Michigan Humane Society

CONVERSATIONAL ADOPTION COUNSELING
SOMEBODY HERE NEEDS YOU.

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GREETINGS FROM THE LAND OF ICE AND SNOW

LILY

MYLES
TIME FOR THE QUIZ!
“HELLO, I’D LIKE TO ADOPT THIS PET.”
Choose the best response:

a) Please have a seat and fill out the application.

b) You want to adopt THIS pet?

c) I’ll need to see your photo I.D.

d) Unfortunately, he is not suitable for homes with small children.

e) None of the above.
The correct answer is:

- Great! Let me look up his background for you.
- What a handsome dog! Have you had a Chihuahua mix before?
- Let’s sit over here and I’ll try to answer your questions about him.
- Have you been looking for a dog for very long?
CONVERSATIONAL ADOPTION COUNSELING

- What we say
- How we say it
- What we look like when we say it
- Leaves people with a positive impression of your organization, whether or not they get a pet!
CONVERSATIONAL ADOPTION COUNSELING

- Gets the information we need to make adoption decisions
- Gets it in a way that minimizes adopter stress
- Makes the adoption process more enjoyable for adopters
- WORKS.
Concerned that our pets are unhealthy and have behavior problems

Our adoption process is too long and difficult

Breeders are seen as the “experts” more than we are

BUT...people who adopt pets are proud to have helped save a life!
ADOPT, REPEAT, SPREAD THE WORD!
TODAY’S PRESENTATION:

- Why conversational adoption counseling?
- Understanding adopters
- Understanding adoption counselors
- How to ask questions and handle responses
- TIME? Training your staff and volunteers
Part 1: WHY CONVERSATIONAL ADOPTION COUNSELING?
DO YOU HAVE ENOUGH ADOPTIONS?

ENOUGH ALREADY!

How long before I get outta here?
LONG STAYS IN YOUR SYSTEM CAUSE:

- Disease
- Behavior decline
- Euthanasia
- Foster program overload
- Reduced staff time per animal
- Increased cost per adopted animal
- Reduced animal intake AND FEWER ADOPTIONS!
WHAT'S HURTING YOUR ADOPTION #'S?

- Adopters who are refused
- Rude treatment on the phone, in person, or via email
- Slow response time
- Complicated process
- Long nosy forms & too many rules
- Inconvenient hours
FIXING OUR ADOPTION “PROBLEM”

- Review Adoption Policies
- **USE CONVERSATIONAL ADOPTION COUNSELING**
- Market Pets Smarter
- Train Staff and Volunteers
- **Adopters Welcome:** new manual from Humane Society of United States
WHERE CONVERSATIONAL ADOPTION COUNSELING CAME FROM:

- Open Adoptions concept pioneered by Humane Society of Boulder Valley in 1996
- More non-traditional adoption settings (events, offsite centers, phone counseling)
- Adopter Support feedback and adopter location analysis
HOW DO I KNOW IT WORKS?

- MHS began using conversational adoption counseling at our offsite adoption centers in 2008.
- Our centers adopted out animals in less time AND had low return rates.
- Highest customer service ratings by adopters.
- Now used throughout!
ADOPTING A PET FROM US IS SCARY!
THE WAY WE INTERACT MAKES ALL THE DIFFERENCE!

HOW WE SEE OURSELVES:

HOW ADOPTERS SEE US:
INSIDE THE ADOPTER’S HEAD

- How long will this take?
- What questions will I be asked?
- Am I being judged?
- What if they turn me down?
- Will my past be held against me?
- What happens if the pet doesn’t work out?
INSIDE THE ADOPTION COUNSELOR’S HEAD

- This animal has had at least one failed home
- I need to protect him from another failure
- Are these people like me? Because I know that I am a good pet owner.
- I will have to ask a LOT of questions to find out.
HOW LONG IS YOUR ADOPTION APPLICATION?
HOW SHORT COULD IT BE?

- Name & contact info
- Gift adoption?
- Humans in the household
- Pets in the household
- Topics you’d like to know about
- Other info you wish to share?
Could it even be (GASP!) eliminated?

- When your counselors gain experience, they may be able to rely only on the conversation.
- May use a checklist of topics to ensure consistency.
- Trust is built!
- People are amazed!
- Animal FLY out!
WHAT DO WE **NOT** NEED IN WRITING?

- Veterinary history
- Landlord information
- Fenced yard
- Info about past pets
- Why they want a pet
- Where they will keep the pet, what they will feed the pet, how long they are gone each day...**what color their underwear is!**
FIRST STEP: SHRINK IT DOWN!

- One page, one side maximum, faxable
- Includes a checklist for counselor’s use
- Decision at bottom: Approve, Pending (reason), or Decline
- Don’t ask for info twice!
SECOND STEP: READ IT!

- While a handler shows the animal
- Check name in computer for past adoptions?
- Scan for blanks
- Look for discussion points
Touch all important points! Answer their questions! Use great customer service!
They should feel comfortable and welcomed by you

This will encourage them to be truthful and express concerns

Not all adopters are qualified to adopt now, but they deserve respect and good customer service!
HOW OFTEN DO PEOPLE GET A PET?

- Not very often!
- This is our chance to leave a positive lasting impression
- Adopters become repeat adopters, and tell friends about your organization
- Adopters become donors
- Adopters can be your best allies in the community!
ADOPTING A PET SHOULD BE FUN!
Part 2:

UNDERSTANDING ADOPTERS AND ADOPTION COUNSELORS
WHAT ARE ADOPTERS LOOKING FOR?

- Well-adjusted healthy pet:
  - Not looking for an animal who is sick
  - Not looking for a dog who will destroy their couch when they leave for work
  - Not looking for a cat who pees in their shoes
  - Not looking for an animal who bites
WHAT ARE ADOPTERS LOOKING FOR?

- Honest information!
  - How big will the pet get?
  - Is the pet housetrained?
  - What shots has the animal had? When are the next shots needed? Who pays for those?
  - Is the animal neutered?
  - How trainable is the pet?
  - Will the animal get along with my other pets? Kids?
  - How much will this cost?
HAVE HONEST ANSWERS AND GOOD PETS
WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING FOR?

- Homes for your adoptable pets (adopt vs. euth)
- BEST HOME or QUALIFIED HOME?
- A qualified home meets your adoption requirements
- “Best” home implies comparing adopters and judging who is best
- Adopters want to be treated fairly:
  - First-come basis & first qualified home = FAIR
  - Judging who is best is not perceived as fair
CAN YOU REALL YJUDE THE BEST HOME?

- We tend to misjudge adopters who are:
  - Culturally different
  - Lower income
  - Young or old
  - Less educated about pets
  - Unlike ourselves!
QUALIFIED HOMES COME IN ALL KINDS!
STRIVE FOR OBJECTIVITY!

- We all have built-in biases
- When we have a bad "gut feeling" we should try to determine if it has an objective basis
- If unable to find an objective reason, then it is probably subjective
WHAT DO YOU WANT TO KNOW?

- Who is this person?
- Have they owned pets before? What do they know about pets?
- Current living situation: where, with whom?
- Lifestyle: active? home during day?
- What type of pet do they want, and are they prepared to care for that pet?
- Is this person a QUALIFIED home?
EXAMINE YOUR NON-NEGOTIABLES

- 18 years of age
- Not a gift
- Home owner
- Landlord approves
- Fenced yard
- Pet will live strictly indoors
- Must meet all family members
- Solid vet care history
PEACE OF MIND FOR YOUR STAFF

- Adopter Support program
  - Emails & phone calls
- Behavior Assistance
  - Send tips home & downloaded
  - Free behavioral advice via helpline
- Adoption Guarantee
  - Money-back on all animals for XX days
- Not all adoptions work out! Returns are not failures!
Part 3: How to Make Conversational Adoption Counseling Work for You
START WITH A SMILE!
THE ADOPTION COUNSELOR PERSONALITY

- Friendly, open, non-judgmental
- Loves people AND animals
- Open to learning from others, as well as teaching in a non-condescending way
- Excited to be doing adoptions (not a chore)
- Volunteers often make best adoption counselors
- Mindful that we all make mistakes
ESTABLISHING TRUST

- Trust goes both ways
  - We have to trust that MOST adopters are honest and forthright
  - We also have to act in a trustworthy way
- Eye contact as you speak is important
- Listening, understanding, pausing, responding
VERBAL SIGNALS YOU ARE LISTENING

- “Okay! Gotcha!”
- “I understand.”
- “So you are saying...”

Without these types of verbal signals, you are likely to be tuned out by the adopter!
YOU ARE NOT SELLING ANIMALS

- Joyce is one of our best rabbit adoption counselors
- She does not sell bunnies
- She talks with people to help them understand what living with a bunny is like
“What a gorgeous puppy! Are you looking for a large dog?”

“This one is just a baby. Have you housetrained a baby puppy before?”

“Would you like to hold her?”

“What questions can I answer about this puppy?”
IN PERSON COUNSELING VS. ONLINE

- Benefits of face-to-face
  - Eye contact
  - Body language
  - Trust building
  - Observe with animal
- Can you compensate over the phone? Online?
- Pre-approvals without in-person counseling?
HOW TO DESCRIBE SAME-DAY PROCESS

- “Doesn’t take too long” (strive for 30 minutes)
- “Answer your questions about the animal”
- “Give you time to interact and make sure good fit”
- “Prepare you for your first days at home with the animal”
- “Sign contract, pay fee, TAKE PET HOME!”

To adopt one of our wonderful kittens or cats, simply ask a PetSmart associate to help you meet the cat and fill out one of our easy adoption applications. PetSmart will fax your application to Michigan Humane Society right away! You should hear back from MHS within 24 hours, and can take your new cat home immediately!
HOW TO DESCRIBE LONGER PROCESS

- “Will respond to your email or call promptly” (strive for 48 hours)
- “Answer your questions about the animal”
- “Set up a meeting with the animal promptly” (try for 4 days or less)
- “On-the-spot decision”
- “Sign contract, pay fee, TAKE PET HOME!”
INTERACTION BEFORE ADOPTION

- Not all people are ready to adopt
- Avoid duplication: talk with animal handler to see what they covered
- If interaction is going badly, talk through what they are seeing
Use animal’s file during interaction

- Answer adopter’s questions as they come up
- Explain animal’s personality testing results
- Great time to demonstrate safe handling and re-directing rough play, etc.
CLIPBOARD ETIQUETTE
DESK/TABLE ETIQUETTE
LISTEN AND ANSWER QUESTIONS

- Check off topics covered in order of adopter’s questions first
- For example: adopter asks about pet’s shots:
  - Answer their question
  - Talk about next shots due
  - Vets and low-cost options
  - Work into worming and heartworm
Cover all topics on your list

- Check off each topic as you go along
- If you run into a problem, stop and handle it right away
- Example: Person is not able to adopt right away
- Make arrangements to hold animal or explain need to move to next person
AVOIDING DECLINES

- Many people are not quite ready to adopt
- You want these people back when they are ready
- Let them know you will be happy to work with them when:
  - You have what they are looking for
  - They come back from vacation
  - They feel ready to replace a pet who has died
- You can increase the likelihood they will return if they truly felt welcomed and respected!
TURN DECLINES INTO PENDINGS!
BUT WHAT ABOUT SLIME BALL ADOPTERS?
HOUSTON: WE HAVE A PROBLEM!

- Looking away when answering a question
- Conflicting answers
- “Not sure” answers
- Story that changes over the course of the conversation
- Listen to what the kids say
THESE PEOPLE EXIST...BUT RARELY!

- Being overly strict with ALL adopters is unlikely to tease them out
- But it WILL drive good adopters away!
- MOST adopters are coming to you for the right reasons
- Fight “Shelter mentality”
Part 4: HOW TO COVER SPECIFIC TOPICS
WHO ARE THEY ADOPTING THE PET FOR?

- Self
- Family
- Kids within family (sometimes gifts)
- Elderly parent(s): “Do your parents know you are getting them a pet?”
- Friend or someone outside of home (gift)
- Know how you will handle gift adoptions
WHO ELSE LIVES IN THE HOME?

- Kids (ages)
- Parents: “Are they aware you are adopting a pet?”
- Roommates: “Is your roommate okay with getting pet?” Do they have pets of their own?
- Are they here to meet potential animals?
“Do you know if there are restrictions on pets where you live?”
Could call if person is unsure
Some agencies are moving to a disclaimer: Some landlords have restrictions on pets. We recommend you check.
“That must have been hard to lose your dog...”

“Have you had a cat before?”

Listen for clues as to their experience level

Some people know a lot! Avoid being a know-it-all!
VACCINATIONS ON PETS AT HOME

“Are you used to taking your pets to the vet?”

Help people overcome barriers to veterinary care.

Low-cost options, vets you recommend, booster shots, emergency care.

Avoid shaming them!
“Animals who go through animal shelters and rescue programs are more likely to come down with upper respiratory viruses.”

“Most viruses are mild, like a human cold, and will resolve on their own, but they are contagious to other pets.”
“Your new pet may cough or sneeze if they get a virus. As long as your animal continues to eat and drink and play normally, with only clear discharge from nose, then okay to watch.”

“If pet stops eating or drinking, acts tired all the time, or has a green or yellow discharge from nose or eyes, then he should go to the vet.”
“We offer one free vet visit within 10 days of adoption for any health condition you are concerned about.”

“The vet visit covers up to $250 of care, including the office visit fee.”
COST OF VET CARE

- Offer health insurance such as PetFirst to adopters
- Encourage adopters to set aside some money each month for pet health care so that when something happens, they will be able to pay for vet care.
Some adopters will ask for meet-n-greets
Supervise introduction and talk through what people are seeing
Should not be mandatory!
Do not necessarily predict what will happen in the home
Do not encourage bringing cats to meet each other
Discuss gradual introduction
New research on pheromone use
“It’s okay to keep the new cat in a small room for a few days. A room is bigger than this cage!”
CATS GOING TO HOMES WITH OTHER CATS

- Encourage giving extra attention to existing cat
- Cat introductions will be easier if both have chilled
- TIP: Old cats generally don’t want kittens!
- Provide a handout to explain gradual introduction process
“Have you used a crate before to housetrain a dog? How did that go for you?”

“This puppy should be taken out mid-day to potty—will someone be home who can do that?”
“Do you have any concerns about a new cat using the litterbox?”

- New cat: new litterbox
- Scoop daily, dump all litter weekly, sanitize box
- Not using the box? Take cat to vet!
DECLAWING

- Some people must have a declawed cat: immune-suppressed, elderly, apt.
- No hard science connecting declawing to litterbox avoidance or aggression
- Offer previously declawed cats when possible
- Counseling versus mandate
“How are you planning to exercise your new dog?”

Fenced yards can be misused

Large active dogs need an active owner, not necessarily “room to run”

Good time to touch on licensing and leashes
“Our kitties are already used to wearing collar and tag!”

“Are you familiar with microchipping?”

“Microchips work sort of like barcode scanners. If a lost pet ends up at an animal shelter or vet clinic, they can scan for a chip and look up the owner in an online database.”
WHAT TO FEED THE PET

- “What type of food are you used to feeding?”
- “Our animals all eat XYZ food. You can switch to a brand you prefer, but we’ll give you a starter bag so you can switch gradually to prevent tummy upsets.”
- Free food coupon
ALLERGIES TO PETS

 “Any pet allergies in the home?”
 Many people with allergies can live with pets
 What can you do to help them make a wise choice?
“Are you able to keep this cat indoors?”

In cases where person has indoor/outdoor or outdoor pets, talk thru the specific situation

“Could the cat be kept in at night?”

MHS generally adopts our animals to be house pets
ADOPTERS WHO DO NOT SPEAK ENGLISH

- Speak slowly, ask person to repeat themselves, show respect and SMILE!
- Children may be good interpreters
- Adoption counselors who speak other languages
- Handouts in other languages (also pet names!)
OVER-THE-PHONE ADOPTION COUNSELING

- Call the adopter in a timely way: within 24 hours or same day if possible
- “Hi, this is Linda from the Michigan Humane Society! I’m calling about your interest in our very sweet black cat in our Taylor cat center!”
USE A FRIENDLY OPEN STYLE

- “Is this a good time to talk about the kitty?"
- If not, find out when to call back
- Smile as you talk: they can hear the difference!
- Pause for their replies
- “Did you have a chance to take the kitty out of the cage to interact yet? How did that go?”
USE ACTIVE LISTENING AND CHECKLIST

- Allow the person to tell you about past pets
- Let their conversation lead the discussion
- Respect the level of pet experience by touching lightly on topics they obviously know about
- Try not to hurry!
HANDLING HURRIED ADOPTERS

- Don’t allow a busy adopter to short-cut your process
- Offer to call back at a more convenient time
- Estimate the time it will take on the phone
- “I want to be sure to answer your questions about this pet”
Part 5:

TRAINING ADOPTION COUNSELORS
TRAINING CLASS

- Online versus in-person
- Keep under one hour or gets BORING!
- Interactive, welcoming, enjoyable (bring pet)
- Print out more detailed presentation for them to study after class
- Allow time for questions
Practice Time Working with Others

- Staff or experienced adoption counselors work with new people until they are ready to take their online exam.
- Watch and assist experienced counselors.
- Study materials about pet ownership, behavior, and health.
ONLINE EXAMS

- Multiple choice
- Open notes
- SurveyMonkey survey
- Quick response with grade and corrected answers
- May take again if <70%
- Store in person’s file
One-on-one practical exam
Use pre-filled-out application (include blanks and problems)
Use scoring sheet
70% pass
Honest feedback
Congratulations! Your staff and volunteers are now able to use *Conversational Adoption Counseling* to provide excellent adoption experiences!

The animals are ALL counting on us!
CALL! EMAIL! FACEBOOK! VISIT MICHIGAN!

- www.mpaw.org
- Michigan Partnership for Animal Welfare on FB
- Linda Reider on FB
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- 248-283-5697