



Maddie's
Fund

Marketing & Adoption Counseling Survey Report

SURVEY RESULTS 2022

Background

The Marketing and Adoption Counseling Survey was launched in January 2022 and distributed by Maddie's Fund. It was created to learn more about the communications methods being used by animal shelters and rescue organizations to convey information about pets who are available for adoption to the public. The objectives were to establish baseline data on how animal shelters and rescue organizations are marketing pets for adoption and answer the questions of whether marketing and adoption counseling are being mixed in their public narratives. It also collected baseline data on whether shelters and rescue organizations have protocols for ensuring transparency with fosters and adopters, and what their views are on the ethics and logistics of these protocols.

Whether or not to draw a distinction between marketing and adoption counseling is a hotly contested topic in animal welfare, with strong feelings on both sides. The point most everyone appears to agree on is that complete transparency with adopters and foster caregivers is essential, both for ethical reasons and because it can minimize risk.

A common misconception about separating marketing and adoption counseling is that by doing so, means it's impossible to be completely transparent around a pet's history and behavior. This is not true. Complete transparency about pets can be accomplished while keeping marketing and adoption counseling separate. In the child welfare system, for example, public narratives about children are only allowed to contain positive, descriptive information. Information on challenges and support needs is shared with potential adopters in a different way: on a continuum, through private narratives and conversations. This private communication is documented to ensure privacy and for recordkeeping. The same can be done with pets.



Methods

Respondents filled out an 11-question, multiple-choice survey about how they market pets for adoption, whether they have staff position(s) for marketing and how they ensure transparency with adopters and foster caregivers.

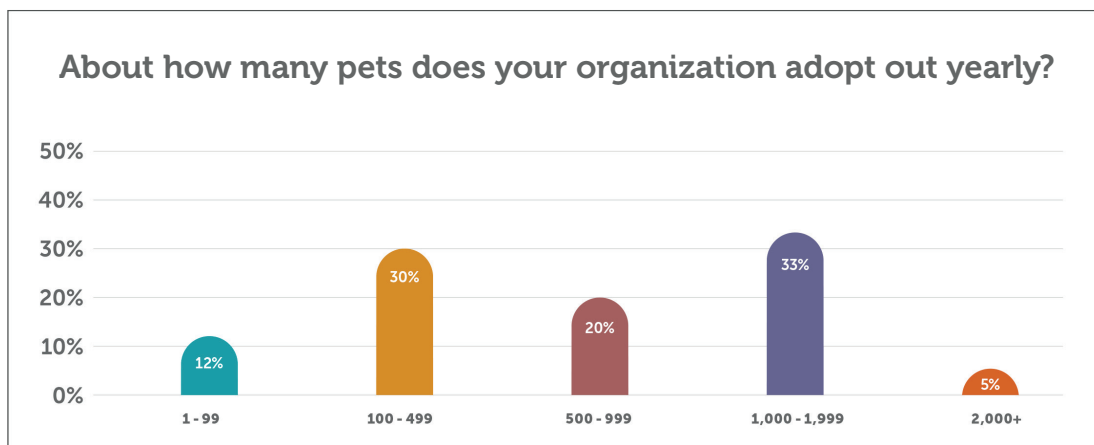
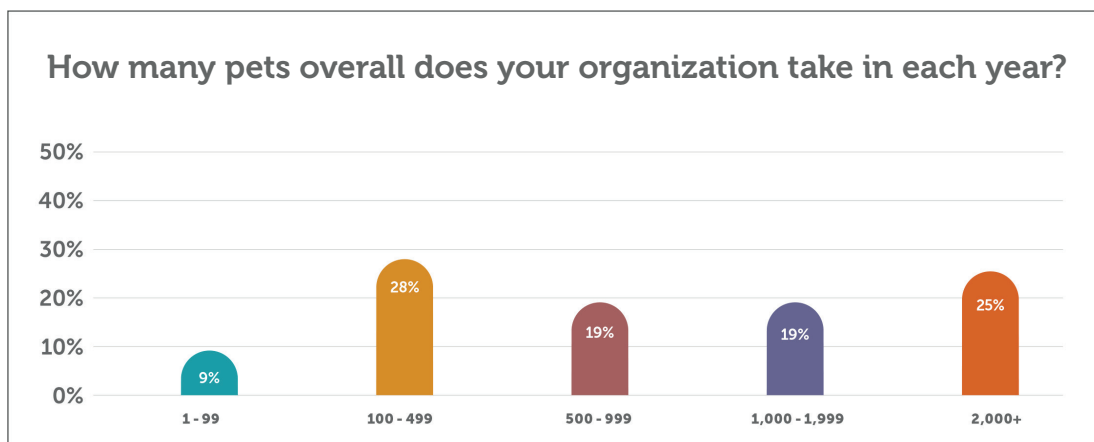
The survey asked respondents about the following general categories:

- Policies for ensuring transparency
- Guidelines for writing public narratives
- Types of information included in pets' biographies, how frequently each type is used and where the information is usually included in the narratives
- Their feelings about potentially applying the child welfare's strategy of putting only positive information in public biographies, while sharing information on challenges and support needs with potential adopters and fosters on a continuum, in private conversations.



About the Respondents

The majority of qualified respondents worked at private non-profit animal organization with a physical shelter (e.g., humane society or SPCA), either with (18%,) or without (40%) a government contract. Respondents from government organizations with a physical shelter (e.g., animal services or animal care and control) represented 18%, and 28% represented private non-profit animal organizations without a physical shelter (e.g., rescue organizations). Less than 1% (1 organization) work in a governmental organization without a physical shelter.

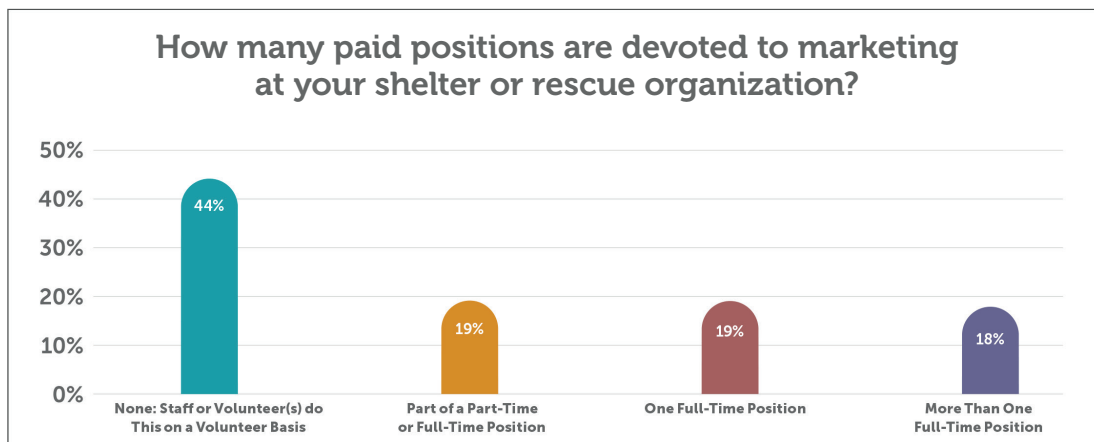


The organizations vary in size from less than 100 to more than 2,000 animal intakes. The majority of the respondents, 28%, were organizations that ranged from 100-499 intakes.

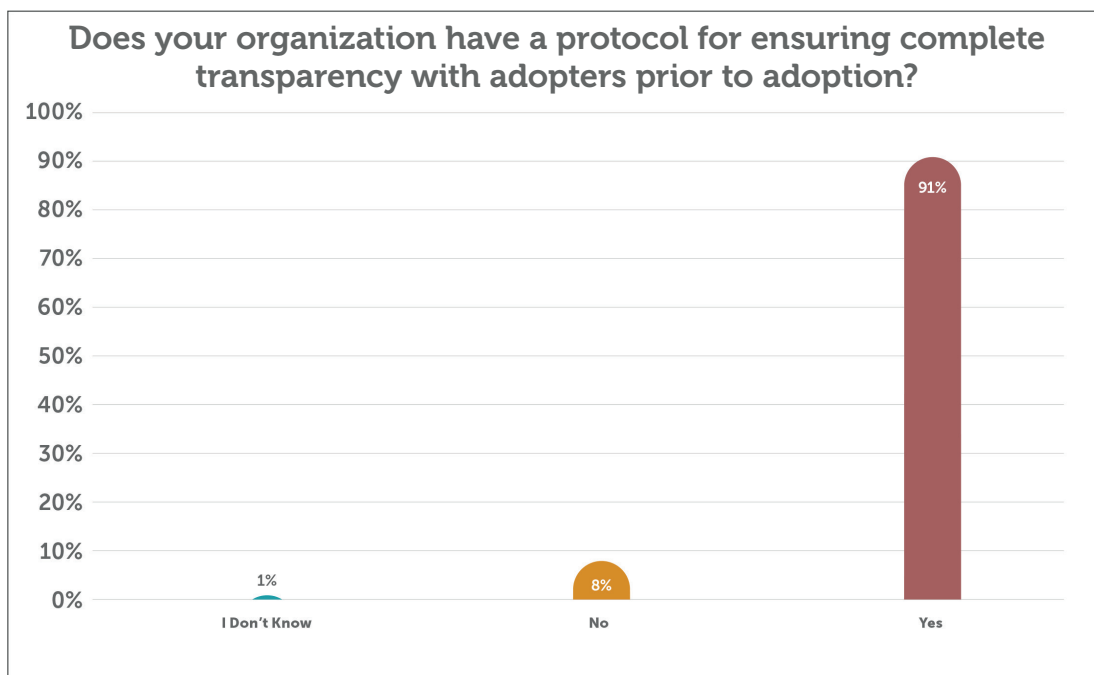
There were also variations in the number of adoptions each organization completes yearly. The largest number of respondents (33%) are adopting 1,000 - 4,999 pets per year. The smallest number of respondents indicated that their organizations adopt 5,000 - 9,999 pets per year.

Results

This survey collected data on paid staff positions at the respondents' shelters and rescue organizations. The largest group of respondents, 44%, indicated that their organizations have no paid marketing staff, but staff or volunteers are doing their marketing on a volunteer basis. Nineteen percent have part of a part-time or full-time position for marketing, 19% have one full-time position and 18% have more than one paid, full-time position.



Perhaps the most significant finding is that **8% of shelters and rescue organizations do not have a protocol for ensuring complete transparency with adopters and foster caregivers about the pets they take home.** An additional 1% did not know if their organization has a protocol for ensuring transparency, indicating that even if a protocol is in place, it may not be followed consistently.



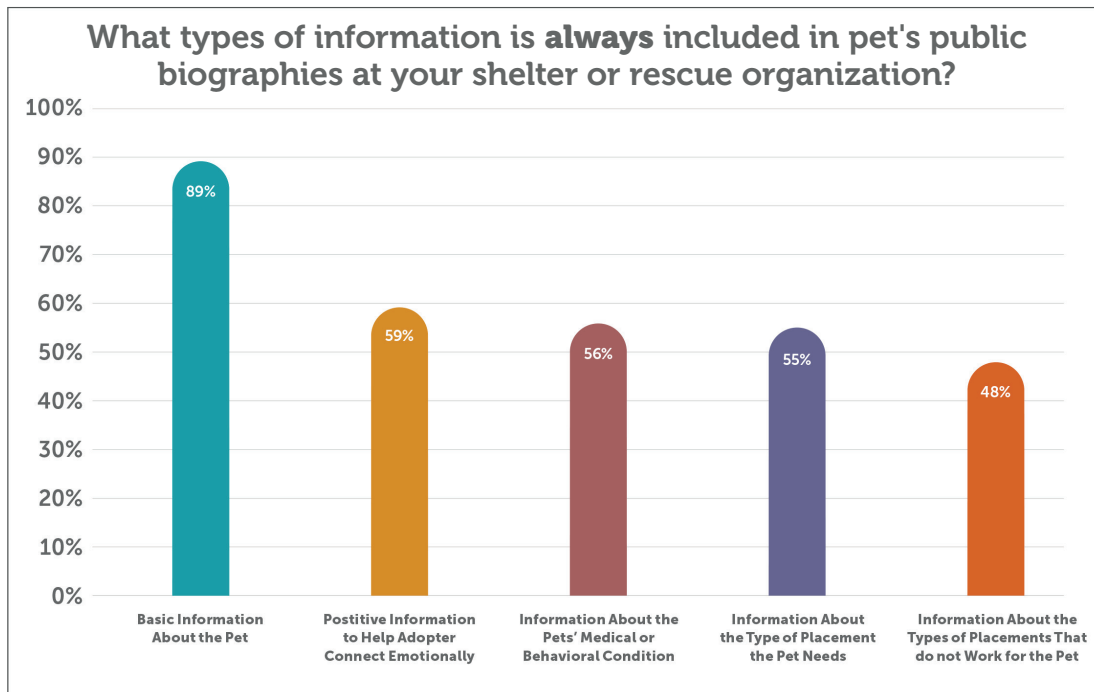
Results

The majority (66%) of respondents' shelter or rescue organizations do not have written guidelines for writing public pet profiles.



Results

This survey also evaluated the types of information that shelters and rescue organizations always include in pets' public biographies. Respondents were able to choose more than one answer. Most respondents (89%) indicated that basic information about the pet (e.g., age, spay/neuter status) is always included. This was followed by positive information that could help a potential adopter connect with the pet emotionally (e.g., stories about the pet, interests), 59%, information about the pet's medical or behavioral condition (e.g., feline leukemia virus, resource guarding), 56%, information about the type of placement the pet needs (e.g., adults only, fenced yard), 55%, and information about the types of placements that do not work for the pet (e.g., no kids, no multiple-family homes), 48%.



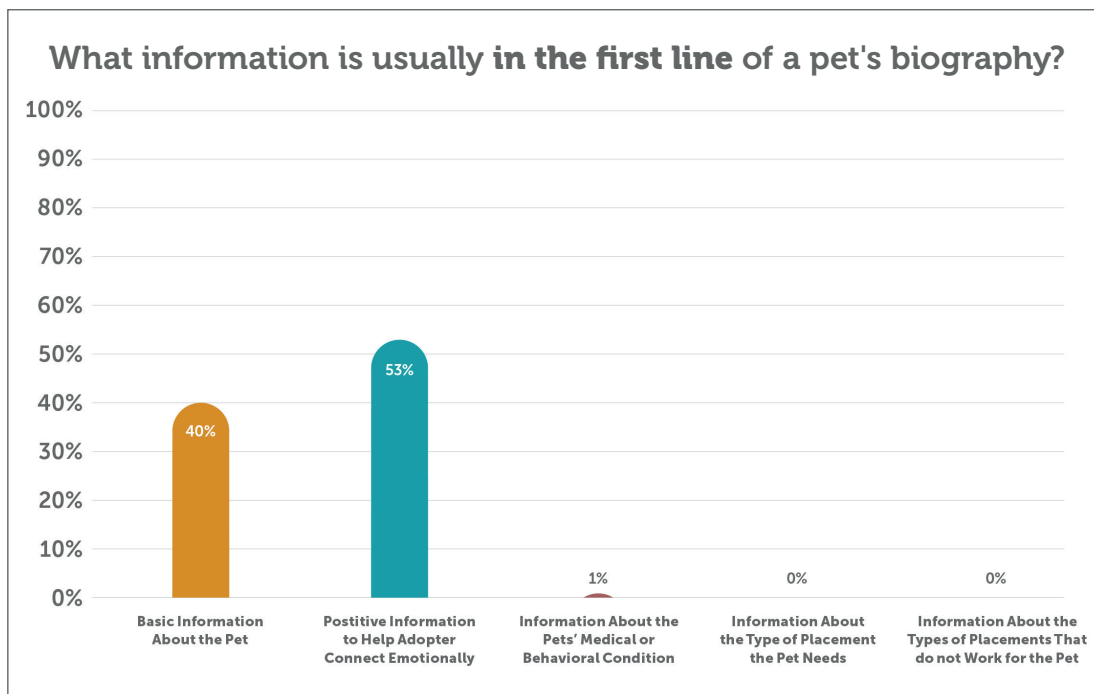
Results

The placement of information in a pet's biography may also be an important factor in finding permanent placement. An important communications technique is a "narrative hook" — opening the piece of writing in an interesting way that "hooks" the reader's attention so they will keep reading

To this end, this survey collected responses about the type of information that is usually in the first line of a pet's public biography. More than half of respondents are placing positive information that could help a potential adopter connect with the pet emotionally in their biographies' first sentences. Information about types of placements that do not work for the pet were not chosen by any respondent.

5% chose "other" and typed in their responses. Answers varied, including:

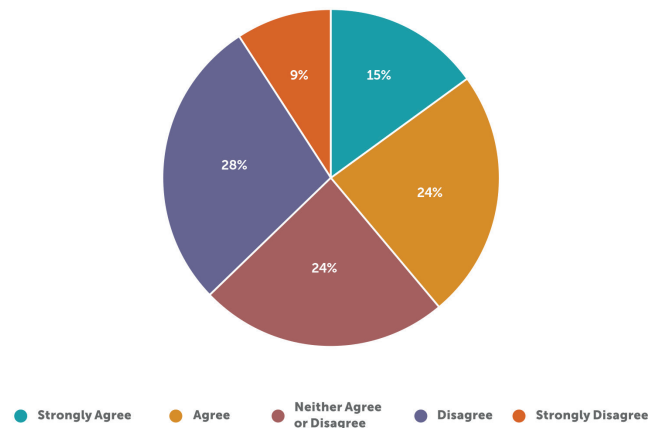
- *"An attention-grabbing headline"*
- *"Background information (how we got the animal)"*
- *"It's left up to the foster so god only knows lol."*
- Something along the lines of, *"Hi, my name is __ and I'm looking for my forever home!"*



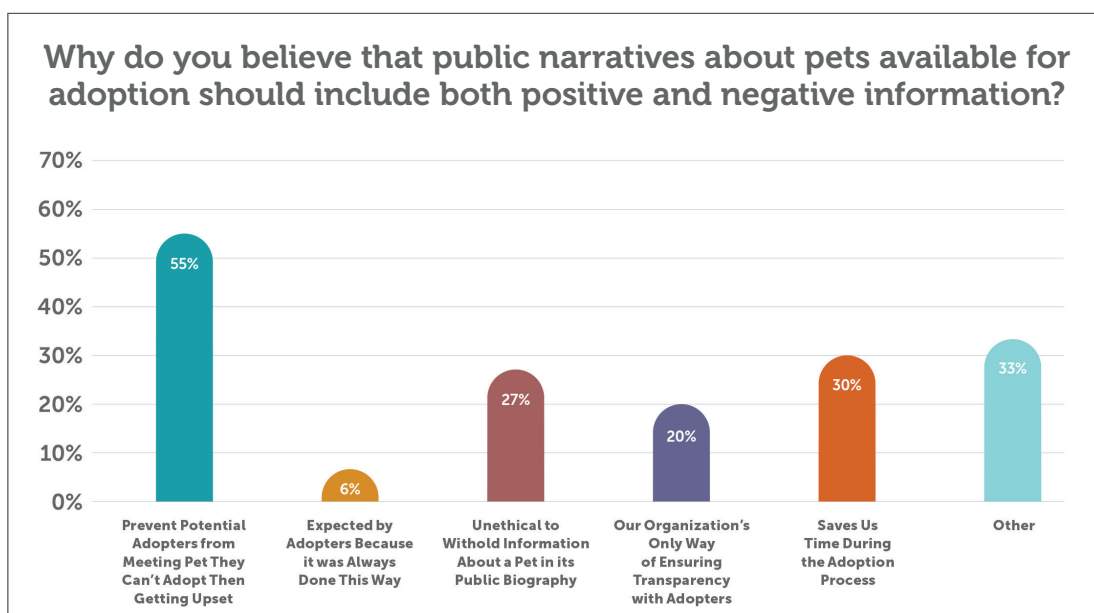
Results

In the child welfare system, public narratives about children are generally only allowed to contain positive, descriptive information. Information on challenges and support needs is shared with potential adopters on a continuum, through private narratives and conversations, and the information shared is documented to ensure the child's privacy. When respondents were asked if they believe this should be applied to animal welfare, the results were almost evenly distributed between those who agreed and those who disagreed.

Should we apply child welfare's strategy of positive-only public narratives and sharing challenges on a continuum, 1-on-1?



Respondents who indicated neutral or negative feelings toward sharing positive-only public narratives were asked why they felt the way they did. Respondents were able to choose more than one answer.



Results

It is concerning that 20% shared that pet biographies are the only method for ensuring transparency with adopters. This means these organizations do not have a protocol for reviewing a pet's records during adoption counseling to ensure that adopters receive all the information necessary. In pets' public biographies, space is often limited. For some pets, this may not be enough to capture all the information that needs to be conveyed. It is also a concern that the conversational discussion is missing to answer questions a potential adopter may have, and make sure they understood what was meant from the pet's biography.

The largest group of respondents (55%) stated that the reason behind their opinion is to prevent potential adopters from coming to the shelter to meet a pet they can't adopt and then getting upset with their organization. Six percent stated that they add adoption counseling to their pet marketing because it is expected by adopters because they have always done it this way.

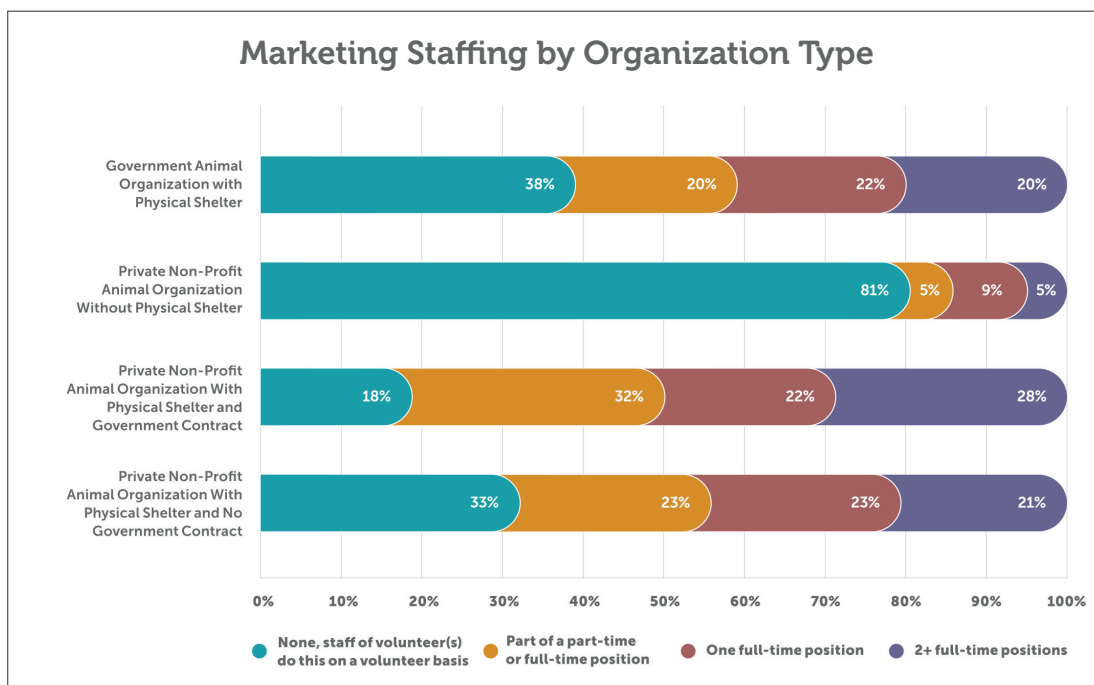
One-third of respondents chose "other" and typed their answers in. There was a wide range of answers, including:

- *"We allude to some behavior needs or issues but reserve the majority for conversations."*
- *"All of the above"*
- *"I am torn on this issue. I see benefits and deterrents on both sides and I honestly don't know the best way to go."*
- Several people responded that they mix marketing and adoption counseling because they believe it helps them find the right fit for the pet, and/or helps avoid pets from being returned.



Differences by Organization Type

We used Survey Monkey Analyze to compare the survey results when sorted by the respondents' type of organization. We found significant differences between organization types regarding whether they had paid marketing staff. The type of organization that had the highest percentage of paid staff (part-time or full) was private non-profit animal organizations with a physical shelter and a government contract (82%). This was followed by private non-profit animal welfare organizations with a physical shelter and no government contract (67%) and government organizations with a physical shelter (62%). Private non-profit animal welfare organizations without a physical shelter had the lowest percentage of paid staff for marketing (19%). Since there was only one respondent who works in a government organization without a physical shelter, we did not report their data in the graph because the sample size was too small.



Discussion and Recommendations

The most common reason that those who feel neutral or negatively toward separating marketing and adoption counseling is that they are worried about potential adopters coming to the building to meet a pet who is not a good fit for them and then becoming upset. While this is a valid concern, it should be noted that it happens rarely and could likely be neutralized with some thoughtful messaging to the public. This is not a concern for pets who are being adopted directly from foster homes, as fosters can discuss this with potential adopters during the exchange of emails in advance of any meetings.

It's important to point out that organizations interested in using this technique do not need to implement it all at once. It may be easier to pilot the separation of marketing and adoption counseling with a handful of pets first. A smaller, controlled sample would enable the organization to develop all the protocols and messaging they need before making organization-wide changes. A pilot is recommended for implementation at all organizations for pets who have long shelter stays. It would be important to track inquiries, adoptions and any other relevant data for these pets before, during and after the pilot.

Regardless of the way animal shelters and rescue organizations market pets for adoption, creating protocols will ensure transparency with adopters and fosters. Relying on a pet's biography to do the adoption counseling may **not** be sufficient for some pets, particularly those that have extensive medical and/or behavioral histories.



Conclusion

The results from this survey suggest that there is wide variation in the way pets are being marketed, and strong feelings around how this is done. There is a fairly even distribution between those who agree with keeping marketing and adoption counseling separate and those who disagree.



Resources

- [Ethical standards for marketing shelter pets](#) (pdf)
- [Ensuring transparency while keeping marketing and adoption counseling separate](#) (webcast)
- [Marketing is not adoption counseling: Keep 'em separate, save more lives](#) (blog)
- [Yes, you can ensure transparency while keeping marketing and adoption counseling separate](#) (blog)
- [No pets, no kids, no problem! Why your harder-to-place pets don't need to languish in the shelter](#) (blog)



Maddie's Fund

925.310.5450 | info@MaddiesFund.org | MaddiesFund.org
6150 Stoneridge Mall Road, Suite 125, Pleasanton, CA 94588