responding that indicates you have heard what the person has said, and promotes further dialogue in a non-judgmental way.

Customer: *I am upset that I can't take the puppy home before it is neutered.*

Counselor: *What I hear is that you are upset that you can't take the puppy home before it is neutered.*

Paraphrasing

To paraphrase is simply to repeat back in your own words the content of what the customer is saying:

Customer: *My cat, fluffy, is pretty territorial. I wonder what he'll do if I bring a new kitten home?*

Counselor: *You're concerned that Fluffy may have a hard time adjusting to a new cat in the household?*

Customer: *I have two small children at home. I don't want a dog that bites.*

Counselor: *So you're looking for a dog that will be a good companion for your kids.*

Open Ended Questions

Open ended questions are designed to elicit more than a yes or no. They often begin with how or what. Questions beginning with why also elicit more than yes or no, but can put person in the defensive.

Open ended: What will you do with the puppy while you are at work?

Closed-ended: Is this puppy going to be home alone while you are at work?

Defensive: Why do you want a puppy that is not housebroken when you work full time?

Three Levels of Responses to a Conversation

1. Denial of the message, or criticism, or abusive response. With all of these the customer will feel put down, on the defensive, and closed to further communication.
2. Accurate, non-judgmental response that answers the question but does not necessarily encourage further dialogue.
3. Good summary of content, that also touches on underlying feelings (paraphrasing), spoken or unspoken (empathy), and stimulating good rapport (open-ended questions).

Examples would include:

Counselor: *What kind of pets do you have at home?*

Customer: *I have a 10 month old lab mix and she's going to have puppies soon*

Level I, Inappropriate response: Why weren't you responsible enough to have her spayed?

Level II: When an animal isn't spayed it's almost impossible to keep her from getting pregnant, even when you take precautions.

Level III: It's probably going to be hard to find good homes for those pups. Have you thought about having your dog spayed, so she won't become pregnant again?

Counselor: *What kind of dog are you interested in?*

Customer: *I am looking for a guard dog.*

Level I, Inappropriate response: We don't adopt out guard dogs here

Level II: So you want a dog that will be protective of you and your property.

Level III: People think of guard dogs in a lot of different ways. Could you help me to understand what you mean by guard dog?

Counselor: *Is there anyone in your household who may be allergic to cats?*

Customer: *My husband says he sneezes around animals, but he's hypochondriac, so I have not told him I'm getting a cat.*

Level I, Inappropriate response That's a pretty inconsiderate thing to do to your husband not to mention the cat.

Level II: So you have not spoken to your husband yet?

Level III: It sounds like you really want a cat even though you are not sure what your husband will say.

Remember, we do not discriminate or turn people down for an adoption due to race, sex, age, language, or the way the person looks or dresses. Also remember to assess the situation and gather all the facts fully before making rash judgments. It is always helpful to consult with another adoption counselor or supervisor before making these decisions.

It is unrealistic to think that the shelter failed when the adoption didn't work out. Don't beat yourself up; animals and people behave differently at home than in our shelter.

The Adoption Process

- Is respectful of the adopter's experience and knowledge and assume both of you come from a place of commonality wanting to help animals
- Takes a conversational approach with open-ended questions such as "What are you looking for", "What's your lifestyle", etc.
- Is a discussion, rather than a series of barriers that applicants must overcome in order to get an animal
- Focuses on success, and creating a relationship with the customer
- **Looks for a way to approve an adoption, not turn one down**
- **Treats each potential adopter and animal as individuals**
- Uses guidelines to encourage discussion and education, not as inflexible mandates
- Emphasizes the resources the shelter can provide to help solve any problems that arise
- Emphasizes that post-adoption contact from the adopter is welcomed and returns are acceptable

Remember – if the adopter can provide a safe atmosphere for the pet then allow the adopter to decide if they can handle the behavior by setting expectations.

What is A Successful Adoption?

1. The match is suited to the individual animal and family
2. The pet is afforded appropriate veterinary care
3. The pet's social, behavioral, and companionship needs are met
4. The pet has a livable environment (including appropriate food, water, shelter, etc)
5. The pet is respected and valued

Adoption Counselor's intuitive judgment

While a counselor's intuitive judgment of a potential adopter should be given weight, it must not be allowed to sink into the realm of prejudice. Automatically rejecting a certain type or group of people from consideration as adopters is discriminatory and reduces the number of homes available to animals without taking the time to even evaluate the individual. We must be conscious of our personal bias and filters.

Chaining

We oppose the idea of chaining a dog outside 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. However, if the dog is only outside for a short period of time and is retrained by a cable run or tie out because they do not have a fence, this is not by itself a reason to decline an adoption. You should work with the adopter to come up with a plan that meets his needs and the needs of the pet. Please understand and know the risks of chaining a dog outside before trying to educate someone on other possible alternatives.

Guard Dog/Mouser

You should first determine whether you and the potential adopter are speaking the same language. By "guard dog", you may be thinking of an underfed, neglected dog guarding a salvage yard. The adopter may mean a dog who barks when anyone comes to the door. "Mousing" could be more of a hoped-for behavior from the family cat than the primary reason for seeking a new pet.

Outside Dog

The question is not simply whether or not the dog will live solely or primarily outside, but rather how the dog's social and companionship needs will be met. Mitigating factors may be the presence of other animals (dog, horse, etc) the dog can play with, and how much time the dog will spend with his adopter (i.e., how much time does the adopter spend outdoors; how do they plan to spend time with the dog during the cold or really hot months?) Also, we might consider that many a dog meant to sleep outside has wagged and wiggled his way indoors – often right into the adopter's bed.

Landlord Permission

It is the Adopters responsibility to know and understand their landlord policies. Rather than acting as a detective in this case, you can counsel them and trust the adopter to make a good decision. The adopter is the one taking the risk.

Pet History

While a past failed human/pet relationship may raise red flags it should not by itself prevent an adoption. Ask simple open ended questions such as “What has changed in your circumstances”, “What if anything would you have done differently”, by keeping an open mind and allowing people to explain you might learn they have already thought about the problem and found solutions. As far as checking with their Veterinarian, it is not required and should only be used as a tool for you to find out more about the person’s pet history if you have concerns. If a potential adopter has no history of pet ownership, a discussion on expectations may help start the relationship off well. In addition, more follow-up support may be needed after the adoption.

Outside Cat or Inside/Outside Cat

This is a good example of a requirement that leads applicants to lie to the adoption counselor. Ultimately, we can not control this situation. A reasonable expectation may be that the adopter understands all the dangers of letting a cat outside, the importance of always having ID on the pet, and the shelter’s strong preference that cats be kept indoors or let outdoors under supervision only. If the adopter wants a cat for a pet, and plans on letting her go outside unsupervised, at least the cat will be spayed or neutered. The same may not be true if the adopter acquires a cat from another source.

Declawing

Declawing is just one solution that people can use as a means to stop destructive scratching by their cat. This by itself is no reason to decline someone from adopting a pet. It is however an ideal opportunity to educate them on other means of controlling the problem. Some people just don’t know they have other options that work or understand why declawing may not be the best choice.

We should recognize that every interaction with the public is an opportunity to educate AND to learn. We can learn while we are teaching. If we don’t educate and build relationships with our potential adopters, we aren’t achieving what we could for the animals.

Thank you to Maricopa County Animal Care and Control and to Petsmart Charities for their Report on Adoption Forum II. A lot of the information in this manual was gathered from these two organizations.