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# Ad Campaigns Depicting Shelter Pets as “Damaged Goods” Are Misleading

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By Dr. Becker

Here's some disheartening news to start the new year. According to a survey conducted by the Best Friends Animal Society of Kanab, Utah, a national leader in the no-kill movement, younger adults (ages 18 to 34) are more likely to purchase a pet from a breeder or pet store than adopt a homeless pet from a shelter or rescue organization.

Incredibly, almost half (46 percent) of young adults view shelter animals as less desirable than those from breeders. And nearly 40 percent don't believe homeless animals are at risk of being killed, but will remain in a shelter until they are adopted.

The horrifying reality is, of course, much different. An estimated 4 million homeless pets are killed each year in America's shelters.

## 'Animals in Shelters Are Stereotyped by Young Adults as Damaged Goods.'

John Polis, Best Friends senior manager of public relations, says the survey results took the organization by surprise. "You often think that the younger (people) are on the cutting edge to do things a better way," said Polis. He continued:

*"For this to come back in a survey tells us we've got more work to do, to let people know that adoption is the best option for people who want (pets). The option is around the corner for them. There's a beautiful animal right down the street at your shelter, and a lot of people don't (adopt)."*

Gregory Castle, CEO and co-founder of Best Friends, had this to say:

*"We were sad to learn that to some extent animals in shelters are stereotyped by young adults as damaged goods. The fact is that every day in this country perfectly wonderful family pets land in shelters through no fault of their own, all of whom need and deserve a home of their own."*

In the 1980s, the yearly kill count for homeless pets in the U.S. was about 17 million, so it's clear a great deal of progress has been made in reducing that number to 4 million. But it's also clear given these survey results that there is still much work to be done.

*"While young people have embraced social media as a way to express what cause they support and in general young people are socially active, the results of the survey were surprising in that so many younger adults, rather than help homeless pets, were likely to buy a pet at the same mall they bought their iPhone. This is something we hope to change,"* said Castle.

## What Is Causing the Disconnect?

So how is it that if 86 percent of Americans are advocates of shelter pet adoptions, only 60 percent would personally try adopting over purchasing?

One reason is that many people are looking for a particular breed and are unaware there are breed-specific rescues for most popular breeds, and that shelters also receive purebred dogs.

The Best Friends survey also points to two additional explanations for the disconnect:

## Story at-a-glance

- A survey conducted by the Best Friends Animal Society suggests that younger adults (ages 18 to 34) looking for a pet are more likely to go to a breeder or pet store than a shelter. Almost half of young adults view shelter animals as "damaged goods." And 40 percent believe homeless pets live indefinitely in shelters until they are adopted, when in fact, an estimated 4 million animals are killed each year in U.S. shelters.
- The survey results came as a shock to Best Friends. "We were sad to learn that to some extent animals in shelters are stereotyped by young adults as damaged goods," said the organization's CEO and founder. "The fact is that every day in this country perfectly wonderful family pets land in shelters through no fault of their own, all of whom need and deserve a home of their own."
- According to the founder of the Animal Policy Group, the survey results could mean it's time for national animal rights and welfare organizations to rethink their marketing strategies. Ads designed to make viewers feel guilty may be creating a negative public opinion of shelter pets, especially among younger adults.
- To change misperceptions about the desirability of shelter animals, potential pet owners must understand that it's easy to find a wonderful companion at the local shelter or breed rescue.
- It's also important to call public attention to the fact that 11,000 pets are put to death every day in shelters across the U.S.

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many young adults believe homeless animals are not at serious risk of being killed in shelters, and nearly half said they find shelter animals less desirable than pets acquired from breeders. This indicates there are a lot of stereotypes and misperceptions about shelter animals floating around.

## Are Guilt-Inspired Ad Campaigns for Homeless Pets Helping... or Hurting?

Attorney Mark Cushing, founder of the Animal Policy Group, has an interesting take on the situation. He believes these survey results will prompt many groups to try to make Gen X and Millennials feel guilty for not adopting dogs from shelters. As Cushing writes in an article for dvm360, *"Guilt is a powerful marketing tool – and the force underlying much of what we see on television fundraising tied to canine adoptions."*

But Cushing believes the survey results should instead serve as a wake-up call to national animal rights and welfare organizations to rethink their advertising strategies. Showing sick, injured, "damaged" dogs in shelters, regardless of the motive behind the ads, may not be having the intended effect – especially when it comes to young adults.

Making potential pet owners feel guilty may increase donations to animal shelters, but it is clearly not translating to a positive public perception of shelter pets, or to an increase in adoption rates. Guilt is not typically a strong motivator when it comes to decisions about who we invite into our hearts and homes.

## Shelter Leaders Are Also Concerned That Shelter Animals Are Increasingly Viewed as Problem Pets

According to Cushing, a growing number of shelter leaders are worried that the public has evolved to view shelter dogs as problem dogs. If people in the 18 - 34 age group feel shelter pets are "damaged goods," Cushing believes it should be no surprise when they look elsewhere to acquire a family pet. And the reality is, those heart-tugging TV, magazine and online ads do not depict the majority of adoptable pets waiting in shelters around the country.

In order to change misperceptions about the desirability of shelter animals, potential pet owners must understand that it's easy to find a wonderful companion at the local shelter or breed rescue.

Cushing is hopeful that *"The Best Friends study may be the spark to cause long-running TV ads to try a different tack, leading the next generation of pet owners to give shelters a chance. Not out of guilt, but in the hope that they will find great pets who deserve great homes."*

Since a large percentage of young adults believe homeless animals live indefinitely in shelters until they are adopted, it may also be important for the no-kill movement to work to increase public awareness of the number of animals killed in U.S. shelters. Four million pets killed annually = 11,000 killed each day = 7 to 8 killed every minute.

In about the time it takes a prospective pet owner to shop for a puppy at the pet store in the mall, 400 to 500 equally wonderful and deserving homeless pets will be put to death.

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