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ADOPTION IS THE NEW BLACK

The Evolution of the Adoption Movement

By Kyra Kirkwood



In 1999, Barbra Marangell, a marketing manager in Orange, Calif., adopted Hunter, a Pointer mix, and in 2001, adopted Willow, an Australian Cattle Dog and Golden Retriever mix, from her local animal shelter. Like most people who were choosing to adopt a dog, she had no idea she was part of an important growing movement. While adoption seems like a common choice among modern dog guardians, it's easy to forget that it was an unlikely decision for many not too long ago.

We are starting to see a change in the concept of animal adoption. So many people are now aware of the plight of homeless animals. Part of it may have to do with the recent shift we are seeing in philanthropy and social causes. More people are choosing to live their lives with greater awareness for the impact they have on our planet. From purchasing organic food and ecologically friendly products to forgoing plastic bags at the grocery store, attempts to be environmentally friendly are everywhere. It seems this movement of recycling is now translating to the animal world.

"People go out of their way to recycle a can. Why wouldn't you go to recycle a life out of a shelter?" said Abbie Moore, executive director of Adopt-a-Pet.com.

As a result, society's new trend has leaned toward adopting, or "recycling," dogs from shelters and rescues instead of buying them from pet stores or the Internet. The public is becoming aware that adopting a dog is not just good for the dog, but good for the community and the planet.

When something becomes trendy in our culture, it is often called "the new black," a catchphrase used to indicate the sudden popularity of an idea as the new "in" thing. So is adoption the new black? We hope so. But unlike many other fads and trends, this new perception on adoption is a good thing and what we believe is here to stay.

CHANGING ATTITUDES

Historically, dogs were seen more as working animals, not parts of the family. They lived outside, had jobs to do, and were not truly regarded as beloved companions. Perceptions have since shifted dramatically.

"The less you see your dog as a possession and think of it as a family member, the more unacceptable it becomes to let dogs die in shelters," said Moore. "We're seeing them as the living beings they are. Their position in our lives has really been elevated."

Not too long ago, dogs were viewed as status symbols. The more money the dog cost, the higher status the owner gained when mentioning the hefty price and prestigious pedigree. Those who adopted dogs from shelters were often seen as financially and socially underprivileged.

Times have changed. And the roles have switched.

In many circumstances, those buying dogs today often feel the need to defend why they "had to" purchase a dog instead of adopting. Our new Vice President Joe Biden recently bought a German Shepherd puppy and has taken some heat for his choice. Afterwards, Biden said that he will be getting a second dog, and this one will come from the pound.

In the past, adopters didn't really advertise the genesis of their new dog. Nowadays, adoptive parents shout it from the mountaintops, happily sharing their dogs' adoption stories.

"I feel pet adoption is on the road to being the same kind of thing as people [not] wearing fur," said Moore. "There's kind of this stony silence that falls [when you announce you bought a dog]. Buying a pet has become stigmatized. Even the word 'buy,' in certain circles, elicits gasps."

Even the language has changed. In 1999, the animal rights group In Defense of Animals started a campaign to change the legal terminology of various cities and states from pet owner to pet guardian. They say that this change would elevate pets from the status of property to that of companion. While this is a topic that is still debated for multiple reasons, the term guardian has become common usage. Users feel that the term guardian reflects the belief that pets are more than just personal property.



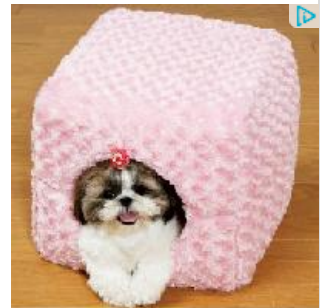
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LEARNING CURVE

The public's education level has skyrocketed. Not only are we more aware of the value dogs bring to our lives and families, but we also know more about their origins. In years past, pet stores selling puppies were the norm. (*How Much is That Doggie in the Window* was a hit song in the 1950s for a reason. But in going along with today's trend, singer Patti Page recently rewrote her famous tune to illuminate shelter dogs, not pet-store pups. The Humane Society of the United States has been given exclusive rights to launch the tune on their website, www.hsus.org.)

In the past, buying a dog from a pet store was as easy as a shopping trip to the mall to pick up new socks. Wannabe dog owners didn't know or even think to question where the dogs originated. If you did ask, you may have been told the pups came from a "farm" in the Midwest.

But now, many people know the truth. Organizations and national media reports alike have exposed the gritty reality behind where the pet stores get their puppies — puppy mills. These mass-market breeding facilities have been around for decades, generating an ongoing canine supply for pet stores nationwide through inhumane living conditions and improper breeding practices. Animal welfare advocates speculate that 99 percent of the puppies sold in stores come from puppy mills. Last year the *Oprah Winfrey Show* did an exposé on puppy mills, bringing the story to an international mainstream audience. People who never knew the realities of store-bought puppies now have their eyes opened.

National news networks have been regularly reporting on the puppy mill raids carried out by The Humane Society of the United States throughout the country. Through televised documentaries and increases in humane law enforcement across the country, puppy mills have been exposed. People unwilling to economically support such ventures have turned their backs on pet stores selling dogs and looked for other avenues to obtain their new puppies. Step in adoption.

FACT VS. FICTION

In order to make people aware that adoption can be a good option, challenges needed to be met. One of the biggest challenges was to clear up misconceptions about shelters and rescues and the quality and character of their inhabitants. These dogs were thought of as damaged dogs. Mean dogs. Biters. Ugly dogs. Someone else's problem. These stereotypes kept people out of shelters and kept the euthanasia at a high rate.

Now people are becoming more aware that this is a myth. Not just "mangy mutts" populate shelters and rescues. While the mixed breed is still prevalent, it's the public's perception of it that has changed. Once thought inferior to dogs of pedigree, the "mutts" are now the hot ticket. "It is so cool to adopt a mutt," said Moore. "You have a one-of-a-kind pet. It's almost designer, your own personal breed. People who blaze trails and set trends don't follow the path [and get look-alike dogs]."

Those who have a specific breed in mind are now learning that there are many options. The Humane Society of the United States estimate that purebreds make up 25 percent of the shelter population across the country. Thousands of rescues and single-breed rescue groups have purebred dogs, from Affenpinschers to Yorkshire Terriers.

Yet for people to see these dogs, they need to venture inside shelter doors. Shelters were once considered unpleasant places to be, to say the least. "Doggie Death Camps" was one moniker. People avoided them and they were not positive or even attractive parts of the community.

Now many shelters and rescues have become animal adoption "destinations." They have been remodeled to make them more animal-friendly and, as a result, more human-friendly. Updated centers have so much to offer now as far as education, seminars, adoptions, veterinary services and grooming. Paula Fasseas, founder and chairperson for the innovative PAWS Chicago no-kill shelter, proves that a bit of shine can make all the difference. Instituted 10 years ago in response to the high euthanasia rate at the local county shelter, PAWS Chicago fostered about 1,700 adoptions a year.

In 2007, they opened their new shelter with apartment-like suites filled with cozy beds, haute décor and top-quality airflow systems. A fireplace, music, friendly volunteer greeters and a coffee bar await the visitors upon entrance to the lobby. Gleaming wooden floors and art museum décor don't seem like the natural match with an animal shelter, but PAWS Chicago is changing that mentality. The privately funded shelter "is a very enjoyable experience," said Fasseas. Then she added with a laugh, "We're running a hotel, adoption center, hospital and clinic." Upon opening its new facility, the group witnessed a skyrocketing of adoption rates — more than 3,000 in just the first year at the new center.



In 2007, the San Diego Humane Society and SPCA in California received help from members of the American Society of Interior Designers (ASID) when they redesigned all 24 doggie apartments at the shelter to create themed and homey decorative "digs." One was refurbished to look like a lobby of an imaginary pet magazine, and another featured a rural country theme and mural.

While not all shelters and rescues have the funding to make such dramatic changes, it is the direction that they hope to move in. Making them more inviting to the public with even just small changes, such as adding donated blankets and beds to make the dogs more comfortable, encourages more traffic and that means more adoptions.

THE BUSINESS OF SAVING LIVES

Shelters and rescues are learning to have a business mentality now. "The shelters that are growing and are successful are those that are being run like businesses," said John Van Zante, spokesperson for the Helen Woodward Animal Center in Rancho Santa Fe, Calif. "This means that they provide good customer service, product selection and follow-up after the adoption. They have to market the pets and services." Adoption facilitators at PAWS Chicago assist would-be guardians in finding the perfect match for their families and a happy ending for all.

This type of personal customer service, at PAWS Chicago and elsewhere, is a win-win for all parties involved. Having educated shelter or rescue volunteers working with families to find just the right dog for their activity levels and lifestyles is what helps make adoption such a hot, successful trend nowadays. When things work, people talk about them. When

they talk about them in a positive way, trends are born. And in this case, more adoptions happen.

The new age of computers and online marketing has made a big difference. Shelters and rescues across the country are jumping on 21st century technology. They boast interactive, photo-filled websites, "advertising" their wares either on their own website or the growing online adoption websites. "Getting orphan dogs out into cyberspace is incredibly helpful for adoption rates," said Moore of Adopt-a-Pet.com, a nonprofit that helps advertise homeless pets to adopters for free. These websites allow potential dog owners to browse from the comfort of their own offices or family rooms and view available dogs. This makes adoption easier and technologically current.

Many websites also list a complete description of the dog including its quirks and medical needs. Volunteers are sometimes able to spend time with the dogs and learn their individual characteristics. Listing such observations on the website helps the dogs get noticed and into the right homes faster, say adoption advocates. People who may not have latched on to a dog's look will fall head-over-heels in love after reading the dog's tale of being abandoned in a vacant lot in the dead of winter, or how he became an orphan after his owner died.

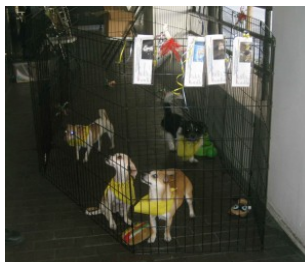
Nowadays, people are savvy Internet shoppers. They want to read all about the product first before making a commitment. Shelters and rescues are picking up on that and making online browsing more user-friendly.

RETAILERS JOIN THE PACK

Even pet stores and pet boutiques are going with the trend. Many now hold adoption events at their stores instead of selling puppies. Petco and PetSmart have traditionally done this, and other smaller boutique stores are following along. Take Janene Zakrajsek, owner of Pussy & Pooch Pethouse and Pawbar in downtown Los Angeles. She never once considered selling dogs; instead, she hosts adoption events at her hip, edgy store and has received rave reviews because of it.

"The adoptions we regularly hold in the store are a fitting way to connect with the community and promote the idea of socially responsible pet ownership through adoption," said Zakrajsek. "In-store adoptions help to make the adoption process more accessible and convenient for the potential adopters."

Some pet stores, sensing the trend, have disbanded their puppy sales completely and turned toward adoption. The OrangeBone (formerly The Puppy Store) on trendy Melrose Ave. is one such venue. With help from the nonprofit Last Chance for Animals, they have recently stopped selling puppies and started adopting out dogs from local L.A. Animal Care Centers. But other pet stores that continue to sell puppies are often targeted by animal activists and protestors. Take, for example, the Beverly Hills-based Pet Love. It is one of the pet stores that closed in part to pressure brought on it through the Best Friends' "Puppy-Store-Free L.A." campaign, aimed at stopping the sale of puppy-mill dogs in the Los Angeles area.



Even pet product manufacturers are seeing adoption as the wave of the future. Many are giving back to the animal welfare community, aligning themselves with shelters, rescues and other nonprofits by donating part of their profits to help these organizations.

Companies that have nothing to do with traditional pet products are even stepping into the adoption limelight. Take Carivintás Winery. This company launched the Victory Dogs Wine Collection with 22 of Michael Vick's former dogs on the labels. In two months time, more than \$170,000 worth of Victory Dog wine and other Carivintás Winery merchandise were purchased from their website. A portion of the sales were donated to the Best Friends Animal Society, the nonprofit sanctuary that is caring for Vick's former dogs, to help other homeless and hurt animals. These companies see the value in marketing their philanthropic ventures and bringing in some loyal dog-loving customers who want to see their purchases make a direct difference for animals.

STAR POWER

No one can deny the power of the celebrity factor behind a trend. We live in a culture that follows celebrities' daily moves, charting their fashions and food habits in an attempt to emulate a sliver of that glamorous lifestyle. When A-list celebs like Diane Keaton, Sandra Bullock, Jake Gyllenhaal and Charlize Theron openly celebrate their shelter mutts, it's hard not to take note.

Many celebrities use their fame to shine a spotlight on specific animal welfare organizations. Rachael Ray launched a new line of pet food called Rachael Ray's Nutrish for Pets and donates all her proceeds to animal welfare. Glenn Close launched FetchDog.com, an online retailer of dog supplies. A portion of the proceeds from the sales of the products goes to charities. Other stars like Linda Blair and Shannon Elizabeth took adoption to a new level and created their own rescue organizations dedicated to saving lives.

Even movies are beginning to tout the benefits of adoption. In the past, movies that had a purebred dog as the star launched wildfires in the popularity of certain types of dogs including Dalmatians, Saint Bernards and Chihuahuas. People saw the dogs on film, fell in love with the characters, and rushed out to purchase a real-life version wherever they could find one. Unfortunately, this led to rampant overproduction of the breeds, and a slew of unwanted dogs coming in to shelters and rescues a few months later when the excitement wore off.

But Hollywood is slowly catching on to the importance of promoting adoption as a theme for a movie. In Disney's animated movie *Bolt*, the storyline includes a canine superstar who was adopted from an animal shelter by his on-screen costar. Paramount Pictures' *Hotel for Dogs* is all about adoption and dog rescue. Even publicity efforts behind *Beverly Hills Chihuahua* focused on adoption. One of the stars was a shelter rescue, and at the premier, L.A. Animal Services had a display table with photos of adoptable pets and collateral materials encouraging adoption from animal care centers.

And now the ultimate example of a celebrity bringing awareness to adoption is President Barack Obama's decision to get a dog for his daughters. His intention to adopt a "mutt like me" and christen it the official White House pet has garnered much media attention. At his first news conference as president-elect, he jokingly said that the topic of his daughters'



puppy-to-be garnered as much attention as anything else since Election Day.

CHANGE HAS COME

What is the result of this new trend? It is more public awareness, more public curiosity, more public support and interest in the shelter and rescue community, more foot traffic at the shelters and rescues, and more adoptions. Across the nation, puppy-selling pet stores are closing, puppy mills are being raided and shut down, and people are no longer willing to stand idle while homeless dogs die needlessly every day.

While all of this is good news, it is not lost on all of us that there is still a long way to go. Millions of animals are still euthanized in shelters every year due to overcrowding and the lack of homes. And now the onslaught of the current financial crisis and foreclosures have caused shelters nationwide to be flooded with dogs unable to be kept by their economically devastated owners; the need for adoption is greater now than ever before.

Thanks to the efforts made by the rescue and shelter communities, and the shifting of public attitudes, more and more people are turning to adoption as their first choice. And just like Barbra Marangell never intended to follow a trend by adopting Hunter and Willow, adoption proponents hope this is not just a trend, but a new way of life.



Kyra Kirkwood is an Orange County, California-based freelance writer specializing in dog reporting. Visit her website at www.kyrakirkwood.com.

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