

Social Media Usage in Dog Shelters

Abstract

This research proposal aims to study the most effective social media medium for dog shelters. 54 random dog shelters around the country will be split into three groups: pictures, video, and control. The pictures group will post only pictures of their adoptable dogs on Facebook, the video will post only videos, and the control will continue with its social media as normal. For six months, shelters will share their adoption rates at the end of each month. This data will be used to calculate averages and then compared with each other to determine which is the best medium.

Introduction

It is often said that adopting a pet is equivalent to saving its life. Whether or not the pet comes from a no-kill shelter, a shelter that doesn't kill its pets due to overpopulation, adopting still helps support an organization that strives to save dogs from a life on the street. Adoption fees help pay for a pet's surgeries, food, and vet visits, and keep the shelter running. Not only that, but adopting a pet also frees up a space in the shelter, leaving it with the availability to accept and save new dogs. For a shelter to thrive, however, it needs to be able to reach its audience in the cheapest way possible. One of these ways can be done through social media. Many dog shelters currently don't have a strong enough social media presence and don't utilize the medium to its fullest advantage.

To help solve this problem, it is important to determine which kind of social media content is most effective for reaching a shelter's audience. Shelters need to use their social media sites correctly and to their full potential. This includes getting the right kinds of pictures or videos of the dogs, communicating well with potential customers, and creating an online image for the shelter. This way, they can maximize their audience reach at a cheap price.

To prepare for this study, I looked at three key articles. The first examines the difference in success between videos pictures of adoptable dogs (Pyzer, Clarke, & Montrose 2016). This study shows how audiences look at the dogs and what kind of content they believe to be most important. It concludes that, overall, videos are most effective in getting the audiences get past any preconceived notions about a dog based on its breed by showing the dog's overall behavior. However, it also weighs the pros and cons of both images and videos so that it is understood that there are limitations to each. The second article examines the kinds of profiles seen on Facebook and how marketers can use those to their advantage. It breaks down Facebook users into four key categories, and then proposes a marketing strategy for organizations (Hodis, Sriramachandramurthy, & Sashittal 2015). This is useful for shelters because it shows how they can use the different kinds of users on Facebook to attract new customers and promote its brand.

The last study I looked at examined Twitter's effectiveness and the importance of interactivity between the company and the audience. It shows that while conducting a dialogue between customers and the company may reduce the company's image, it enhanced the brand's attitudes and purchase

intentions (Colliander, Dahlén, & Modig 2015). This one is especially important because it highlights one of the most essential things in social media: conversation. If a shelter were to create a conversation between itself and its potential customers, then it would enhance and strengthen its own brand. This could lead to promotion both on social media and through word of mouth.

One key deficiency I found in these studies is that they don't talk about which type of social media content is most effective for promoting a brand to the largest audience. There also is not a lot of information on social media marketing for dog shelters or any kind of case study on a shelter that has successfully utilized marketing strategies or social media campaigns.

This study will add to scholarly research because it will compare the effectiveness of the different kinds of content that can be posted on social media. It will help define a specific target audience for dog shelters, and determine the best marketing methods for them.

With my study, I will be able to determine what is the best social media content for shelters to reach their respective audiences. I will study social media, its content, and its level of interactivity and conclude which has the best response rate with the shelters' target audience. A strong and researched social media campaign will help teach improve shelters' brands. In turn, people will learn more about the importance of adopting and adoption rates will improve. All of this will help save dogs' lives and decrease the overpopulation both in the shelters and on the streets.

Literature Review

The current research in social media marketing discusses the different kinds of content necessary for each social media and the best communication practices for each company. Others determine the effectiveness of the content for dog shelters' strategies. However, none of these combine social media and the shelters' content to determine which is the best kind of content for dog shelters' audiences. Because of this, there are still many unexplored areas in social media and how they can be used to improve adoption rates in shelters. Two specific areas of research are the response or interactivity expected on the social media platforms, and the kind of content shown on them.

Response/Interactivity

Response rates and interactivity are essential to any social media campaign. To create a successful social media site, these two factors need to be studied and utilized. In "Twitter for two: investigating the effects of dialogue with customers in social media," Jonas Colliander, Micael Dahlén, and Erik Modig investigate the importance of communication and dialogue on Twitter between companies and their customers. They find that engaging in these conversations help enhance the company's brand and purchase intent. The most important part of social media, they say, is the "social" aspect; people must interact with each other and socialize. This way, customers will begin to believe in the companies' care for their customers and products (Colliander, Dahlén, & Modig 2015). This article showcases one of the most important aspects of social media and what it should mainly be used for; not just to communicate ideas, but also to dialogue with customers. My study will expand on this information by utilizing this technique to create a successful social media campaign that tests the success of different kinds of content.

To be able to dialogue successfully with people, shelters should know the kinds of people they'll expect. Because of this, "Interact with me on my terms: a four segment Facebook engagement framework for marketers" divides Facebook users into four different categories: attention seekers, devotees, connection seekers and entertainment chasers (Hodis, Sriramachandramurthy, & Sashittal 2015). They then propose a marketing guide for organizations to follow when they interact with users on Facebook. In my project, I will use these guidelines to determine how to interact with customers on Facebook.

Content

The content posted on the shelters' social media sites should accurately represent the ideals and traits of its market audience. According to Denni Arli & Timo Dietrich in "Can Social Media Campaigns Backfire? Exploring Consumers' Attitudes and Word-of-Mouth Toward Four Social Media Campaigns and Its Implications on Consumer-Campaign Identification," social media users are more likely to relate to a social media campaign that represents their character traits (religion, ethnicity, hobbies, etc.). This is how organizations get publicity through word of mouth, which is an important part of any organization's market. The content posted on the shelters' social media pages will have to represent the kinds of character traits the shelters' audience expects. This will affect the text describing the dog and the kinds of behavior traits listed for each dog.

A large majority of the content posted by dog shelters is of the dogs available for adoption. This can either be in the form of images or video, but they must show that the dog looks like and their behavior traits. According to Chloe Pyzer, Lucy Clarke & V. Tamara Montrose in "Effects of Video Footage Versus Photographs on Perception of Dog Behavioral Traits," video is an effective way to promote dog shelters because it shows a dog's behavioral traits more than a picture can. This way, potential adopters can see the kinds of behavior traits exemplified by a dog and decide if they will be a good fit for their home. However, there are negative impacts to this kind of content because the videos tend to represent more undesirable traits such as hyperactivity (Pyzer, Clarke, & Montrose 2016). Something not mentioned in this study is whether video increases adoption rates. My study will look at the effectiveness of the social media content and whether it affected peoples' decisions.

A way to resolve the behavioral issues is to rely on images. While they are not as descriptive as videos, they do obscure some of the more negative traits in the dogs. In "Speed of Dog Adoption: Impact of Online Photo Traits," Lampe and Witte study the effects images with different characteristics have on the possibility of a dog's adoption. They concluded with a list of the most successful traits of images and how they impacted the consumers' idea of the dog. Because images are essential to any social media campaign, I will be using these strategies to create quality images that can compete with the video content.

Another important factor for a successful media campaign is the variety of the kinds dogs people look for. In "What Do People Want? Factors People Consider When Acquiring Dogs, the Complexity of the Choices They Make, and Implications for Nonhuman Animal Relocation Programs," Garrison and Weiss find that people prefer a variety of options and are willing to travel distances to find their new companion. This shows that people have complex preferences and there isn't one specific dog that is more successful than the other. Because of this, it's important for the shelters' social media to represent all the dogs equally, not just those thought to be more popular or have a higher probability of

being adopted. This study shows that all dogs need to be represented equally so that potential adopters have a large variety of animals to look at.

While engagement is an essential part of social media, this is not what the study will focus on. Instead, level of engagement will only be used when making sure the shelters don't change their use of social media while the study is being conducted.

Methods

Participants

Each shelter will be chosen at random from a list of 54 shelters around the country. These shelters will have to have been open for at least one year and will have to have a Facebook account currently being run by one of their volunteers, members, or the owner. The shelters also cannot be (or plan to be) undergoing any kind of major change that will significantly impact their adoption rates. This includes renovations, changes in location, changes in adoption style (fostering vs keeping the animals in-house), etc.

There will be three groups made up of 18 participants each. The three groups are based on the kind of media they will post. Since the experiment is measuring the effectiveness of pictures and video, the three groups are pictures, videos, and control.

The pictures group will only post pictures of their adoptable pets on their social media. This way, we guarantee that their market only sees pictures of the animals prior to deciding whether to meet the animal they are interested in adopting. Similarly, the video group will only post videos of their adoptable animals. The control group will continue to use their social media account as normal, posting either both videos and pictures or just one of each.

While all groups are encouraged to post any kind of content they want, there is a limitation. Each shelter must follow the same format they had before they began the experiment. For example, if each shelter regularly posts a single profile post on each adoptable dog, then they must continue with this and cannot change patterns once they enter the experiment. This also includes the level of interactivity shelters can have with their followers on social media. If they are responsive (based on Facebook's responsiveness grading system) or reply to comments, then they must continue this practice throughout the time they are participating in the experiment. This is so that a single outlier post doesn't skew their adoption rates for the month.

The experiment will measure the average change in adoption rates per month for each shelter for six months. This allows us to account for the differences in each shelter's circumstances. For example, if one is in a more affluent area and/or has a higher adoption rate than the other. If each shelter is initially compared to itself, then those factors are taken out of the equation because the shelter will continue to be under the same circumstances as when the experiment began.

To ensure the shelters' data is reliable, each shelter will be compensated with a donation at the completion of the experiment. Their level of responsiveness and other social media trends will be measured at the beginning of the experiment and will be monitored throughout the six months.

Materials

Each shelter will be using Facebook to promote their animals. Facebook is the world's most popular social media site and its setup makes it easy for organizations to promote themselves through different mediums. Facebook's algorithm currently favors videos. This means that videos are more likely to show up on a user's feed than an image. To get past this, the shelters in the image group will have to render their images out as still videos. This will get past Facebook's algorithm and give their pictures the same chance of getting promoted as the videos.

At the end of each month, each shelter will submit their adoption rates. Adoption rates will be calculated by comparing the number of dogs that enter the shelter versus the number of dogs that have been adopted. For example, if 10 dogs enter a shelter in a month and 5 get adopted by the end of the month, then the shelter has a 50% adoption rate.

The adoption rates per month for each shelter will be used to calculate the average adoption rates per group. To show progression through time, the results will be put into a line graph and then each group will be compared based on changes in the rates through time. The videos and pictures groups will be the main groups of comparison and the data from the control group will be used to measure changes or trends in the market. For example, if adoption rates tend to rise over the holiday season, this trend will be shown in all three graphs. Any rise or fall in the control group will help account for any rise or fall that happens in the other two groups.

At the end of the experiment, the average change in adoptions per month will be calculated for each shelter, and then for each group. Using the data from the control group to account for changes in the market, the differences between the two groups throughout the six months will determine which medium is most effective.

Conclusion

We expect to find that videos perform best when used to raise adoption ratings. This is because based on our predecessors' findings, videos demonstrated the dog's traits the best and showed them as a more adoptable candidate. This is especially true with stigmatized breeds such as Pit Bulls or Rottweilers.

During our research we might also find that there is no connection between the medium used for social media posts and the adoption rates. Pictures and videos might make a dog seem more adoptable, but that might not make people adopt the dog. Owning a pet, especially a dog, can be extremely time-consuming and costly, so the kind of medium used might not affect peoples' minds on if they will be adopting a dog at all.

I will ensure that these results are beneficial to my audience because I will be able to show the kinds of factors that affect someone's decision to adopt a dog and define if the kinds of content they see on social media matters or not. If there is no connection between the content medium and adoption rates, then shelters will know not to focus their energy on the medium of the content they post on social media. Focusing on posting only pictures instead of video will save them time and money.

If the research concludes that there is a connection and there is a medium that is clearly more effective than the other, then shelters will know to focus more on one medium instead of the other. For example, if videos are proved to be more effective, then they will know that to raise their adoption

rates, they need to focus their energies on social media campaigns that represents dogs through video rather than still images.

Some recommendations on further studies include looking into the right balance between the usage of pictures and videos in social media and determining if that has an effect on adoption rates in shelters. This study also doesn't investigate which is the best social media platform for shelters. Because each platform has its own algorithm and market, different mediums might work best in different scenarios.

Works Cited

- Arli, Denni, and Timo Dietrich. "Can Social Media Campaigns Backfire? Exploring Consumers Attitudes and Word-of-Mouth Toward Four Social Media Campaigns and Its Implications on Consumer-Campaign Identification." *Journal of Promotion Management*, vol. 23, no. 6, 2017, pp. 834–850., doi:10.1080/10496491.2017.1323259.
- Colliander, Jonas, et al. "Twitter for two: investigating the effects of dialogue with customers in social media." *International Journal of Advertising*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2015, pp. 181–194., doi:10.1080/02650487.2014.996197.
- Garrison, Laurie, and Emily Weiss. "What Do People Want? Factors People Consider When Acquiring Dogs, the Complexity of the Choices They Make, and Implications for Nonhuman Animal Relocation Programs." *Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2014, pp. 57–73., doi:10.1080/10888705.2014.943836.
- Hodis, Monica Alexandra, et al. "Interact with me on my terms: a four segment Facebook engagement framework for marketers." *Journal of Marketing Management*, vol. 31, no. 11-12, 2015, pp. 1255–1284., doi:10.1080/0267257x.2015.1012535.
- Lampe, Rachel, and Thomas H. Witte. "Speed of Dog Adoption: Impact of Online Photo Traits." *Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science*, vol. 18, no. 4, Dec. 2014, pp. 343–354., doi:10.1080/10888705.2014.982796.
- Pyzer, Chloe, et al. "Effects of Video Footage Versus Photographs on Perception of Dog Behavioral Traits." *Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2016, pp. 42–51., doi:10.1080/10888705.2016.1229186.