Animal Sheltering
animal services / rescues / shelters

Breakable Chains
The Fight Against Tethering

The Quest for Bequests
Got Pigs in Your Digs?
We all know how powerful the media can be. Take, for example, Oprah’s recent exposé of Pennsylvania’s puppy mills, which helped spur national awareness of the issue, a spike in adoptions, and passage of long-lingering legislation for some improvements to the canine factory farms in the state. Reaching our media goals can still be challenging, but the payoff—even if it doesn’t include a seat on Ms. Winfrey’s couch—is priceless.

“The more the public is exposed to the adoption message and the more familiar people become with rescue groups and shelters, the more likely they will be to choose adopting over purchasing their next new four-legged family member,” says Steve Gruber, director of communications for the Mayor’s Alliance for NYC’s Animals. Gruber handles the organization’s media and communications efforts in New York City—the biggest, most cluttered, and most competitive media market in the nation.

An oft-cited Princeton University study conducted in the 1950s by George A. Miller led to the coined of the marketing guideline known as “the rule of seven,” which holds that an average person needs to be exposed to a message seven times before it really sticks. Modern studies and corporate marketers say that the rule should be updated to a “rule of 21” or more to take into account the astronomical growth in the amount of information and advertising people are exposed to through the Internet, television, newspapers, magazines, and even text messages. These days, it takes a lot more juice to fully saturate a market!

But few (if any) nonprofit organizations can come up with the marketing

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**Reeling in the News Media**

Shelters can plan ahead to find seasonal news hooks that will generate coverage

By Patrick Kwan

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By tying their cause to other local news and events—such as the Chinese Lunar new Year—New York animal protection groups have gotten more media attention, such as this piece in the Daily News.
and advertising budget to meet even the “rule of seven,” let alone the “rule of 21” in getting out their messages. Established brands like Apple, Starbucks, and Coca-Cola spend hundreds of millions of dollars each year to reinforce their brands and promote their products. The annual advertising budget for McDonald’s is $1.2 billion in the United States alone; the average shelter can only dream of an adoption or spay/neuter message with as much market penetration as “I’m lovin’ it.”

The good news is that media-savvy shelters and rescue groups don’t have to spend for the spotlight; after all, people pay more attention to news stories than to advertising, and trust information from news sources more. With a little strategy and planning, shelters and rescue groups can effectively get their messages out through earned media coverage.

In *Now Hear This—The Nine Laws of Successful Advocacy Communications*, available for free online through Fenton Communications, Kristen Grimm notes that “from a marketing perspective, when nonprofits conduct communications campaigns, they have assets,” such as credibility, public trust, and “inspiring issues that by their very nature garner attention”—things that big budgets can’t buy.

**The Power of News Hooks**

Some years ago when I was working at a corporate public relations firm, an animal-friendly reporter at a major newspaper told me that shelters and rescue groups would clog her e-mail and voicemail with pitches for stories about spay/neuter or a particularly sweet animal who needed a home. She would often press the delete button without reading or listening to these heartbreaking stories. Though she was always willing to help, the story ideas that reached her often didn’t have a news hook, and she didn’t always have the time to think of one.

She told me frankly: “It’s not news that animals are surrendered at shelters. It’s not news that shelters are trying to get people to adopt animals. It’s not news that some of these animals may be euthanized if they don’t get adopted. And you know what? People don’t want to hear about it.”

We’ve all heard that a picture is worth a thousand words, but there’s more! Sometimes a good picture can grab a thousand words—or at least a blurb. Media outlets need imagery, and if your organization can provide it, you’ll be a favorite. Just look at the photo the Mayor’s Alliance gave to *Time Out*!
The media is in the business of covering news stories—not just good or interesting stories, but stories with news elements. While extraordinary stories may prevail without a news element (or a particularly strong one), pairing the powerful stories we encounter in our daily sheltering and rescue work with news hooks gives our adoption and spay/neuter messages new life and makes them relevant to the media. News hooks also create “expiration dates” on the great stories you have—and stories that can’t wait will light a fire with the media to choose to cover your story over others that can be covered a week or a month down the road.

Some of the simplest and most effective news hooks for your messages are seasonal ones, such as a local or national holiday or the anniversary of a major event.

“Seasonal news hooks help put the issue at hand into a context not previously considered by editors, producers, and reporters,” says Joan Grangenois-Thomas, an account director at Make Waves, a marketing and communications company for nonprofits.

In 2006—year 4073 and Year of the Dog on the Chinese lunar calendar—the Mayor’s Alliance for NYC’s Animals, along with partner organizations Animal Haven, Bideawee, Humane Society of New York, and Animal Care & Control of NYC, celebrated the Chinese New Year in New York’s Chinatown neighborhood.

Joining the parade, the groups found a wealth of media opportunities. Dogs wore “Adopt Me” vests and festive Lunar New Year outfits to promote adoptions on local TV morning shows in the week before the parade. On the day of the event, they posed for news cameras as they strutted down Chinatown’s historic Mott Street—later dubbed “Mutt Street” by the New York Daily News. Local papers such as the New York Post and national news wires such as the Associated Press highlighted the groups’ participation and discussed the need for adoptions. The result? Millions of people saw images and read coverage of the event in dozens of television, radio, and print outlets.

“While many groups are savvy in taking advantage of celebrations like Halloween to do a costumed pet contest, we don’t often also think about how we can take advantage of media opportunities as celebrations and seasons come and go,” says Jane Hoffman, president of the Mayor’s Alliance for NYC’s Animals, who arranged the groups’ participation in the parade.

“You have to ask yourself, ‘This issue has been going on for a while. How do we make this story relevant to people now?’ Once that hook is found, multiple stories can stem from it,” says Maureen Isern, a former broadcast news professional and owner of Moped Productions, a company that develops media for nonprofits.

“I think if you’re staying on top of trends and news that relates to your organization or cause, it can be very simple to find a way to shed new light on your group,” adds Isern. “Whether it’s research-related, an anniversary month, or something happening on the national or international level that can be tied to what your agency does, all it takes is the connection. And over time, cultivating a relationship with your contact person at the local news outlet can help you learn what they respond to.”
Sample Bait

Here are some successful seasonal news hooks used by New York shelters and rescue groups that you can incorporate into your PR plan for next year. Hey, if these can make it here in New York, they can make it anywhere, right?

I Love NYC Pets Month: The Mayor’s Alliance for NYC’s Animals, ASPCA, Animal Care & Control of NYC, the Humane Society of New York, and the North Shore Animal League, along with dozens of other New York City-based shelters and rescue groups, came together during the month of hearts and flowers (February) to encourage New Yorkers to adopt a furry valentine or to show their pets some love by having them spayed or neutered. With extended adoption hours, special gifts and discounts for adoptions and spaying and neutering, and more than 50 adoption events under the I Love NYC Pets month banner, the promotion proved irresistible to the media.

In addition to dozens of stories in local media that carried the adoption and spay/neuter messages throughout the month, the promotion was covered nationally by the Associated Press and made a couple of appearances on the The Early Show on CBS. See links to their media coverage at ilovenycpets.com.

Tip: Don’t limit your promotion to just a day or weekend. Give yourself and the media some bandwidth and more opportunities for coverage by making it a week or month.

Keeping fit and giving dogs some fresh air: Animal Care & Control of NYC promoted its volunteer dog-walking program by pegging the story to the nice weather that the late springtime offers. Volunteers walked dogs who donned “Adopt Me” vests for the cameras. AC&C staffers explained to reporters that they would love for dogs at the shelter to get more fresh air and suggested ways for New Yorkers to pitch in to ex-
pand the volunteer program. During a taping for a story on an ABC affiliate, a lucky pooch was spotted by a passerby and later adopted. The unplanned happy ending became part of the segment and powerfully demonstrated how volunteers can make a difference.

*Tip:* Create a photo library of your best photos in a high-resolution digital format (minimum 300 dpi) to distribute to the media to help illustrate your stories. This great photo helped the dog-walking program garner several features.

**Best summer vacation idea:** The Humane Society of New York and the rescue group Bobbi & the Strays asked the media, “Ever wonder what some teachers do during the summer?” Fostering, of course! The groups lined up a few volunteer fosterers who were also school teachers to speak to the media about kitten season, the need for more foster homes, and how important it is for New Yorkers to spay and neuter their animals.

*Tip:* It’s not news that nonprofits need volunteers, but seasonal news hooks and the use of interesting “characters,” such as teachers in this case, give the message new life and allow for the reinforcement of additional messages promoting adoptions and spaying and neutering.

**Santa trades reindeer for pooches:** The Mayor’s Alliance for NYC’s Animals and Animal Care & Control of NYC created an excellent visual when they had Santa, adorable pooches wearing “Adopt Me” vests, and volunteers wearing Santa hats hit the famous Fifth Avenue shopping district to encourage lunchtime shoppers to give some four-legged New Yorkers a home for the holidays.

*Tip:* Think about how you can create colorful visuals for the cameras. This ensures prominent coverage by the media who need photos and video to illustrate their stories.

Patrick Kwan is New York state director for The Humane Society of the United States.