Almost Home Humane Society: From Creating a Marketing Tool to Adopting a Dog

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INTRODUCTION

Every year, an average of over 3,000 animals arrive at Almost Home Humane Society (AHHS). Whether they arrive as strays or are surrendered by their owners, they all end up homeless nonetheless. Abandoned animals can remain homeless anywhere from a few days to several years while waiting in the shelter to be adopted. AHHS provides a range of services during their stay from vaccinations, microchipping, spaying and neutering pets to providing a pet food pantry to support owners. Donors help make it all possible. All donations go toward the animals via provision of enrichment materials such as toys and training tools, or basic necessities like food and shelter maintenance in order to provide a safe and comfortable living environment. Sometimes AHHS sponsors adoption events as a way to expedite the process of finding pets homes.

During the fall semester of 2018, I took a service-learning course called Multimedia Writing (English 419). The course revolved around compositions on various forms of media and new media technologies. It explored how design, perception, action, and ethics connect in a single text and how certain qualities of a text influence the target audience. I was assigned an open-ended project where I created a document through a media format of my choosing. This particular project allowed me to take the initiative of going solo to create a magazine for AHHS and how spending time at the facility inspired her to adopt a dog.

DESCRIPTION

AHHS is a nonprofit organization that is contracted with Lafayette and West Lafayette, Indiana, agreeing to take
Almost Home Humane Society

into their facilities any stray or surrendered pets within city limits. They also accept pets transferred from other animal shelter organizations, given that AHHS is not at capacity. Their mission is to “inspire a more humane community by educating, providing resources and collaborating to improve the lives of animals and their families” (AHHS website). In addition to housing animals, they also provide care by implementing several methods of enrichment. For instance, the staff members make efforts to learn each dog’s unique personality in order to properly place them in play groups alongside dogs they would be comfortable interacting with. Once the AHHS staff sees how the dogs socialize with other dogs and humans, they will use that knowledge to eventually place them in a family with a lifestyle of best fit. They also ensure that each animal is constantly surrounded by toys that challenge their intelligence or ease their anxiety, if necessary. Some other services they offer to clients include low-cost microchipping and vaccinations, a pet food pantry that low-income families can access monthly, spaying and neutering, and emergency animal housing. Additionally, they will accept any animal that is brought back to their facilities after adoption if a family realizes they were not a good fit for that particular pet for any reason. They do so in order to prevent the risk of that animal being in danger elsewhere.

AHHS appreciates as much volunteer help as possible, ranging from opportunities in the dog or cat area to the facilities, which involves upkeep and greeting visitors. I attended a volunteer orientation with the intention to learn more about AHHS for this project, as well as to volunteer with them in the near future. After the orientation, I spoke with the host, Jannet Rivera, who is also the canine coordinator; she then called over Justin Henry, the marketing manager, and I pitched my idea to him.

I told Justin that I wanted to produce a magazine for the organization primarily containing stories about a few of the animals who have been through unique circumstances before ending up at AHHS. Its purpose was originally supposed to cater to readers from the community and serve as a form of entertainment, as well as awareness of adoptable animals at the shelter. Coincidentally, Justin stated that he essentially pitched the same idea to his boss a week prior to my visit, so he agreed to let me execute the trial run for this magazine to be distributed to donors in the upcoming year. Because he was already working on the project at that point, he already had taken the time to create a mailing list with all the donors’ names from the past year, so my only job was to write and design the document itself.

During my first meeting with Justin at his office, we came up with a completed outline. We decided on narrowing the background stories to those of one cat named Nala and two dogs named Suzie and Chino, because they arrived at AHHS together. Other information we chose to include in the magazine are an “About Us” page, an interview with Jannet (the canine coordinator) about dog behavior and training tips, and statistics on AHHS adoption outcomes. The last few pages elaborate upon AHHS’s various services, annual events, and available pets. This particular outline allows for a layout that can easily be updated by AHHS in the future, replacing discontinued events or pets that have found a home, for instance. Justin and I then agreed to meet weekly or as needed, depending on the content I need to personally be on-site to gather. Otherwise, we maintained contact via e-mail and text for quick questions I had or particular photos I could use for certain pages.

In terms of working on the content of the magazine, I wrote the articles on my personal computer at my leisure. For the design process, I often spent hours at a time on campus in order to freely access Adobe InDesign on Purdue’s computers. I translated my notes from our meetings into paragraphs on Google Docs with the target audience constantly in mind while maintaining professionalism, as I represented AHHS through this document. I chose photos of animals that would go along with the theme of that particular page but would also keep the reader entertained. In the same sense, I made sure to keep the articles concise, avoiding excessive wordiness and unnecessary information in order for the reader to remain engaged. Fonts had to be consistent throughout the document, page elements had to be aligned, layout had to make sense in terms of how people’s line of sight tends to move across a page, all for the purpose of being aesthetically pleasing to the eye while also following basic design principles.

Justin Henry sent me multiple photos of animals they had on-site at the time, and I decided how to incorporate them into my pages. As I completed each page, I would send them to Justin and ask for suggested improvements; I was also able to receive feedback from my professor and peers in my Multimedia Writing class. Then I would make the changes, and repeat that process until I was satisfied with my work.

All in all, the design aspect was extremely tedious, ensuring that every element aligned with one another, that the fonts and color scheme looked cohesive, and that the magazine, as a whole, matched AHHS’s overall style and needs. But the end product was something I was
COMMUNITY IMPACT

The first step toward success for this project came as soon as Justin Henry stated that he was already in the course of developing the same project I had in mind. That sense of reciprocity from the community partner strengthened the concept of the project, confirming AHHS’s genuine need for what I planned on creating, as opposed to AHHS simply allowing me to complete a project strictly for academic purposes.

At the time of this project, AHHS was in the midst of preparing for a change in head management, so I was told that everything was slightly more chaotic than usual. This did not cause too much of an issue on my end besides a few times when Justin was too busy to respond to e-mails with elements I needed, such as photos or statistics, but having to wait for responses was expected and tends to be fairly common in service projects, based on previous experience. Therefore, it did not serve as a significant hindrance to my personal deadlines for class or overall completion of the project.

When I initially sent the end product to Justin, he thanked me for the work I had done and stated that he planned to present it to the board in the near future. He concluded his reply with, “You’ve already done the heavy lifting.” However, due to AHHS being in the process of changing management, he gave forewarning that he was not entirely sure of the release date of my magazine to the donors.

Nevertheless, I do think it was useful for them to get an undergraduate student’s perspective in their marketing strategies, as it provided them with fresh eyes from someone who does not work in an animal shelter environment on a regular basis. I believe Justin and I collaborated well when it came to sharing our ideas with each other, and while his ideas helped me better my project, I think my ideas also helped trigger some tasks that needed to be done as well, such as producing a calendar of events for the rest of 2019.

AHHS’s magazine did not exist before I took on this project, and it could therefore potentially serve as a template, structured so that it is available to repeatedly utilize in the future, rather than as a document for singular use. Therefore, other staff members at AHHS, or students who would like to work with the organization, could continue distributing new editions of the magazine by simply updating and replacing the content with more relevant information for that time period.

AUTHOR IMPACT

Whether my magazine is actually mailed out or not, I did learn a lot from the experience of collaborating with the staff members of a nonprofit organization while being able to utilize the skills I have developed during my time as a Professional Writing major at Purdue University, such as rhetorical design and composing a cohesive document.

Gathering information not only involved talking to Justin, but I also personally interviewed Jannet for a particular spread, and I talked to their operations manager, Molly Baker, asking about the cat featured in the Pet Spotlights. I was introduced to each staff member and volunteers who happened to be there, and I got a behind-the-scenes look into the regular goings-on at a typical animal shelter. I sat alongside Justin as he answered phone calls ranging from donors asking about fundraising events to a friend asking for advice on what to do about an enraged pitbull trapping her friend in their car. I watched dogs taken out of their cages for playtime and field trips by volunteers, I saw pets being surrendered by their owners, and failed foster parents falling in love with their temporary pets, wanting to adopt them instead.

Going into the project, I was extremely nervous about individually visiting a new place and blindly pitching an idea to people of authority at the organization. I quickly learned that I was simply overthinking it and that AHHS is very accepting of students helping out in any way they can, considering all the staff members who made it a smooth process for me to collect information required of my project. This experience helped me gain confidence in my capabilities to execute an idea and turn it into a tangible result primarily on my own, while obtaining necessary resources from those involved along the way. I learned how to speak professionally to those who work for a nonprofit organization and collaborate on a project that took place over the course of a month, and I was able to use my expertise with audience publishing throughout the process.

Aside from academic results, working with AHHS on this project, as well as volunteering afterward, inspired me to spontaneously adopt my own dog. AHHS named her Boo because she was taken in as a stray the day before Halloween. Between October and December...
2018, Boo was adopted by another family, but they brought her back due to minor behavioral problems and aggression toward a dog they already had. Boo’s behavioral issues include rowdiness when excited and play-biting, but nothing severe to the point where she is not adoptable. A couple weeks after I completed my magazine project, I came back to AHHS to volunteer. They recently started a program in which volunteers can take dogs on “field trips” to locations of the volunteer’s choice as a way to expose the dog to the environment aside from the shelter. Jannet typically lets the volunteer choose which dog to take out based on availability, but I was indifferent, so she led me to Boo.

I took Boo to my apartment and on a walk around Happy Hollow Park to explore her surroundings. After those four hours, I brought her back to AHHS and told Justin I wanted to adopt her; he then kindly paid the reservation fee for me while I contemplated my decision over the next day. The management at my apartment complex required Boo’s breed and medical documentation in their system before I could bring her home, so I submitted everything to the leasing office and immediately picked Boo up from AHHS. We are still working through her rowdiness and play-biting, but I have no regrets.

The project went smoother than I could have imagined. However, looking back, the biggest thing I would do differently if I had the chance is follow up on the status of my magazine in terms of whether it has been distributed yet or not at a closer date to its completion, rather than waiting until months later. Moving forward, I am confident that I would be able to mention this project during job interviews, explaining the steps I took to complete it and how those skills would apply to the potential position. This experience exercised my skills in taking an idea and executing it as a solo project all the way through completion. It also improved my knowledge of Adobe InDesign more than any other assignment and pushed me to be confident in sharing my vision with staff members at a nonprofit organization while working alongside them to make that vision come to life.

CONCLUSION

Not only did this service-learning project with AHHS impact me as a Professional Writing student in various aspects, but it also led me to tackle the responsibility of being a first-time dog owner.

AHHS truly appreciates as much volunteer help as they can receive, especially during the holidays when staffing is extremely low. Students can sign up to volunteer under the “Get Involved” tab on the AHHS website. Some potential roles include kennel assistant, dog walker, enrichment specialist, and shelter greeter during special events.

However, as this project has made clear to me, there are numerous other opportunities for students to make an impact on this organization, as long as one is creative and open-minded. For instance, Justin Henry shared that Purdue students have done internships at AHHS, organized clubs to volunteer in groups, and helped with adoption events. Students should feel free to pitch new ideas for fundraising events, as AHHS is open to any ways to help the animals. There’s also the “field trip” program that allows students who may or may not also be volunteers to take dogs out to places other than the shelter for a few hours in order to provide the animals with a change of scenery and new interactions, as I did with Boo.

This article was intended to inform those who are interested in service-learning projects about my personal experience and its outcomes relating to the community in addition to myself, as a student in the Professional Writing program. Creating a magazine for AHHS was undoubtedly a unique experience that made a lasting impact, and I am determined to retain the skills I developed, and most importantly the connections I made with those at AHHS throughout this project.

REFERENCE


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