Exploring Methods To Increasing

Awareness for the Okanagan Humane Society

For: Ms. Romany Runnalls

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**Introduction**

**What is the Okanagan Humane Society?**

 Established in 1996, the Okanagan Humane Society is a volunteer-based organization dedicated to spaying and neutering companion animals for the prevention of animal overpopulation and unwanted litters. Based out of the Okanagan Region, the Okanagan Humane Society does not have a designated shelter similar to those of the BCSPCA, rather, all animals taken in by the society are cared for in foster homes. Operations for programs such as trap neuter release and fostering are funded through donations, adoption fees, and some grants, though nothing compared to the donations the BCSPCA receives. With that said, the program is thriving for a volunteer-based organization. In 2018 alone, the Okanagan Humane Society cared for 1164 animals, which are comparable to the averaged sum of animals helped per BCSPCA location (1085 animals per location; including their call centre, Provincial Office, and wildlife rehab centres). In total, OHS has helped 18,052 animals from 1996-2018, without taking into consideration the potentially hundreds of thousands of animals prevented from being born through spay/neuter programs.

**Programs Provided**

 The Okanagan Humane Society implements two primary programs for animal welfare. The first program is their Rescue Program with the primary purpose of controlling the population of feral cats while adopting out those that are deemed to be tame to households or suited to farms. This program is the bulk of their operations, and as a result, where a majority of expenses are placed. The trap neuter release portion of the program in particular requires significant spending towards vet fees, and temporary care of the animals before they are released back to their colonies. The second program, which has admittedly been operating more so under the radar, is their Owned Animal Assistance Program. This initiative is geared towards helping low-income pet owners care for animals by spaying or neutering them, and at times assisting with other costs in order to prevent abandonment, euthanasia, or inhumane disposal of pets.

**The Importance of Small Scale Humane Societies**

 Organizations such as the Okanagan Humane Society, are vital to animal welfare communities everywhere. They work in accessory to larger charities such as the BCSPCA. The BCSPCA has an essential role in the province. They are empowered under the prevention of cruelty to animals act. This act allows the the BCSPCA to prevent animal suffering as it occurs through their ability to carry out investigations, seizures of animals, and prosecute whenever necessary. Smaller-scale societies work toward the prevention of suffering through more preemptive methods. Namely, they prevent suffering by preventing the animals from being born in the first place. It has been estimated that over the course of eight years, one pair of unfixed cats are responsible for a chain of reproduction, creating more than two million cats (see Figure 1 above). In addition to controlling the population, small scale humane societies adopt out rescued animals, raise awareness, and educate on the issues of animal welfare in their respective communities.

**Purpose of this report**

 As a small scale society, every ounce of support matters. This support can range from the time volunteered by community members, discounted services provided by veterinarians, and funds donated by loyal followers. However, none of this support is possible if the community doesn’t know what the society does, why they do it, or how they do so. Since Ms. Runnalls took over as President of the society in May of 2018, OHS has redeveloped its website and social media pages, increased events linked to the charity, and spread their name through the news outlets. As a result, there has been an increase in the following of the Okanagan Humane Society in the previous two years. With that said, there is significant room for improvement. While social media numbers don’t tell the whole story, especially given how new their facebook page is, they have just under 3000 followers in a region of well over 360,000 people. This demonstrates how much room for growth there is for the Okanagan Humane Society’s following. This report will explore the efficient, cost-effective opportunities the Okanagan Humane Society can take to increase the awareness of their foundation and animal welfare.

 **The importance of The Report**

 The importance of this report is as significant as the small scale humane societies themselves. This report explores awareness raising methods implemented by the Okanagan Humane Society for the purpose of developing their ability to raise their profile in the community they serve. Thereby enhancing the awareness of the important work they do for animals. Large scale animal charities such as the BCSPCA receive most of the recognition for their contributions to the animal welfare world due to their larger budget, increased media recognition, and governmental support. Making it vital that recognition is raised for the small scale humane societies such as the Okanagan Humane Society who do not receive the same recognition but create significant impact in their communities. While, small scale charities do not have the authority to act in legal manners they are able to impact animal welfare in their community through, rescue, adoptions, fostering, and preventing feral and stray animals from continuing to reproduce. As such, it is critical for these small scale humane societies to continue to grow and adapt for the purpose of continuing to make a difference in their community.

**Scope and Data Sources**

 This report will be focused on researching cost effective forms of raising awareness that are not currently employed by the Okanagan Humane Society. In addition, methods of improving on currently employed techniques will also be explored. The data found in this report will be primarily derived from the Survey that took place on the week of November 24th, 2019 - December 1st, 2019, as well as from an interview conducted with the President of the Okanagan Humane Society: Ms. Romany Runnalls. Supplemental data will be obtained through peer reviewed research articles, with non peer reviewed articles providing a minimum but tertiary role in the data collecting process.

**Data**

**Current Forms of Advertisement**

 Currently, the OHS is focused on social media, E-Newsletters, and community events for advertising and raising support. Ms. Runnalls admitted that Facebook has been a focal point for their social media pages, while Instagram has not underused to this point. Furthermore, in their development of the OHS Facebook page, there was a significant boost in following thanks in part to the take over of the disassembled Okanagan Cat Coalition’s facebook page. In addition to social media pages, OHS has begun releasing a monthly E-Newsletter sent out to those who have subscribed. The release of this newsletter has been warmly welcomed by new and longstanding followers alike, thanks to more in-depth and consistent updates from the society. Finally, there has been an increase in events (fundraisers and adoption events) organized and run by volunteers, which has generated a healthy increase in followers. Ms. Runnalls stated, “We usually try to have at least one event per month, in addition, to approximately twenty pop up adoption events throughout the year.” These events range from seasonal interactions such as pictures with Santa to more globally celebrated events such as appearances at Canada Day festivals.

**Survey Data - Current Methods**

 An online survey was conducted for this report to obtain feedback on how well OHS is raising awareness, satisfaction of their content updates through social media and newsletters, and other feedback followers may want to see. The sample size of 48 respondents in this survey is relatively small. Nonetheless, useful feedback was obtained. Of the 48 participants, 41% heard about the Okanagan Humane Society through social media, while 33% heard through word of mouth. Forty-nine percent of the respondents hear about Okanagan Humane Society more than once per week, while only 12.8% hear about OHS once or twice per year.

Further questions were regarding the satisfaction of content updates. Nearly 81% of the respondents answered with either a 5 or 6 (out of 6, with 6 being most satisfied) on general content updates, while 75% answered a 5 or 6 (out of 6) on satisfaction for social media updates. Finally, when asked about the monthly E-Newsletters, 43.8% answered that they are not currently receiving them.

**Interpretation of data**

 The data from the survey has strong indications that the Okanagan Humane Society is getting through to its supporters over social media, and with a great deal of satisfaction. The general content updates through news letters and social media are two of the strongest methods currently employed by OHS though there is some feedback from followers that will be discussed in the next section. The data also shows that of the respondents, just under half of them, are not yet receiving the monthly E-Newsletters. While these numbers can undoubtedly be improved upon, the letters were implemented less than four months ago (September 2019), and are showing upward-trends in their subscriptions.

**Survey Feedback**

 Perhaps the most beneficial portion of the survey was the feedback shared by respondents. Two particular questions that were asked revolved around feedback on methods employed to raising awareness and feedback on social media content. In response to the methods, it appears as though most respondents are quite happy with the methods that are already employed. One piece of feedback requested an education program for kids pertaining to the importance of keeping domesticated cats inside and how they can get involved in helping animals in the community. The second piece of feedback requested that events be labeled as wheel chair accessible, or not in order to accommodate everybody. Finally, there was a request that information for emergency response situations is provided.

 From the social media standpoint, respondents were vocal in their desire for updates on animals. These desires include how certain animals are doing, before and after success stories, and updates on feral colonies (when appropriate). One respondent requested that information be presented with regards to how the Okanagan Humane Society helps dogs since the society is advertised to help a variety of pets. Finally, there was a strong indication by participants for further advertisement on how they can actively help the organization. Interest was expressed in different volunteering opportunities, ways they can help/support events, and items that foster animals may require.

**Interview Findings**

 In the interview with Ms. Runnalls further information was revealed with regards to plans for raising awareness, and how far the organization has come since she became president. Upon Ms. Runnalls’ election as President, she immediately went to work on revamping the website and improving the organization’s use of social media. The next mission was to get OHS out and active in the community through increases in events supporting the society. When asked which single awareness-raising technique has made the most significant impact, Ms. Runnalls noted that articles published on Castanet (A local source of media in Kelowna) and Kelowna Now, led to considerable increases in social media, and website views within 48 hours. This media exposure, while significant, is few and far between as they hinge on news-worthy events or costly payments for such exposure (I.e., news paper advertising), which OHS tends to avoid.

 As for the future and what Ms. Runnalls would like to do next in her role as president, she has made it clear that it is a priority to increase focus on helping dogs in the community through OHS’ Owned Animal Assistance Program. Coming into her role as president, the primary focus was establishing the Rescue Program to get the population of feral or homeless cats under control through trap-neuter-release, while helping adoptable pets find new homes. This program has been successful in areas of the community but must be sustained, however, focuses can now be turned to assisting more pets, including dogs. An early partnership with “Woofers,” another Okanagan based rescue society, has been formed and will develop further over the next couple of years. This partnership will allow for expansion of the Owned Animal Assistance Program in various aspects, including: who can be helped, in which communities, and how many pets can be assisted.

 In Ms. Runnalls’ closing remarks, she stressed that OHS “Is firing on all cylinders”. There isn’t a single area that has been less successful than the other during her time as president. The applications are flowing in from those who wish to help volunteer. Most tame cats being brought in, are being adopted out nearly as quickly, and The spay-neuter programs are ensuring population control feral colonies alike.

**Literature Review**

 There is no question the social media is the most powerful tool when it comes to advertising and awareness-raising in general, let alone the potential for cost-effective ways to implement it - because it’s free. For that reason, being able to employ and maintain various social media pages optimally, may be more beneficial than all other techniques combined. One article suggests that in order to optimize social media, a few basics need to be implemented. The first is deciding which social media platforms are going to be used and using them effectively (Jackson, 2019). In this context, “effectively” is described as consistent upkeep, and is capable of follower interaction that keeps them interested. It was found in a study on social media, that different platforms were more beneficial than others in appealing to various dimensions. For example, Facebook obtained the highest ratings on social interaction and topicality as it allowed instant sharing of information, quick correspondence, and staying informed on all the information. (Voorveld et al., 2018) In the same study, Twitter was found to be effective in sharing information quickly, while Instagram was most impactful in the dimensions of topicality, those looking to pass the time, and obtain information quickly. (Voorveld et al., 2018)

 Outside of social media specifics, it has been suggested that to increase brand awareness, there are the “Three E’s” of awareness-raising. Ryan Erskine indicates that in order to build a brand, one must Educate, Entertain, and provide “wow-experiences” (Erskine, 2016). Educate the followers on what this brand (or charity) is doing and why. There have been countless studies demonstrating the positive impact education has on subsequent behaviour. For example, Bosshardt, Kipps, and England (2017) showed that education on post-concussion behaviour, resulted in improved behaviour in situations of risk while Wang et al. demonstrated how educating students on health concerns led to increased understanding and preventative measures towards infectious diseases. (Wang et al., 2018) The comparison of concussions and disease to the methods of raising awareness for a charity is a comparison of oranges to apples. Nevertheless, the important take away from these studies is the apparent correlations between education on a matter and behaviours in support of such education.

**Suggestions**

**Impressions**

 As far as cost-effective means for raising awareness is concerned, the Okanagan Humane Society is effectively advertising events, cats for adoption, and news through their Facebook page. The implementation of the monthly E-Newsletters has received positive feedback for its content and informative nature. Meanwhile, the efforts to have a monthly event, in addition to the pop-up events, keep the followers active and interested.

**Implementations**

Options to consider for implementation are as follows:

* A blog
* An education program
* Increased awareness for dogs in the program

***Blog Implementation:***

 Thanks in part to the desire expressed by respondents of the survey for updates on animals, as well as positive success stories, the implementation of a blog on the OHS website or hyperlinked from the website would satisfy this need. When asked about a blog post in the interview, Ms. Runnalls eluded to having already given it some thought. However, two primary concerns of hers led to the decision to avoid a blog for the time being. The first concern was that the positive success stories from OHS are very similar in nature from one to the next. There are thousands of animals they have helped, yet most of the time, a blog would end up sounding like a broken record after a while. The second concern is the lack of volunteers with the capability to maintain the blog.

 OHS should implement a blog for the positivity it creates, and the positivity it can spread. Media of all sorts is packed with negativity. Whether it is related to animals or not, negative stories tend to dominate news headlines. With the addition of a blog that posts on a weekly, or biweekly basis, a sense of positivity is generated that can be shared through social media to others. There is great potential for these positive stories to reach a greater audience, thereby raising further awareness, through the ability to like and share posts on social media platforms.

***Education Program:***

 As touched on earlier, education drives behaviour. The education program does not need to be extensive, nor does it need to be complicated. In fact, the more straightforward it is, the more audiences it can reach. A program in which children and adults alike can learn the basics of programs such as trap-neuter-release, how the animals are treated, and why it is important, can create an extensive branching out of knowledge to others. Now, this program would be slightly more time consuming; as such, there are different forms of education. This education can be run through monthly newsletters to reach more of the audience at once, or semi-annual gatherings that are heavily advertised months in advance for in-person experiences.

***Increased awareness of dogs***

 The benefit of being a charity that helps both cats, and dogs, is the ability to appeal to a more broad audience. As it stands right now, there is likely to be more of a “cat person” following for the Okanagan Humane Society as the previous twenty two years have been geared primarily towards cats. As OHS begins to grow its ability to support dogs, their ability to appeal to this audience grows, which naturally should increase the awareness and support for the charity.

**Modifications**

In addition to implementations that would increase the awareness of the Okanagan Humane Society, there are several modifications to the current methods that could produce an increase in awareness.

* Increased use of Instagram
* Seasonal promotions

***Increased use of Instagram***

 Members of social media are no strangers to searching for pictures of cats and dogs. Videos of pets performing acts that entertain us, enamour us or have us sympathizing with an emotional story, fill social media feeds daily. The potential growth in awareness that is created for the Okanagan Humane Society by posting more pictures may be the most simple implementation in the report. Furthermore, regularly scheduled posts on both Instagram and Facebook with regards to adoptable animals in OHS’ care, provides opportunities beyond growth. These opportunities include demonstrations on specific techniques to caring for animals with disease or injury, as well as fulfilling the desire that has been expressed for updates on the animals.

***Seasonal Promotions***

 Advertising to the season is far from a discovery. In fact, the Okanagan Humane Society has participated in seasonal promotions for their adoptable cats in the past when they advertised their “Lover Boys” for February, and more specifically, Valentine's Day. An increase in seasonal promotions such as this, is a fun, engaging way to attract the attention to adoptable cats, and more specifically, those that may be struggling to find their forever home. Ideas along the lines of the 12 cats of Christmas or the freaky felines of Halloween are festive ideas that get adopters both into a holiday mood and help find their companion.

**Conclusion**

**Summary and Recommendations**

 In summary, the Okanagan Humane is without question trending upwards in their awareness-raising throughout the Okanagan region. Ms. Runnalls is a strong, passionate leader who has the interest of the animals as her number one priority. As time progresses, the main focuses of the society for raising awareness should involve education programs, and increasing focus on helping dogs. It is recommended that in the short term, upgrades are needed for social media pages. For the long term, developing education styles that are simple, cost-effective, and reach a greater population will be helpful for raising awareness. Greater focus on dogs will create a natural increase of interest by a more broad audience over time.

**Citations**

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