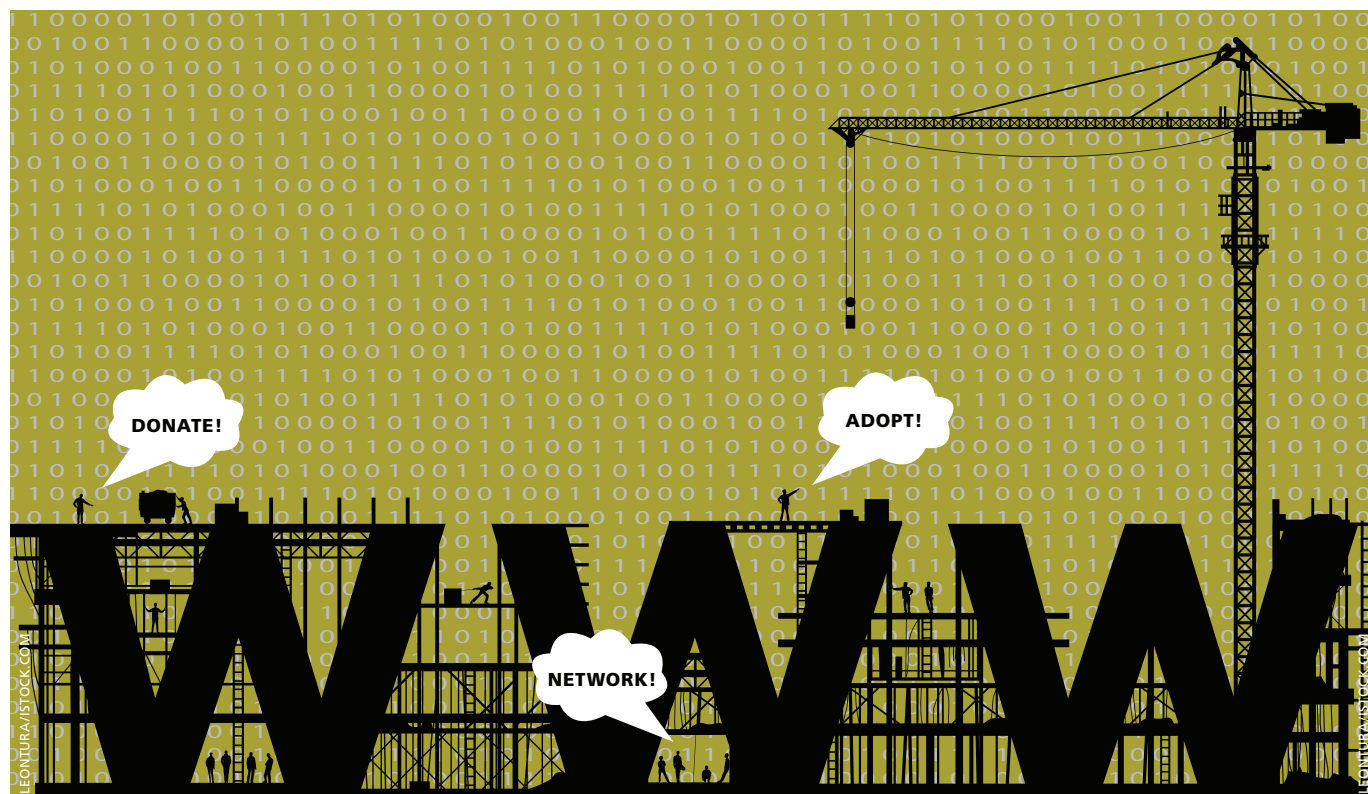# Keys to a Cool Shelter Website

Amazing new tools to engage people, create community, and support your mission

BY JIM BAKER

It's irresistible.

Click over to a website the Greenville (S.C.) Humane Society launched last fall to educate the public about the pet overpopulation problem. Up comes a deceptively standard-looking page listing some alarming statistics, as well as the benefits of spaying and neutering your pets.

Then, from every corner, appear rambunctious kittens, one after another, careening into the text, clawing at the pictures, turning the neatly designed page into a mess—and showing what happens when people don't neuter.

Or visit the Oregon Humane Society's website and click the "Donate" button. You can honor a loved one by selecting and sending them a tribute card and designating a gift to the shelter on their behalf. This feature alone brings in about $85,000 a year.

Or check out the website of the SPCA of Wake County (N.C.), which runs the nitty-gritty of its volunteer program—filling spots in orientation sessions, gathering contact information, getting people signed up for shifts—electronically, greatly reducing paperwork and back-and-forth phone calls.

No longer is the typical shelter website a static, digital brochure featuring a "just the facts, ma'am" approach, a homemade appearance, and the barest hint of interactivity (that being an adoptable animals search function, updated every few weeks at best).

These days, the trend is clearly toward websites that are sleekly professional and guided by the principles of ease of use, clarity, interactivity, and site-visitor engagement.

Thanks to the Internet, people are conducting more and more aspects of their lives online: shopping, socializing, doing business—and that goes for seeking a new pet, too. That's why it's rapidly becoming essential for private shelters, as well as animal care and control agencies, to have an online presence. The public expects an organization to have a website, where they can pay a quick, virtual visit to find out if you have what they need—whatever that good or service might be.

An effective website can project your organization into cyberspace, serving as your voice, your identity, and one of your most valuable marketing tools. It can communicate your mission, provide detailed information, and, of course, give people a look at all the potential new best friends available at your shelter.

Not only that, but many shelters are finding that their websites, with the addition of some interactive features, are a tremendous boon to their donations, adoptions, and volunteer programs.

Ask essential questions such as "Why do people visit this site?" "When they do, what are they looking for?" and "What would help the site be visited more frequently?" and then make the information easily accessible.

Shelters that have committed the resources and done the hard work that goes into creating knock-your-socks-off websites often identify the same approaches and tools as being the keys to their online success.

Here, some of them share their insights on the key elements of a strong online presence, explaining how their own sites have helped them in their mission to help animals.

A Good Site is Easy and Fun to Use

Ease of use should be a guiding principle for any website designed to engage the public.

"Always consider visitor perspective when planning and developing [a site]," says David Avila, account manager at All City Web & Print, in Longmont, Colo. His firm redesigned the Longmont Humane Society's website, pro bono. "If the site is not user friendly, users will abandon it quickly after arriving and/or not return. Ask essential questions such as 'Why do people visit this site?' 'When they do, what are they looking for?' and 'What would help the site be visited more frequently?' and then make the information easily accessible."

An effective shelter website will provide quick, easy access to information that a visitor in a hurry might be looking for—the shelter's phone number, hours, and location, for example, should be easy to find. Some sites put this information in one area (a page labeled "About Us" or "Contact Information," for instance). Others ensure it's always at hand by placing the organization's phone number and address at the top or bottom of every page on the site. Some, in fact, do both.

Such basics ensure that a harried client won't be frustrated. Someone who has lost her cat doesn't want to spend 15 minutes trying to figure out how to call the shelter.

But a good website is also joy to navigate, providing folks with more time with a place to explore and a way to learn more about the organization and its work. Achieving this quality is a big challenge; the easier a website is to use, the more likely it is that tons of thought and planning went into designing it.

Adrian Goh, a Ph.D. student in organizational science at the University of North Carolina-Charlotte, has studied the qualities that make shelter websites effective. He points to the website of the San Francisco SPCA as a good example of customer-friendly Web design. "They have a very easy, clean interface, there's not a lot of distraction, there's a main focus point. You have drop-down menus at the top bar that will help just about any visitor navigate."

The key here is to shoot for a clean, uncluttered look, rather than a wall of content. "You don't want to overwhelm [visitors], but at the same time, you want to provide the general frame."

Model approaches:
■ The San Francisco SPCA: *sfspca.org*
■ The Longmont Humane Society: *longmonthumane.org*

A Good Site is Highly Functional

A good shelter website has the potential to make your life—as well as the participation of adopters, donors, and supporters—much easier, because you can design it to do so many things. People can use it to buy a ticket to an upcoming event, donate to various funds, grab content from your site (such as a profile/photo of a particularly charming kitten) and share it with friends on Facebook and Twitter, join your volunteer program, register for your e-newsletter, print out adoption forms, license their pets—you name it.

The SPCA of Wake County in Raleigh, N.C., for example, has transferred much of the cumbersome administrative work required to run its volunteer program onto its website. A website-management software suite from Convio—a company that specializes in technology for nonprofits—has saved staff tons of time. "Before, with our old website, once you clicked a link that said, 'I want to be a volunteer,' you had to call or e-mail our volunteer services manager, so she spent much of her time just responding to people that were interested in attending an orientation," says Mondy Lamb, marketing director at the shelter. Now, site visitors can click on a calendar that shows when volunteer orientations are scheduled, and sign themselves up for one. The volunteer services coordinator can print out a report tracking attendees, including their contact information. If a particular orientation is full, it automatically closes out online, and people are directed to another date. In similar fashion, site visitors can

use the same calendar to sign up for a pet-loss support group, or register to participate in an event, like the shelter's "Howl-O-Ween" celebration.

Model approaches:
- The SPCA of Wake County: *spcawake.org*
- Wayside Waifs: *waysidewaifs.org*
- The Placer SPCA: *placerspca.org*

A Good Site Makes it Easy to Donate

Shelters have always relied on the kindness of strangers. Their websites are often the first way to reach potential donors—and yet, some shelters don't have a donation function in their websites, and others hide donor opportunities deep in the site labyrinth, as though they want to make sure only the geekiest and most persistent will ever be able to give their dollars to the animals.

Don't make your supporters work that hard. These days, incorporating online donations into your site's functionality is easy. A variety of online payment services enable people to make donations on your website, while maintaining the privacy and security of their financial information. PayPal is probably the most familiar of these services, but there are others, such as Network for Good, Acceptiva, Click & Pledge, and DonorPerfect. These four, in fact, are tailored specifically to meet the needs of nonprofits.

You can incorporate a design element, such as a box that says "Make a Donation," into your site that appears just about on every page view. Some shelters put such a box or button in a column running down one side of the page, or in a banner across the bottom or top of the site.

And give site visitors options: Your donation page can have information about general donations, those in honor or memory of a particular person or pet, bequests and estates, event sponsorship, individual pet sponsorship, a wish list, a fund for shelter pets with special needs, even car donations. Visitors to the website of Wayside Waifs in Kansas City, Mo., will find links for all of these options located on a "Donate" landing page.

Model approaches:
- The SPCA Located in Lakeland: *lovemyspca.com*
- The Longmont Humane Society: *longmonthumane.org*
- Wayside Waifs: *waysidewaifs.org*
- The Oregon Humane Society: *oregonhumane.org*

A Good Site Will Help Visitors Search for Pets

Shelter webmasters who track where their visitors go report that the No. 1 destination on the shelter's website is typically the adoptable animal search. In fact, many visitors click right past a shelter's homepage to see what animals are available. Some visitors even follow a particular pet's journey through a shelter, checking back in to see if an animal is listed as adopted, placed in foster care, or transferred to a different location (such as a satellite adoption center).

In many cases, the adoptable pet search is what drives traffic to a shelter's website. It certainly does in Oregon: "There are people who, when they have a 15-minute break at work, they go online, and they look at our animals available for adoption, and they e-mail their friends, and it's a whole social circle that revolves all over Portland, following this website," says Barbara Baugnon, OHS's public relations/marketing director.

Featuring an adoptable pet search on a shelter website is nothing new; that tool's been around for a while. But now there are software systems that automatically update an animal's status in real time (or every hour or half hour). This means that as soon as staff members enter an adoptable pet into the shelter's internal tracking/management software, the animal appears on the online pet search—and if that animal gets adopted, the listing will come down. This way, people don't come to a shelter to see a specific pet

listed in the search, only to find out the animal's already been adopted.

In some cases, when websites are equipped with this type of search, site visitors who browse adoptable pets are actually looking at images of animals that have been uploaded to a remotely hosted pet adoption site like Petfinder, or the newer Petango, but the interface keeps the viewer on the shelter's own website throughout the experience. This neat trick is accomplished by a simple bit of embedded software code.

At the SPCA Serving Wake County, "We survey everybody that adopts: 'How did you hear about us? What made you come down here today?' And 95 percent of them say, 'I visited your website, I saw this picture of the animal online,'" says Lamb. "That's step one: a real-time adoption database."

Model approaches:
- The SPCA of Wake County: *spcawake.org*

A Good Site Will Take Advantage of Social Networking

Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, YouTube and other social networking/content-sharing sites aren't only revolutionizing the media, they're also changing the landscape for nonprofits. Webmasters and other staff members say that incorporating these tools into your website is surprisingly easy, and they serve a number of important purposes, such as creating a sense of community, attracting new supporters, and offering an effective way to spread the word about what your shelter's doing. If you check

Animal Control Adapts to Internet-Age Expectations

The days when animal care and control agencies could carry out their mission with just a bare-bones website offering minimal functionality and the slightest online identity are over. At least that's how Mike Oswald feels.

"We're an urban animal services program, and we're full-service, and what we've discovered is that in this day and age, people expect to have their needs met electronically, using the Internet and the Web," says Oswald, director of Multnomah County Animal Services in Portland, Ore.

That's why his agency, in addition to offering the basics like an adoptable pet search with photos, lost-and-found services, and information about ordinances, has enhanced its site with all kinds of new content and dynamic features.

Staff have added success stories of adopted pets; links to press releases about various events and issues in the media; kitty and doggy cams; videos about pet care and training taken from episodes of a community cable TV show the agency produces, posted to YouTube; the ability to process donations; a pet license lookup feature, so people can track down a stray pet's owner; and they're even experimenting with Facebook and Twitter.

"Whether they're private shelters or public shelters, I think the trend is to be more accessible, and the public's simply more sophisticated when it comes to the Internet and what they expect from the Web," Oswald says.

The online revolution that has reshaped so much of the way people interact, conduct business, and seek information has altered the landscape for animal control agencies, too.

When Peggy Bender started her job as community relations and education specialist at Fort Wayne Animal Care and Control in Indiana, there were no computers in the office; everything was handwritten, in triplicate.

Twenty-five years later, one of her many tasks is to oversee the agency's website, which includes shooting "Pet Wise" video clips about various aspects of pet ownership.

The agency's online presence is housed within the larger City of Fort Wayne website, with each city department using the same basic template design. Within the template's limits, Bender can easily update and change the shelter's pages.

Unlike many municipal or county agencies, Bender's shelter has purchased its own domain name, so that people don't have to click through the City of Fort Wayne website, looking for the link to animal control. The domain name is short and sweet—the

agency's initials—and Bender makes sure it appears on all the department's printed materials. It's even plastered on the staff's government vehicles.

Her agency's Web pages attract 55,000 to 65,000 hits per month, most of them going to the adoptable pet search—which is why Bender insists that photos of pets be high-quality. That means pictures that clearly show the eyes and expressions of the animals, and a cozy setting, complete with toys or blankets. Photos of a stressed-out cat, pressed against the back of a stainless steel cage, hold little appeal to site visitors.

"You've got your people who are really just looking for pets, and boy, I'll tell you, they are looking at those pets every day … so spending the time to put quality photos and video on your site is so worthwhile," she says.

If an animal care and control facility is going to invest the effort to do a website, its hallmark should be quality.

"It has to be professional, it has to be current, it has to be engaging, useful information—all that has to be considered in any kind of marketing that you are doing," Bender says. "That website is your voice."

Model approaches:
- Multnomah County Animal Control: *multnomah.or.us/ dbcs/pets/*
- Fort Wayne Animal Care & Control: *fwacc.org*

out various shelter websites today, you're likely to see more of those Facebook and Twitter icons populating their homepages.

Wayside Waifs in Kansas City has jumped on the social networking bandwagon. Visitors to its website can follow the shelter's events, activities, and adoption promotions on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, as well as on a frequently updated blog. At press time, the shelter had nearly 3,000 followers on Facebook and about 2,000 on Twitter.

What's the shelter doing on those sites to attract all that interest? On its Facebook group page, there's news about upcoming events and promotions, videos of adoptable pets, photo albums with pictures from past activities, answers to questions posted by followers ("Will Wayside Waifs be at Dogtoberfest on Sunday?"), and more.

On Twitter, meanwhile, staff members are posting brief "tweets" about adoption specials ("Looking for BIG LOVE? Adopt a BIG DOG at Wayside!"), fundraisers, upcoming media spots about the shelter, and links to videos and other content.

"None of [the social networking sites] alone would be sufficient to move the needle on donations or adoptions, but all of them working together are kind of spokes on the wheel," says Marla Svoboda, director of development. They work in concert with the shelter's TV advertising, direct mail, and the website to give Wayside Waifs a strong identity in the community.

Goh has looked into how websites can make volunteer programs more effective and appealing. Social networking, he says, is an increasingly popular way for people to feel a sense of belonging. In fact, some people seem to feel closer to their online friends than to those they interact with in person. The trend these days is toward people leading more solitary lives, while at the same time shifting to more online friendships. "Shelters need to be a part of that," Goh says. "What shelters can do is create a Facebook group or have a Twitter channel where people could just tweet about what's going on with the shelter." Twitter especially, he says, meets the need people have today for instant information and instant gratification. "People are really taking to it. It's even becoming a way for news organizations to start giving you news."

Model approaches:
■ Wayside Waifs: *waysidewaifs.org*

Bringing New Tools to Bear

These days, the Web is the primary medium for people's interactions with the world, and having a website that reflects the compassion and professionalism of your organization can go a long way toward improving public perception of your agency. These five points just scratch the surface of the qualities and capabilities that the Web can give to shelters.

Other key elements include:
■ Having online registration for your e-newsletter, so you can capture people's contact information and build a database of supporters
■ Posting high-quality pictures of your adoptable animals
■ Making it as easy as possible for the media to cover you by providing them with your own content, such as videos.

Animal welfare organizations really need to use these new modes of messaging in the communities they serve, says Lamb. And the way to do this is to develop dynamic, content-rich websites that give people a relevant source of information and become a destination site for them.

"Other nonprofits are using powerful [software] tools to motivate people and to influence their behavior," says Lamb. "And if our goal … is to ultimately change the way society treats animals, I think we have to turn to these more sophisticated messaging tools." **AS**