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100%  
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# The Price is Right



**Aiming to increase revenue and highlight overlooked animals, many organizations raise adoption fees on their most popular pets**

BY KATINA ANTONIADES

In Boise, Idaho, the going rate for a shelter dog isn't what it used to be.

"If we get a basset hound puppy, it may start out at 350 bucks," says Jeff Rosenthal, a veterinarian and the executive director of the Idaho Humane Society.

That's more than five times what adopters were paying just a year ago for any animal they chose: \$65, which covered the costs of spay/neuter, vaccinations, a microchip, and a free checkup.

Today, the shelter's base fee of \$75 is so flexible that prices have shot up as high as \$450 for animals coveted by the public. Staff decide what the market will bear, decreasing the fee over time if the animal is not adopted.

Prices at a competing operation—the local pet store—inspired Rosenthal to make the change. "I was just absolutely flabbergasted at the prices for ... puppy mill puppies. People were routinely paying \$1,400 for something that isn't what it's supposed to be, and sick," says Rosenthal. "And so I thought, why can't the humane society benefit from that sort of mentality as long as it doesn't hurt the animals?"

In a profession where supply has long exceeded demand, people aren't used to asking that question. Overproduction—the economic parallel to pet over-

population—leads to lower prices and unsold goods, or in this case, unadopted animals. In the past, charging more for animals who could be obtained for free through newspaper ads seemed pointless. And elevating the price of one animal over another based simply on fads and public preferences seemed to cheapen the lives of those whose noses weren't the right color or whose ears didn't hang perfectly.

While animal shelters are clearly not profit-motivated, they must compete for dollars, attention, and customers in a society where consumer choice is considered a sacred right. In most communities—and through the dubious wonders of the Internet—people can choose to pay next to nothing to get a pet or to shell out thousands. Determining where your organization's animals fit into consumers' complex value calculations can lead to some tough questions: What sort of fees would encourage someone to adopt? What would turn them off? What kind of message are you sending to your community through the rates you set? While an adoption fee can't come close to earning back the resources your organization puts into each pet, how close can you get?

Rosenthal's decision to increase certain adoption fees was a long time in the making. In the past, he says,

The fee to adopt a Breed Musketeer is \$300, substantially more than the \$155 price for other puppies. "We've not had anyone even blink an eye at it," says Clark. "People still can't believe that they're getting a purebred puppy for 300 bucks." Many adopters are also grateful for the chance to adopt a homeless dog rather than buy one, she says.



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popular dogs would be snapped up quickly, leaving the others behind. "Your average family stopping by on a busy weekend would find really nothing in the shelter but large breed dogs, Labrador retrievers, pit bulls," he says. The adopters would "go home a little discouraged, maybe not finding what they wanted."

Now, if adopters are concerned about costs, they're more likely to look at mixed breeds or larger dogs, which Rosenthal points out will probably be healthier (and cheaper to care for) anyway. "A lot of the dogs that are the most coveted are actually the most expensive and ultimately the most troublesome to keep," he says. "Your Labrador-pointer-border collie mix [is] probably going to be a lot healthier and a lot more psychologically stable than a neurotic dachshund."

### More Funds for the Less Adoptable

In spite of Rosenthal's pragmatic arguments, some staff and volunteers were initially worried that adopters wouldn't pay the higher fees and that purebreds would be the worse for it. But most have now changed their minds. It doesn't hurt that the extra revenue from pricier adoptions has gone toward a new grooming room, an improved "get acquainted" yard, and a fund for pre-adoption medical care. Under the new fee structure, the shelter raised an additional \$80,000 in revenue from one year to the next, even though the number of adoptions remained steady.

To explain the change to the public, Rosenthal made a poster for the shelter detailing why the new fees were instituted and how the organization would use the extra money. He decided against contacting local media. "I want to be transparent, but I don't necessarily want to attract five letters to the editor or something like that," he says. "And also, I don't know how much of a good story it is to say, 'Oh yeah, by the way, dogs are now a lot more expensive at the humane society!'"

A few members of the public have complained about the new fees, but the response has generally been positive. Rosenthal compares the reactions to people's feelings about veterinary care costs: "A lot of folks, if you don't draw attention to money, are actually very happy: 'Oh gosh, it's only that much? That's great.' But if they hear that it's been increased, then they're cranky."

Even when charging a few hundred dollars for a coveted breed, the organization doesn't make a profit. "To a large degree, these fees are donations to the humane society," says Rosenthal, "because we don't even get close to recouping the expenses of running this organization through adoption fees."

Edging toward market-value prices hasn't overflowed the coffers of the Humane League of Lancaster County either, but it has helped the less glamorous ani-



mals, says Meghan Gallagher Clark, director of community outreach for the Pennsylvania shelter. By charging higher fees for popular pets, the Humane League makes enough money to lend “marketing help” to the pit bulls and big black dogs who could use a boost from media coverage, extra grooming, or medical care.

Staff members don’t follow explicit guidelines regarding which dogs to include in the shelter’s “Breed Musketeer” program, but animals labeled with the nickname are usually the healthy, purebred puppies with a crowd of potential adopters surrounding them. “It’s pretty easy to tell when one’s gotten here because you start getting a lot of noise,” says Clark. “Everybody’s oohing and aahing over the puppy fuzziness that just came in.”

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### The Value Judgment

During the first several months of the program, staff chose about four puppies to be Breed Musketeers. “We get a fair number of desirable purebred, expensive dogs,” says Clark, whose shelter is located in the heart of puppy mill country. “If a store knew that they had a product that went like that—that people were fighting over—they would do the same thing [by raising prices]. And we’re in the business of saving animals’ lives, so if we have the opportunity to raise any more money ... then I think we’re obligated to do that.”

Not everyone agrees. When the Gulf Coast Humane Society in Corpus Christi, Texas, started charging more for purebreds than for mixed breeds, employee Cody Rice approached the board president and shelter director to register her objections.

“My personal opinion is that it’s very unethical to do,” says Rice, the shelter’s humane educator and director of volunteer services. “Because ... that’s saying that, okay, a boxer’s better than a Lab mix. And they’re all homeless, they’re all lives living in a shelter, and they all deserve good homes regardless of what breed they are.”

Rice was also concerned about the ramifications of definitively identifying a dog without papers as a “purebred,” wondering what would happen if the adopter later heard from a vet that the animal was really a mixed breed. Her shelter eventually dropped the tiered adoption fee system.

Though her staff hasn’t always agreed with her on the issue, Donna Rex of PAWS in Columbus, Ohio, rejects the notion that a higher adoption fee for a certain

Are you looking for new retail strategies to promote homeless animals in your community? Have you often wondered whether discount promotions are effective? Do you worry about what kind of messages your adoption fees are sending? Don’t miss the next issue of *Animal Sheltering*, which will explore how different organizations have used marketing ploys to attract more adopters. We’ll also feature tips from a marketing professor who has studied the effectiveness of different pricing strategies in the retail world.

type of animal devalues others. And she made her staff into believers, too, after explaining to them that higher fees for puppies and small dogs would translate to additional resources for other animals. “They were easily convinced,” says Rex. “I think I was more concerned than I needed to be.”

Columbus had recently become home to a national pet store chain when Rex was making her decision. The store was selling puppies and kittens for \$1,500 or higher and even allowed customers to pay in installments. After polling a shelter management listserv and involving staff in the decision, Rex raised fees to “add value to our adoptions,” she says.

Before PAWS made the switch in February, the adoption fee for dogs was \$125 (with a discount rate of \$75 for senior adopters). Age is now a deciding factor; fees for puppies and kittens are \$185 and \$115, respectively. Adopters of dogs under 25 pounds also pay \$185. PAWS asks for \$145 for other dogs 5 months to 6 years, while dogs 7 years and older are \$95—a fee shared by cats older than 6 months. People taking home pairs of dogs or cats can save \$50 or \$25.

At the time of the fee change, the organization was not yet adopting out cats, but in late March, PAWS began off-site cat adoptions at a pet supply store. Rex set adoption fees for cats lower than those for dogs because the organization anticipated lower care costs.

Some staff were concerned that potential adopters would balk at the increased fees, but their worries seem to be unfounded. “We’ve not had one challenge on it,” says Rex. In fact, adoptions rose by about 6 percent over the same three-month period last year, and revenue increased by 16 percent. **AS**