



## ***Ethical Standards for Marketing Shelter Pets***

**Introduction: Lessons Learned from the Child Welfare Movement.** AdoptUS Kids' publication entitled [Writing Children's Narratives](#) states, "Because public narratives can be viewed by anyone who visits the photolisting website or picks up a printed flyer—including birth family members, tech savvy peers, and the children themselves—it is especially important to keep these principles in mind when writing a public narrative:

- The first obligation is to protect the child or youth.
- The goal of a public profile of a child is to encourage prospective parents.
- The narrative should be positive, descriptive, and strengths-based."

### **Part I. The Most Common Negative Marketing Examples AVOID THESE!**

1. Blatant stop signs. ***No kids. No other pets. No cats. No men. No kids under 12. No apartments.***
2. Labeling a pet by their issue. ***Ringworm cats, behavior dogs, FIV cats, distemper dogs.***
3. Thinly-veiled stop signs. ***Buffy would do best in a house with adults or older children.***
4. Lack of any or adequate positive information contained in bio/social media posts. ***Sasha is an eight-year-old cat whose owner didn't want her anymore.***
5. Positive information is buried under stop signs. ***Peanut warms up slowly to new people and doesn't like men, but when he bonds with you, he's a great dog.***
6. Descriptions of negative or undesirable kennel behavior. ***Carlos is highly leash reactive and kennel reactive.***
7. Recommendations for what the pet 'needs,' or the type of household where the pet should live. ***Java would do best in a quiet home without a lot of activity.***
8. Recommendations for the 'type' of owner that should own the pet. ***Fern is looking for an active owner who loves to hike, run, and be outdoors.***
9. Describes the pet by their behavior in the shelter as if this is an innate quality. ***Patty is a fearful and anxious dog who needs a lot of patience.***
10. Creates a blanket restriction based on shelter behavior. ***Thrasher is aggressive towards other cats in the shelter and should be an only cat.***
11. Tells the viewer a negative trait but tries to offer 'context.' ***Otter has bitten two other dogs but he can be safely managed by the right owner.***



12. Ratings and rankings. *Fugazi has a two star rating for cat interactions but a five star rating for people interactions.*
13. Statements that have unintended perceptions by the public. *Kitty is a total lap cat and wants to be on you all the time. Example #2.*

## Part II. What to Include in Pet Marketing Bios

The goal of pet marketing is to make an emotional connection between the pet featured and prospective adopters and foster caregivers. To accomplish this, they need to be positive and based on the pet's strengths while protecting the pet's privacy.

Shelters and rescues need to be completely transparent with a pet's adopters and foster caregivers, but information about these pets must be shared on a continuum: the public profile should contain only positive, descriptive information. Information about the pet's challenges and history should be provided through one-on-one narratives and conversations.

**What is a Public Narrative?** A public narrative is the information that is made available to the public in the pet's bio, on a social media post, and in other marketing materials. A public narrative should include the following:

- A first sentence with a hook that enables the reader to make an emotional connection with the pet. "You know those special people who have experienced the toughest things in life and continue to smile and show love to everyone they meet? Shelter cat Bailey is just like one of those people."
- Strengths, such as that they're clicker trained or walk well on leash. "Tyler knows more than eight commands, including how to 'play dead,' and 'shake.'"
- Positive stories that show the pet's personality through behaviors and interactions with others. "Lila has one favorite stuffed animal and she carries it around all day and puts it to bed at night, tucking her 'ducky' in with her on her Kuranda bed."
- Things they like, including food, games, toys, and more. "One thing I love is...."
- The pet's cute quirks. "A funny fact about me is...."
- What it might look like to be their adopter or foster
- Very basic information about their history that can help create emotional connections
- Positive quotes from people who know them



## What is a Private Narrative?

A private narrative may be helpful as a first step after a potential adopter inquires and provides additional information about a pet's medical, educational, behavioral, and other issues. This is still not the right place for full disclosure, which would come later in the process with a person or family who is interested in moving forward. Like public narratives, private narratives should protect the pet's privacy and dignity, be written clearly and accessibly, and help potential adopters understand the pet's needs without being off-putting. This is especially helpful for more challenging pets.

## Part III: FAQ About Positive Marketing

*Q: What if people get mad or upset when they find out the pet they were looking at online has issues that will make it a bad fit for them? A:* The most important thing your organization can do to buffer against criticism is to have a clear, consistent process for disclosing known medical and behavioral histories. Though we rarely hear about anyone being upset about positive marketing, as long as you explain your process AND are prepared to show them other available pets who may be a better fit, there is no reason to think your marketing approach will be poorly received.

*Q: We are a small organization and we don't have time to provide counseling for adopters who won't be a good fit for a particular pet. We'd rather just tell them up front and save time. Why is that a problem?* Negative marketing will result in pets staying in shelters longer and will vastly reduce their chances of finding a home. The time you lose by caring for these pets, over time, will negate any time savings you achieve by not talking with potential adopters in person. Additionally, your goal should be to send every adopter (or foster) home with a pet. Once an adopter arrives at your organization, you can easily and quickly redirect them to a pet that is a great fit for them.

*Q: My boss said we must disclose everything in social media and in the pet profile to protect us and prevent liability issues. How do I address that?* Your boss is correct that you have a responsibility to disclose everything you know about a pet to the adopter or foster home. We recommend doing this both verbally and in writing, and to follow the recommendations in the law and liability reference section below. However, we do recommend conversations about the pet's complete history happen after the marketing phase, when a staff member or volunteer can explain the history and answer any



questions. We know of no successful lawsuits that resulted from positive marketing of a pet, even one with a known medical or behavioral history.

*Q: What about dogs with serious, known behavior histories of biting people or animals? Do the same rules apply?* In short, yes. However, your organization needs to always use its best judgment when determining which dogs will be available for adoption and foster. If you believe there is a safety risk for the potential adopter in meeting the pet, you should disclose this and counsel the potential adopter prior to the physical meet and greet and coach them on safely meeting the dog. If a pet's placement will be restricted for safety reasons (for example, if a dog who has injured a cat in the past will not be adopted to a home with a cat), this should be communicated internally and to potential adopters and fosters individually, not in the pet's public marketing.

## Part IV. Resources

### Law and Liability

- [Could We Get Sued For That? An Introduction to Liability for Animal Shelters](#)
- [Law and Liability presentation by Ryan Clinton for Maddie's Fund](#)

### Marketing vs. adoption counseling

- [Marketing is not adoption counseling: Keep 'em separate, save more lives](#)
- [Yes, you can ensure transparency while keeping marketing and adoption counseling separate](#)
- [No pets, no kids, no problem! Why your harder-to-place pets don't need to languish in the shelter](#)
- [Writing pet bios + using a positive marketing approach for animal shelters](#)

### Marketing techniques

- [Adopters Welcome: Marketing that Overcomes Barriers](#)
- [Getting shelter pets noticed with better bios](#) from HeARTS Speak
- [Anti-marketing tips for foster caregivers](#)
- [To find adopters and fosters for pets who are more difficult to place, start with your language](#)

### Research

- [Fairfax behavioral foster study](#)



# HUMAN ANIMAL SUPPORT SERVICES

by AMERICAN PETS ALIVE!

*Keeping People and Pets Together*

- [Developing relationships and self-disclosure](#)
- [A behavioral study of warning labels for consumer products](#)

## Relevant information from human services

- [Writing Children's Narratives](#)
- [Engaging Children and Caregivers in Developing Strengths-Based Profiles](#)