



Tony La Russa's Animal Rescue Foundation:

Free Adult Cats Promotion



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Animal Rescue Foundation: Free Adult Cats Promotion



Tony La Russa's Animal Rescue Foundation (ARF) has conducted several free adult cats promotions that have resulted in a dramatic increase in cat adoptions.

ARF leaders report no evidence that cats adopted during these promotions are valued any less than those adopted at other times of the year, when adoption fees are charged.

Stats

From the end of June through the end of July of 2006, the year before the first Free Cats promotion was put into effect, 90 cats and kittens were adopted from ARF.

During the same time in 2007, with the first promotion in effect, 192 cats and kittens were adopted.

The 2008 promotion resulted in 205 cat adoptions – a 127% increase overall.

Since the institution of Free Cat promotions, the average length of stay for cats has been cut in half, from 6.6 weeks to 3.3 weeks.

How Cool is That?

We're excited about the fact that Free Cats promotions have enabled ARF to increase the number of cats they can handle without increasing the size of the shelter.

Adopt or Adapt

A Free Cat promotion can be easily implemented and result in an immediate increase in adoptions. It's important, however, to maintain a thoughtful adoption process and to make it clear to potential adopters that you value every animal in your care and expect adopters to do the same.

Who They Are and What They Do

ARF is a privately funded no kill facility that takes in potentially adoptable cats and dogs who have run out of time and are about to be euthanized at seven public shelters throughout California. The animals are temperament tested, given medical care, spayed or neutered and then put up for adoption. In an effort to insure successful life-long relationships, ARF uses [ASPCA's Meet Your Match™ program](#) to match dogs and cats with a potential adopter's preferences.

According to ARF Executive Director Elena Bicker, ARF is, like most shelters, challenged to find homes for the large number of adult cats needing homes. "Everyone wants kittens," Bicker says, "even though a two year old cat has years of love to give."

In an effort to remove fees as an obstacle to getting adult cats out of the shelter and into good homes, ARF at first reduced the adoption fee for cats over six months of age to \$50 while leaving the kitten adoption fee at \$100. Then, after learning of Dr. Emily Weiss's 2006 study challenging the widely held theory that adopting out free cats devalues the animals in the eyes of adopters*, they decided to try a Free Adult Cats promotion.

In 2007, ARF held its first "Cat Independence Days" promotion as a pilot project. From the end of June to the end of July, all cats over six months of age were free. At the same time, adoption fees for kittens were raised to \$125. No changes were made in the Meet Your Match™ adoption process.

The "Cat Independence Days" promotion was widely publicized. When 102 more cats were adopted during the promotion than had gone home in the same period the previous year, ARF knew they had a hit on their hands. According to Bicker, the experience of saving so many more lives energized the entire organization. "Cat Independence Days" is now an annual event.

In 2008, ARF added a second highly publicized Free Cats promotion, the "Raider Nation Cats Celebration", sponsored by the Oakland Raiders. From August 8 to October 19th, silver and black cats were free. Once again, there were no other changes in the adoption process. The promotion will be repeated in 2009 and Bicker says she is seeking sponsors for additional free adult cats promotions.

When special promotions are not in effect, the adult cat fee remains at \$50. Bicker reports no difference in the quality of the Free Adult Cats adoptions and adoptions when fees are paid.

** In 2006, ASPCA Senior Director of Shelter Research and Development Emily Weiss, PH.D., CAAB, conducted a study comparing "the attachment levels of adopters of cats – fee based adoptions vs. free adoptions." The resulting data, not yet published but accepted for publication in the Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science, indicates that eliminating adoption fees does not devalue the animals in the eyes of the adopters and suggesting that free adult cat programs could "dramatically impact the lives of thousands of shelter cats who would otherwise reside in a shelter for months or be euthanized".*

Ingredients and Prep Work

Timeline

According to Bicker, it took about three months to lay the groundwork for the first "Cat Independence Days" promotion.

Costs

While ARF loses the income from adoption fees during the "Cat Independence Days" promotions, there are offsets, such as reduced cost for long-term care of cats remaining in the shelter.

In addition, some adopters of free cats make donations. ARF also receives income from their retail store where, according to Bicker, adopters may spend \$40 or more on supplies to care for a new pet.

The Oakland Raiders covered the adoption fees for cats adopted through the "Raider Nation Cat Celebration."

Step by Step

Step 1: Work out the details.

According to Bicker, the ARF core management team got together to determine what the promotion would look like (e.g., how they would define adult cat, how long the promotion would last) and to estimate the cost to the organization in terms of lost fees. Fees lost through the "Cat Independence Days" adoptions are simply not included in the annual budget. Sponsors are sought for other promotions, like the "Raider Nation Cat Celebration."

Step 2: Make sure stakeholders are on board.

When you're introducing a radical change like Free Adult Cats, communication is key. Bicker reports that all staff members were well informed and prepared to speak in one voice. In addition, since so much of the work at ARF is done by their team of over 500 volunteers, Bicker used regularly scheduled Town Hall volunteer meetings, the volunteer page on the web site, a central bulletin board at the shelter, and the volunteer newsletter to introduce and explain the concept. As a result, everyone was prepared to deal with any push back from the community.

Step 3: Get the word out.

According to Bicker, it's important to develop a clear, consistent promotional message and to have one person in charge of dealing with the media. ARF sent press releases and PSAs (public service announcements), put up fliers, posted information on their website, sent e-blasts, and placed signs on their property.

In addition, ARF entered a float in the Independence Day parade in nearby Danville, a town of 50,000 people. Volunteers walked the parade route and handed out "Cats Independence Days" fliers.

Step 4: Make it fun!

For the "Raider Nation Cat Celebration," ARF decorated the cat area with goal posts and artificial turf that had been painted with yard markers. Each cat was named for a Raider player, and promotional materials invited adopters to "add Cooper or Kwame to your own home team." Teens in the ARF volunteer program painted Raider helmets on the glass cat condos. In addition, fans visiting the shelter during the promotion could enter a drawing for Raiders "fantastic football gift".

Step 5: Communicate your success.

According to Bicker, it's the success of the program that inspires others to get involved. Bicker recommends circling back through everyone you initially contacted to report your success. All the ARF volunteer communication tools have been used for this purpose.

To re-enforce the importance of what they were doing, Bicker invited Dr. Weiss to attend a Town Meeting. According to Bicker, the volunteers were excited to hear about Weiss's research and to know that what they were doing had a scientific basis.

As soon as the first "Raider Nation Cat Celebration" ended, ARF sent the Raiders a complete report, letting them know how many animal lives they had affected. The Raiders immediately signed on for next year.

Results

The Numbers

From the end of June to the end of July, 2006, with no Free Cats promotion, ARF adopted out 90 cats and kittens. The following year, with the "Cat Independence Days" promotion in effect, they found homes for 192 cats and kittens. In 2008, with the promotion in effect, 205 cats and kittens were adopted. Twenty-seven cats were adopted during the first "Raider Nation Cats Celebration" in 2008.

Since the initiation of the Free Cats promotions, the average length of stay for cats has dropped from 6.6 weeks to 3.3 weeks

In addition, according to Bicker, the promotions have energized the staff and volunteers. "People get excited to see the older cats getting the spotlight," Bicker says. "More cats go out. More cats can come in. It's a success everyone can share in." And finally ARF has benefitted from increased traffic and new opportunities to tell the community about its lifesaving people and animal programs.

Critical Factors

- The fact that ARF was very well respected in the community. According to Bicker, "If you have a good brand — one that stands for quality and integrity — and you come up with something controversial, people will assume that you're making a good decision."
- Making it clear, by the way you house and care for your animals and by the carefulness of the adoption process, that the cats are highly valued. According to Bicker, ARF's facility and program agenda show how much they value their animals.
- Having staff and volunteers buy into and support the program.
- Assuring the staff and volunteers that there will be no change in the adoption process.
- Clearly identifying the cats included in the promotion.

Thinking Outside the Box

- Using the radical "Free Cats" term sparked conversation. During the first "Cat Independence Days" promotion, the response wasn't what Bicker had hoped for until ARF put up a huge sign at a busy corner by the shelter reading "Free Cats to Good Homes." The sign caused instant controversy. A reporter called asking if it was true that ARF was "giving away free cats." This created a lot of publicity and gave Bicker a chance to explain the reasoning behind promotion.
- Partnering with the Oakland Raiders has gotten ARF in front of their huge fan base, a whole new audience that might never have considered adopting a shelter animal.

Words of Wisdom

What Worked

- Being prepared for push-back from the community (even though, for ARF, the resistance never actually came). According to Bicker, volunteers, board and staff were all were comfortable with the concept and able to speak with one voice about what they were doing and why.
- Although the idea of free cats was seen as radical at the outset, the staff and volunteers quickly saw the increase in adoptions and low return rates and were able to embrace the program as a way to save more lives.

What Didn't

Bicker says her only regret is that she was unable to pay for ad space. To date, ARF has relied on PSAs, press releases, and other free media. Bicker hopes in the future to obtain sponsor money to pay for ads.

Next Steps

Bicker believes that an adoption fee should never be a barrier to adopting an animal, and she dreams of the day when all adult cat adoptions can be free. Even if that's the case, however, she will continue to do special promotions to call attention to the animals and reach new audiences.

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Elena Bicker, Executive Director



Baseball legend Tony La Russa and his wife Elaine founded the Animal Rescue Foundation (ARF) in 1991 to "create a world where every loving dog and cat has a home, where every lonely person has a companion animal, and where children learn to care."

Today ARF saves cats and dogs who have run out of time at public shelters throughout California. As space allows, ARF also accepts animals through its Good Samaritan and Foreclosure programs. In FY 2007, ARF found homes for 885 cats and 1,086 dogs.

In addition, ARF operates a low-cost spay/neuter clinic to reduce pet overpopulation and offers dog training and other resources to keep animals in homes. An array of "People Connect" programs brings the healing power of animals to abused children, the elderly, victims of violence, and others in need of "a dose of unconditional love."

Staff

71 (42 FTE)

Much of the work is done by over 500 active volunteers whose hours in 2007 were the equivalent of an additional 39 FTE staff members.

Operating Budget

\$4.3 million

Business Type

501.c.3 non-profit