

Why pop-up shops?

As the name suggests, pop-up shops are temporary retail establishments that emerge for a few hours, days or weeks on street corners, in malls and at major public events. The goal of a pop-up shop is to create a new touch point with customers and engage with them in a unique way without having to fully invest in a new store or location.

A pop-up store can be a bonafide way to explore reaching additional adopters. The reason being that it doesn't cost nearly as much as going all in when you get started with temporary retail.

Affordable brick and mortar presence

For many shelters, a centrally located stand alone adoption center simply isn't a reality due to sky-high rents, inflexible leases, staffing costs, and a constant influx of overheads. This means that shelters remain trapped in the hinterlands, along with airports and waste transfer stations. That is until the concept of pop-up stores arrived on the scene. Temporary by nature, pop-ups allow shelters to tap into the benefits of centrally located stores, without spending themselves broke in the process. Ultimately, they connect their mission with customers, both old and new.

Connecting with new adopters, donors, and volunteers

Fundamentally, pop-ups can allow shelters to create meaningful relationships with people who might otherwise never visit the shelter. Globally recognized brands like Volvo and Gap now use pop-ups to connect with their customers on a deeper level. There is no reason not to borrow from the big kids!

In 2010, author Carol Tice wrote a blog for Entrepreneur that outlined the following benefits. *Italics are my additions to her original article.*

Empty space. There is an unprecedented amount of open retail space right now. Make a landlord an offer and they'll probably jump at it. *This is especially true now in malls, which have been hard hit by on-line retailers.*

Low risk. With a pop-up, you can get a lease for a couple of months, or month-to-month. It's not a big commitment.

Tax Benefits. *Landlords want full shops but some are having trouble finding tenants. Landlords can donate the space and receive a tax benefit. Malls and downtown merchant associations want to see most storefronts filled. It is good for everyone's business when a street or mall doesn't resemble a ghost town!*

A chance to experiment. Temporary stores are a great way to try an idea, *like an adoption center or a cat cafe, without investing too much.*

Build awareness. Storefronts are a form of advertising. Find a shop space at a prominent intersection, near a busy transportation hub, or in a busy mall, and get your name in front of hundreds of potential new *adopters, volunteers, and donors.*

Benefit from flexibility. When you open a pop-up, there are no expectations. Open the doors on Friday only, or only for the first week of the month, or only on weekends. Be open four hours a day. You can make your own rules here, and experiment. If your ideas work, they could be used in your permanent stores, too.

Marketing suggestions

There's a lot that goes into a pop-up shop, but much of the success (or lack thereof) can be directly tied back to marketing. If the marketing strategy is sound, then foot traffic and adoptions will follow. But if the strategy is lacking, you may find your pop-up shop to be a waste of resources. Having said that, here are some marketing tips and techniques that other brands successfully implement for high returns:

Build buzz in advance. Think of yourself as a boxing promoter, in the weeks leading up to the pop-up shop. It's your mission to build as much hype and anticipation around the event as possible. Much of this will happen on social media via event pages, content marketing and possibly some localized PPC advertising.

Nail day-of marketing. While building advance buzz is important, the most critical factor in your success is *day-of* marketing. For many shoppers, the decision to visit your store is impromptu. If you're relying only on your pre-marketing, then you're missing out on a significant source of traffic. So, feel free to get clever and try some new things, like geofencing with Google adwords.

Traditional marketing techniques, however, often work best. Because pop-up shops are local events, printed flyers in highly trafficked areas are extremely effective. (They can be very cost-effective.) Drop off flyers with all your neighbor stores, and invite their employees to visit on a break for a kitten cuddle. If you are in a mall, find out when mall management has weekly staff meetings and visit the week before you open. Also, send updates weekly about how many kittens found homes. You will find new champions for your mission everywhere!

Make sure your location is branded with eye-catching signage. This is not the time to go all #non-profit. You want the space to feel like a retail store, not a kitten jail. Invest in matching wire rolling cages and mesh playpens. Outfit one area of your space as the Kitten Cuddle Room, with comfy furniture, cat trees and wand toys, and childrens books for kids to read to kittens. You can use flexible ex-pens to cordon off the space. Suggest a donation for time to cuddle with kittens--lots of people love kittens but aren't ready to adopt.

Source material adapted from: <https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/280429>

“Kitten Kaboodle”

A pop-up seasonal foster kitten adoption center.

Why?

- We needed new cat adopters to increase our LRR.
- During the height of kitten season we run out of space in the shelter.
- We wanted to keep foster kittens out of the shelter as much as possible, to keep them healthier.

Where?

We targeted areas where we didn't currently have a strong presence, like the smaller towns across the river from Salem. However, they were experiencing high growth and had no available, appropriate, vacant spaces.

One of our board members, the specialty leasing manager for our downtown mall, approached me about putting the store in the mall. They had a space that was only leased during the holiday season, from Thanksgiving to Easter, by Honey Baked Ham, and they were open to leasing it to us for only the cost of utilities during the open months. We lease the space from June to October each year, as long as the mall doesn't find a more desirable year round leasor.

Who?

The first year, it was run primarily by volunteers, and a LOT of executive leadership support. The second year, we recruited an intern from the local university MBA program to write SOPs and a marketing plan. This didn't work. Some interns aren't what you hope for. Staff pitched in a lot that year. The next year, we hired a part-time seasonal staff person to run the store. This was much more successful, and is the model we use now. Originally, KK was managed under the foster program, but there isn't the bandwidth during the peak season. This year, we moved it under the adoptions program, along with the other off-site adoption venues, in close collaboration with the foster program.

What?

- Foster kittens land at the shelter, are immediately sent to foster homes, and return to our clinic for S/N, then back to foster home for post op recovery (at least 3 days), then they head to KK for adoption. **Caveat:** You will need to plan on expanding surgery schedules to accommodate the increased number of foster kittens and support the efficient flow of kittens to the store and on to homes. We are still working on this.
- The first two years, we had kitten socialization classes at the store during times we were not open. Kittens 6 weeks and up came to the store for class, (like puppy class). They learned handling, crate training, exposure to novel environments, and to be around other kittens. We hope to restart this program.
- When the kittens are big enough for SN and recovered from the surgery, foster families drop off their kittens on the days KK is open, and if they are not adopted that day (rare), the kittens may go back home, or be housed overnight at the shelter in the foster room.
- We were very successful selling “kitten starter kits”. Bundled retail products, specifically for kittens. We sold more at KK than we did at the shelter’s retail store!
- Over the three months it was open in 2015, Kitten- Kaboodle led to the adoption of over 215 pets and helped raised the shelter save rate for cats for the kitten season from 70% in 2014 to over 80% in 2015. In 2018, it was over 95%!

How?

Plan to start at least a month before opening to hire a store manager, coordinate signage, redecorate the store, order supplies, and get marketing going. We lease the space from June to October, but the kittens are there July-October.

We found the best days to be open were Friday-Sunday, from noon until mall closing at 6. It didn’t take long before there were lines at the door before we opened every week.

It is helpful to have a volunteer with theatrical set design experience help to transform an ordinary empty store into a fun, kitten-filled, welcoming space that communicates your mission.

Think about having a local celebrity kick off the opening. After the first year, we had people eagerly waiting for the kitten store to come back to the mall. If you have a thriftstore, have them set aside comfortable furniture, cat trees, and decor to use in the kitten store.

Make friends with your neighbors. The ice cream store near KK gave us coupons for adopters to get a free ice cream cone!

One last thing:

People will ask about “impulse purchases” and if it’s ok to get a kitten on impulse. Much like the research on gift adoptions has countered old thinking in adoption placement, our return rate has been extremely low. Less than 1%. We use an open adoption model, and customers receive all the same adoption counseling, and fill out all the same paperwork as they would at the shelter. The pop up model has worked well for us for kittens. We were not successful when we brought dogs, even puppies, to the store for adoption. It makes sense if you think about it. You have to do a lot more planning to bring a dog home than a cat. Nobody has to walk the cat, or take it outside to go potty, which is why cats are the superior pet. (Just kidding, mostly!)

If you are interested in your own seasonal kitten adoption center, feel free to contact me with questions. And if you are in Oregon during our kitten season, come visit us and tour the truly happiest store in the mall!

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