How to Approach and Talk to People

“We can never judge the lives of others, because each person knows only their own pain and renunciation. It’s one thing to feel that you are on the right path, but it’s another to think that yours is the only path.” —Paulo Coelho
One of the most important keys to successful outreach is using the right approach to communicate with people. It is imperative your team set aside any negative assumptions about owners of unaltered pets or those whose pets are living in less than ideal conditions. If you are judgmental and condescending to owners, you’ll lose their trust and will likely miss an opportunity to connect.

Use a more friendly and open approach to see that most people truly care about their pets and want to make healthy decisions for them. The common assumption that owners of unaltered pets or those whose pets are living in less than ideal conditions are irresponsible or uncaring is generally inaccurate.

It is best to walk, rather than drive, while doing outreach to fully engage people. When promoting an event and possibly working in a commercial area, you should ask local businesses to hang flyers in their windows or leave information at the check-out counter. Be sure to engage everyone in the community. Start by simply making eye contact, smiling, and saying hello.

If your entire team is doing outreach on the same day, it is best to be in smaller groups of two to three people—too large of a group can be overwhelming. Smaller groups will help use your time efficiently by reaching more people and pets within the allotted time frame.

Every person engaged should receive something. It may just be your business card with a phone number or a spay/neuter voucher, but you should have on hand items such as, leashes, collars, treats, flea/tick medications, etc. After the first day of outreach, return to the same location within a few days. When you return for the second or third time, people will likely recognize you and become increasingly more willing to open up. It might take multiple visits before many people engage or say “yes” to spay/neuter for their pet.

As reviewed in Chapter 6: Coalition Building, the person or team responsible for doing outreach needs to possess unique skills to succeed. This job is not for everyone. Once people understand the task, some will self-identify as not being a good fit for the job, and that's okay. Knowing your team’s strengths and identifying the right fit for outreach will yield the best results for the animals.

A condescending attitude or fearfulness will often be obvious to those who are accustomed to these attitudes from others. Choosing the right person or team to meet and talk to people is key, and it can mean the difference between getting significant numbers of animals spayed/neutered versus turning people off and missing opportunities to build wonderful, lasting relationships. The designated outreach person or team should thoroughly enjoy meeting new people, regardless of race, gender, religion, socioeconomic background, interests, or personality. They should be non-judgmental, respectful, relaxed, genuine in their interactions, and good listeners.
Once you’ve identified your team, make sure they understand many of the people they’ll meet could be isolated from mainstream messaging due to their situations. In many cases, they rarely—if ever—receive positive wellness messages for themselves or their animals. They most likely have little familiarity with spay/neuter. Any familiarity is often based on misconceptions and fear that the surgery will negatively affect their pet. Many pet owners will have minimal, if any, awareness of existing resources to help them with their animals and will not know how to seek out these resources.

Here are some tips for the person or team who will be doing outreach:

• Understand your audience. Take time to tune into the mood of the person you are approaching. Ask a variety of questions in an interested—not interrogative—manner and listen more than you talk. Be warm, respectful, and relaxed.

• Smile naturally. Do not feel compelled to rush the conversation. Keep in mind that most people are uncomfortable with silence and will naturally talk to avoid it, so if you are quiet and listen, people will often reveal useful information about themselves and their animals.

• Be careful selecting your words to avoid belittling or offending someone. Telling someone that caring for their pet differently will demonstrate that they are a “responsible” owner can imply they are not currently. For example, telling an owner of an unaltered pet that spaying a cat will make him or her a “responsible” owner implies that the person is acting “irresponsibly” now. This will not be well received. It’s a mistake to underestimate the intelligence of your audience. Do not assume that less affluent people are less sensitive to nuanced verbal communications—the opposite is often true.

• Be cautious about saying you’ll help “educate” the people you meet, as this can be offensive. The better way to phrase your goal is to say that you’re “sharing” helpful information. The truth is, your relationship will involve information-sharing on both sides. It is beneficial to everyone to keep the conversation going. Avoid letting a word or two spoil the opportunity to connect with someone by shutting them down, or worse, turning them off. Keep in mind that certain words come off as condescending and disrespectful. Eliminate the words “responsible,” “irresponsible,” and “educate” from your vocabulary. You’ll get a more positive response and begin to see how truly patronizing and hurtful those words can be. In the event you say something causing offense, be sure to make eye contact, apologize, and rephrase using a better word. Keep in mind the person you are speaking to has probably made the same mistake at some point and will likely not take offense or remain offended if your apology is sincere.

• Be aware of the suggestions you make and how they may be taken. For example, do not automatically assume someone needs help feeding their pet; that can be insulting and condescending. Instead of saying, “I have food I can give you,” engage in a conversation with the person and find out the circumstances and if they do need or want this sort of assistance.

A common mistake in community outreach is deciding that a dog or cat would be better off in a new home and “rescuing” or re-homing that pet. This is not only ineffective but also damaging to your reputation. Taking a dog or cat from its owner will almost invariably result in the owner simply getting another dog or cat—one that he or she will treat exactly the same way. The more effective strategy is to work with the person to improve the situation. Taking a dog or cat also assumes there is another home to place it in. We know there simply are not enough homes for every dog or cat who needs one. The reality is that shelters
as well as rescue and foster programs are full. Working with a pet’s current home is usually the best option.

Taking someone’s pet also presumes that the owner doesn’t care about his or her dog or cat; however, this is not true. Many people are simply doing the only thing they know to do or the only thing they can afford. While taking a dog or cat can look like an easy fix, it really means that you have given up on the hard work of relationship building and information sharing.

Finally, taking people’s pets also create barriers that prevent from helping many other pets. Your reputation is important and by taking people’s pets, the network of trust and the reputation you build weakens quickly. We do not live in a perfect world, and things do not work out every time, but the strategies using non-judgment and information sharing allow you to make lasting and positive changes in the lives of many animals.

View the people you reach out to and meet as clients, and focus on providing them with good customer service. This will help build a relationship, greater acceptance of your services, and more people and pets being served. A long-term focus is the way to create sustainable, systemic change. Achieving this goal improves the life of the current pet, and potentially the lives of all of the future pets that person might have and those of their neighbors, friends, and children.

See Attached Tip Sheets

Your team can provide tip sheets to people out in the community. These sheets can help pet owners who just need a few simple tips to improve their situation.

- Housebreaking Your Dog [Tip Sheet]
- Leash Walking [Tip Sheet]
- Bringing an Outside Dog In [Tip Sheet]
- Cat Scratching Post [Tip Sheet]

For as many pets and pet owners there are in the community, there are an equal number of unique situations and relationships. However, your team will come across some common scenarios, for which we have provided some possible responses. Tailor these responses and suggestions to the specific situation. Make sure that your outreach team spends time listening and identifying key pieces of information that can be helpful when addressing the case at hand. Sometimes, the first bit of information sharing is effective, while other times a series of responses might result in little, if any, immediate change. Always take the opportunity to provide the pet owner with information about the benefits of the topic at hand, whether for spay/neuter or other general wellness practices, and provide contact information so they can easily follow up with questions, concerns, or request for assistance. Even if the person seems unwilling to make changes or accept services, leave the
conversation on a positive note. It is more likely they will think about the information provided and pass along to others. Your team will be in the community often, and have many opportunities to engage people, so services don’t have to be accepted on the first visit and the sense of urgency is eliminated.

As animal advocates, we want to see pets living indoors, sleeping in warm beds, and having what we think is the perfect life. But in our society—for reasons of culture, class, and other influences—there are different types of people with different perspectives and different lifestyles. As long as those differences exist, there will be different lifestyles for pets. When you meet someone with a dog or cat and think the pet’s life could be better, consider for a moment the person’s life and experiences, access to information, financial means, and access to resources.

Consider what approach is likely to be effective, remembering your goal is not only to provide relief in the moment, but to create long lasting change. Preaching and telling people what to do is often not well received. People respond more positively to shared information, experiences of others, and considerate suggestions or solutions. When engaging people on any topic regarding their pets, it is most effective to ease into the conversation, rather than meeting them and immediately starting to talk about what you want them to change. Get to know them, ask them questions, and listen. Ask to meet their pets and learn about their lives, challenges, and concerns. Chapter 8 includes extensive information on how to talk to people about spay/neuter, but the following sections address other common situations you’ll encounter, suggestions on how to handle them, and assumptions and myths many of us share, but should eliminate.

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**Chained Dogs**

In certain areas of the country, chaining dogs is more prevalent than in others. In most situations, people chain their dogs because they do not have the financial means to build a fence. They rent housing and are not allowed to bring the dog indoors, or because that is what they have always seen and known. In some cases, people chain their dogs for perceived protection. Sometimes the best you can do in this situation is to make it better—spay/neuter the dog, provide a longer tether or run and proper collar, and talk with the owner about walking the dog and providing increased interaction. If you can offer a free crate, you could talk about bringing the dog inside, maybe just at night to start. If you have access, find information on how to build a fence. The key is that you can’t simply tell someone, “Don’t chain your dog,” you have to provide an alternative. It may take multiple visits and time to get to a point where you can comfortably and respectfully talk to someone about not chaining.

**How to Build a Fence**
Skinny Animals

There are many reasons that animals are skinny, but very rarely is it because someone is intentionally trying to starve his or her pet. In speaking with people about their circumstances, most often you find there is a sad, but real, reason for an animal’s thinness. For example, the owner does not know the correct amount to feed; is feeding but the pet is not putting on weight (which could indicate a medical issue); or simply does not have the financial means to remedy the weight issue. There are many pets who eat what their owners eat, and survive on human leftovers. There are some who do not eat often enough, in which case people simply need to know that pets should eat at least twice a day.

Dogs often have parasites and need to be dewormed. Be aware that most over-the-counter dewormers do not kill all types of worms. Instead, you'll often need to use a prescription strength dewormer, such as, Drontal or Strongid. People sometimes purchase dewormer at a big box retailer or pet supply store thinking they are treating everything, but they're not actually killing the most dangerous parasites. As with chaining, have a solution to offer the owner. The solution must be feasible and work in the long-term for the pet owner.
Pregnant Animals

Advocates often feel a sense of urgency with pregnant animals because they know that it’s not ideal to bring more puppies or kittens into the world when there are already so many animals waiting for homes. When you speak to someone about a pregnant dog or cat, be sure to explain that the animal can be spayed, which will terminate the pregnancy (after a veterinary exam to determine whether it’s safe, which in most cases it is). This conversation can be more delicate because owners might not understand the procedure, or they might think that the unborn puppies or kittens will suffer. You’ll need to explain these things, elaborating that the animals are more likely to suffer or die after being born, whether through disease, homelessness, or potential euthanasia. For dogs, there’s the added worry of labor complications if the father is not known, because he could be a larger size dog.

Some people will be opposed to their pets being spayed while pregnant and will want the puppies or kittens to be born. In this case, remain positive and offer the spay again after the mother is done nursing. Stay in touch with the owner so you can keep the dialogue going as the owner faces the challenges of caring for a mother and babies and finding good homes for them. Clearly you should not say, “I told you so,” but by staying in touch, you have the chance to talk about keeping the mother healthy while she’s nursing, keeping all of the puppies and kittens alive, feeding them as they grow, cleaning up fecal matter, vaccinating, deworming, searching for homes, etc. Breeding is always much easier and more fun in theory than in practice, so make the best out of the situation and work to be able to spay the mother at a later date, preventing further litters. In some cases, cats can be spayed while nursing without affecting the ability to nurse, so check with your local spay/neuter provider on this option.

Heartworms

Heartworm prevention is something most of your clients will know nothing about and generally will not understand. There is often confusion about the various types of worms and the difference between intestinal worms and heartworms. Many people think that the dewormer they purchase at the store kills everything. It’s important to share information on what heartworms are, how to prevent them, and the consequences if they’re not treated. Understand many people will not be able to afford the monthly prevention or simply will not understand the need for it, even after you explain it. Do not get frustrated or upset. Instead, keep in mind that when someone lacks familiarity with a topic, or when potential consequences seem to be a problem for much later in the future, it is human nature to put off addressing it. In your target communities, it will probably take time to build up an understanding of the disease and the need for prevention. People often fail to prevent certain human diseases (or are unfamiliar with them), so it shouldn’t be a surprise that this happens with pets’ diseases as well.

One of the best things you can do is to provide information about the signs and symptoms of heartworm disease in its latter stages and what to look for in older dogs. Sometimes the best you can do is offer assistance to a dog in the early stages of heart failure and provide euthanasia at an appropriate time so the dog doesn’t suffer. You may be surprised when you provide the pet a dignified death, you bond with the person involved since they appreciate your compassion and care.
Fleas and Ticks

Other common issues are fleas, ticks, and related skin irritation. Just as with heartworm disease above, parasite prevention is not commonly understood in many communities. No one wants their pet to be uncomfortable or covered in fleas and ticks. In fact, you’ll likely come across home remedies people use to kill or try to kill the insects. The best thing you can do is to share information and, if possible, provide free medication. Again, preventative treatments are expensive and not always affordable, so providing a solution is the best way to help the pet. If the pet has secondary issues like sores, rashes, etc., address the underlying issue first and then discuss how to clean wounds, hotspots, etc.

Lack of Adequate Food or Water

The communities served do not usually receive messaging on any topic, including basic pet care and wellness. When you see a pet who isn’t fed regularly or doesn’t have fresh water, the best thing to do is get to know the person, his or her situation and possible daily struggles, and then slowly introduce information in a respectful manner. Avoid making a pet owner feel judged or talked down to; when this happens, people shut down, a wall goes up, and the ability to connect and ultimately share needed information is lost. No one likes to be told that they’re bad or doing something wrong.

Instead, find positive ways to communicate information and ask permission to share experiences. For example, when meeting a dog who doesn’t appear to have any water on a hot day, you might speak with the owner and discover that the dog keeps knocking over the bowl. In this case, provide them with a larger bucket or show them how to bury a bucket that can’t be spilled as easily. The person might not have an outside faucet and has trouble carrying large containers of water outside. In this case, help to find a more convenient option. Regardless of the reason, always ask whether they need help to provide water instead of making assumptions and bypassing the owner to give the dog water. That type of action is insulting to the owner and hinders your ability to form a relationship. Remember that the goal is not only to provide temporary relief, but to make long-term changes.

Suspected Abuse

One of the most difficult situations to encounter is one where you are not sure if an animal is being actively abused (as opposed to just not receiving the best care). The best thing is not to assume the worst, jump to conclusions, or react emotionally. Many people interact with their pet in the same way they interact with other people and the way other people interact with them. Addressing a behavior with physical correction might be viewed as completely normal. It can take time to work through these behaviors because you are not simply addressing the human-animal relationship, but someone’s entire view on conflict resolution. Automatically deciding that the best response is a punitive or legal measure will not necessarily result in real change. More times than not, enforcement agencies are limited by laws and
ordinances in what they can do and by getting them involved, you’ll lose the chance to get to the heart of the matter and possibly change someone’s view and future actions.

Most people will get another pet, without having changed their mind on behavior or care. If an animal has wounds or scars, it’s likely that the cause is not the worst-case scenario that pops into your head. Outdoor animals get into altercations with other animals more than people realize, and various accidents happen almost daily. The best thing to do is get to know people and their situations, understand their life circumstances, and listen to what they have to say. If real abuse is happening, report the abuse to the appropriate law enforcement agency. But know that with proper outreach, real understanding, patience, and workable solutions, the occurrence of real abuse is very rare, and when encountered, it can be prevented from occurring again.

**Behavior and Handling**

One of the most personal things to address is the way pet owners correct or train their pets. Using negative reinforcement or physical intimidation can be upsetting, but remind yourself of the end result to achieve. By creating a more positive relationship and sharing information on a new way to interact, you can create lasting change. Aversive training techniques have been used for many years in many forums and are therefore widely accepted. Yet the more people learn about positive reinforcement, the more it is becoming the norm. Not only is positive reinforcement more effective in changing the dog’s behavior, but it helps to elevate the bond between owner and pet.

The best way to achieve this is through constructive and encouraging conversation, not berating or criticizing the person, especially in a public forum. It is important to put your personal feelings aside. The pet owner is frustrated and likely using all the tools he or she knows to try and control his or her pet.

This is a great opportunity to show the pet owner a positive way to communicate with his or her dog. When you model positive training techniques, the pet owner can see how well it works and will be likely to use these training methods in the future. When training is offered without judgment, in a positive manner, it will be received more readily.

> Volunteer veterinarian sharing tips on how to improve a dog’s social skills
Outreach Conversation Reminders

When approaching people in your neighborhoods of focus, there are a few key points to remember:

• Smile naturally
• Be relaxed; do not rush conversation
• Listen carefully and sincerely
• Start the conversation by saying “hi” and introducing yourself
• Share in the very beginning that you have a free or low-cost program so the person is aware you are not asking for or trying to sell something.

You must be aware of, and careful about, the language you use. Focus on the positive and express a desire for commonality and a mutually respectful conversation. For example:

• “I’m here to share information on my program.”
• “I know you love your pet, that’s very clear. So here are services I have to offer.”
• “Would you like to know about options for…?”
• “May I say ‘hi’ to your dog/cat? He/she is beautiful.”

Certain terms and language can be offensive—think about the perception from the other side of the conversation. So terms to avoid are:

“Educate” (or “teach”) as in “I’m out in the community today educating people on how to better care for their pets.”

“Educating” someone automatically creates a relationship where one person is the teacher and one is the student. Responses are most positive, and you’ll be most successful, when there is an equal sharing of information and where each person can learn from the other.

[alternative]: “I am out in the community today sharing information about pet wellness.”
[alternative]: “I have a tip sheet on how to train your dog to leash walk, I’ll leave one with you in case you are interested.”
“Responsible” as in “A responsible pet owner spays or neuters his or her pet” or “It is important to teach responsible pet ownership.”

Calling a specific behavior “responsible” when the person doesn’t do that action implies that the person is behaving irresponsibly. In this situation, the person might feel judged or become defensive, preventing you from effectively communicating.

[alternative]: “The best way you can ensure your pet is as healthy and safe as possible is to spay/neuter.”

[alternative]: “It is important to share information with people on how to make healthy decisions for their pets.”

“At-risk” as in “The community you are serving is at-risk” or “Your dog training classes serve at-risk pets or pet owners.”

“At-risk” can be used when you’re speaking about a specific, qualified situation, but avoid using it to make generalizations about an area, group of people, etc. without an explanation.

[alternative]: “A chained, unaltered female dog is at risk of becoming pregnant and contributing to the overpopulation problem.”

Research and Ask

Research and ask about what terms are appropriate to use when describing a certain group of people in regards to race, ethnicity, or culture. It is always better to use the term with which people identify themselves instead of guessing or assuming. Often, you’ll only know by asking, and people will appreciate your desire to know and learn from them.

[alternative]: “The best way you can ensure your pet is as healthy and safe as possible is to spay/neuter.”
In your target communities, many people will probably have pit bull type dogs as pets. You might be tempted to offer events and services specific to these dogs. Perhaps counter-intuitively, a comprehensive approach opens your program to the entire community, and will likely provide services to more pit bull type dogs than if you targeted these dogs exclusively. Having a “breed-specific” focus not only excludes a significant number of other pets and people, but it also results in serving fewer pit bull type dogs. Many pit bull type dog owners have some distrust or negative feelings when they’re targeted for exclusive services. Singling out these dogs, by animal welfare advocates, the general public, and the press, leads to negative results. An open program is inclusive and overall more welcoming.

There is a wide range of pets in the community; avoid excluding anyone. When poodles, cats, labs, pit bull type dogs, etc. are all together, a great sense of community is created and you can begin to break down inaccurate perceptions of pit bull type dogs.

A clear difference in breed-specific versus an inclusive and comprehensive approach is demonstrated in the 2012 Data Report found in Chapter 13 in the Measurement section.
In the animal welfare field, workers and advocates see a tremendous amount of suffering and sometimes become jaded to the complex social structures that pets exist within, resulting in generalization, false assumptions, and harmful stereotyping. When pet owners of different backgrounds, socioeconomic classes, or cultural norms are marginalized in our movement and isolated from services and resources, the result is detrimental to improving care for the animals. This builds walls and distrust, creating an “us versus them” mentality that helps no one.

Below are examples of just a few common myths that are pervasive in the animal welfare field, along with true stories. Once you open your heart and mind, you’ll find that these stories are the norm, not the exception.

1. Myth: People who struggle financially should not have, or do not love, their pets

The fact that pets make people happier and healthier is not just conjecture any more. Studies have shown how much joy and solace pets can bring to people and the natural connection people share with animals. This is true regardless of people’s financial status; in fact, pets can bring more to someone’s life when that person has less. Just because a pet owner cannot provide the luxuries—or sometimes even the necessities—to his or her pet or does not outwardly fit our movement’s traditional concept of a “good pet owner” does not mean the owner does not care about or wants less for the pet.
He talked about one special dog he had loved dearly. He had lived to be 17 years old and it hurt to lose him. He also shared that when he loses Peaches, he’s not sure whether he will get another dog because he’s getting older and might not able to care for them.

At first glance, Mr. Richardson could have been labeled as someone who could not possibly care for or might possibly even mistreat his dog. However, upon looking deeper, it became wonderfully clear that he not only loves Peaches, but is very connected to her and wants the best life possible for her.

The general public tends to have a particular image that comes to mind when envisioning a “dogfighter.” Most often, that image is a young, male minority with a pit bull type dog. In reality, while street-level dogfighting does occur, the more common, widespread activity is professional dogfighting. Street dogfighting is not nearly as prevalent as many people believe. The vast majority of young male minorities are not engaged in street-level or professional dogfighting, and it’s important not to infer that they are.

The Story of Tim

Tim is a young, African American man in his early 20s. He lives in Chicago and has three pit bull type dogs: two males and one female. All of the dogs wear choke collars, the female has sagging teats from being bred, and the two males have remnants of cuts and scrapes on their faces. While doing community outreach in an under-served neighborhood known for gang activity, some volunteers met Tim and his dogs. Their first thought was he must have fought his dogs and that their scars were from fighting injuries. The volunteers invited Tim to the free dog training classes being held in his community.

After a few weeks of getting to know Tim, the volunteers learned that Tim loves his dogs very much and is very careful with them, but his two males do not get along. They had a scuffle one day that resulted in the facial cuts. Not only has Tim never fought his dogs, but he was very upset about the accidental fight and came to training class so he could learn how to keep it from happening again. Tim received great training tips, information on spay/neuter, and learned that having the unaltered males and females living together likely contributed to the tension between the dogs. He made training a priority and succeeded in all three dogs earning their Canine Good Citizenship certificate. Tim represents so many young men who have been labeled as something they are not and who do not receive information or resources because they are stereotyped or feared.

Most people are not ideologically opposed to spay/neuter. Separate research sponsored by The HSUS and PetSmart Charities has found that most people who have unaltered pets have not spayed or neutered because they have not been properly engaged on the subject or because it is cost-prohibitive. When you share information with people about spay/neuter in a respectful, patient way, and remove barriers by making it affordable and accessible, most people will make the decision to have their pets altered. Assumptions that people do not spay/neuter because they do not agree with the idea, or that people who have not had their pets altered are never going to do so are usually inaccurate.
Devell Brookins
Owner of Ace, Philadelphia, PA

Devell is known as the “pit bull kid” in his hardworking, yet resource-starved, North Philadelphia neighborhood. At 18, Devell earned this nickname because he had bred his dog, Ace, a couple of times, supplying family, friends, and neighbors with puppies. He was planning on a third litter when he received a flyer for free dog training classes through a local outreach program. Devell and Ace started attending class and soon became the star students, as well as fixtures at other program events. Through his involvement, he also started hearing about spay/neuter for the first time in his life. Devell is a soft-spoken young man and quietly took in all of the information, although he did not think spay/neuter was for his dogs. Eventually, he started to ask questions about how neutering would affect Ace, how much it would cost, and exactly what neutering meant.

Almost a year after learning plenty of details and seeing the high number of pit bull type dogs in his local shelter, Devell decided to get Ace neutered. Like most people in under-served communities, Devell had simply never given much thought to spay/neuter. He had to come to the decision in his own time and in his own way. Devell was treated with patience and respect, and because of this, he was able to come to a decision he felt good about. Devell has stated many times that because he feels so good about having his own dog altered, he can talk about the experience with confidence to others in his community. He and Ace walk the same streets together, yet now when people ask to breed or get a puppy, they instead get information on spay/neuter.

You’ll meet many people who have no familiarity with spay/neuter. In fact, many people have never known a spayed or neutered pet. Their grandparents did not spay/neuter, their parents did not spay/neuter, their neighbors do not spay/neuter, their friends do not spay/neuter, and they have never spayed or neutered a pet. Without any exposure to animals who have been spayed or neutered, having an unaltered pet has become a cultural norm in some communities, with associated misconceptions and uncertainties about the procedure. Add to this the hope that money can be made from selling puppies or kittens, the inability to afford the procedure, negative experiences with animal service providers—the list goes on and on—and it should not be a surprise that some people are initially averse to the idea.

However, as communication experts will explain, most people need to hear a message up to six or seven times before it sticks. Even if you hear “no” from someone with an unaltered pet when you bring up spay/neuter, do not view this as the end of the conversation. Don’t view a “no” as a closed door if you have established rapport; keep the dialog open and make it an exchange rather than a lecture or sermon. Continue to build a relationship and respectfully bring up the topic, discuss the reasons why it is a healthy decision, share details about overpopulation, and answer any questions. Some people may decide quickly, while others may take more time. When people come to the decision in their own time, they will likely become ambassadors of the message to others.
Leroy Cuyler
Owner of Duke and Ming,
Philadelphia, PA

Leroy showed up with his two unaltered mastiffs, Ming and Duke, at a community outreach event that offered free rabies vaccinations in Philadelphia. Leroy greeted everyone with an infectious smile and could not wait to show off his dogs. It was obvious to everyone that Leroy loves his dogs very much. While at the event, he thanked everyone and stayed long after his dogs received their shots.

When Leroy was engaged on the topic of spay/neuter and offered free vouchers for his dogs, he quickly declined saying, “I just don’t believe in that and I take good care of my dogs.” Several days after the event, program staff from the event phoned Leroy to thank him for attending, check in on his dogs, and let him know about other services offered, including free spay/neuter, should he change his mind. Again, Leroy politely said he was not interested. A couple of weeks later, Leroy saw two program volunteers in his neighborhood passing out flyers for dog training classes and giving out free collars and leashes. Spay/neuter came up, again respectfully. Although he was still not interested, he did have a couple of questions that the volunteers addressed. The program later arranged a trip to the local shelter to share firsthand the unfortunate animal overpopulation problem in Philadelphia. Leroy attended and was uncharacteristically quiet. He decided to leave the tour early.

The very next day, Leroy called to set up spay/neuter appointments for Ming and Duke. When asked what made him change his mind, he said, “I couldn’t believe all those sad dogs, with no couches to sleep on. I don’t want to be part of that.” Leroy decisively said “no” when initially engaged on the topic of spay/neuter, as well as on multiple other occasions; however, because he was repeatedly engaged on the topic without judgment and given space to think about it, Leroy ultimately made the healthiest decision for his dogs on his own.

Low-cost, high-volume spay/neuter clinics have opened in markets all across the country, and mobile spay/neuter clinics are also trying to provide accessible, affordable services. For the first several months after the clinics are up and running, people who are familiar with spay/neuter, but can’t afford the traditional service, fill the books. Unfortunately, in most cases, these clinics are not on the radar of the target audiences living in under-served communities. Not only do the appointments decrease once the first wave of pet owners comes through, but advertising the services will likely not be enough to reach people in neighborhoods where spay/neuter is not the norm. Even after focused energies are spent engaging pet owners who may be skeptical at first, many barriers along the path to fulfilling a spay or neuter appointment can cause pet owners to change their minds before following through. Proper engagement and removing as many barriers to service as possible is key to reaching the people who otherwise would never spay/neuter and whose pets are most likely contributing to the overpopulation problem.

The Story of Marcus

Marcus is a 20-year old owner of a pit bull type dog named Samson in Baltimore. Marcus paid $125 for Samson from a “breeder” in his neighborhood, making him the proud owner of the first dog he ever lived with.
Marcus wanted the dog for protection and so that he would have a loyal buddy to keep by his side at all times. Because Marcus became immediately and mutually attached to Samson, he expressed an interest in doing whatever was best for his new friend. He knew—at a minimum—that he needed to get shots for the dog because Samson had received none prior to his purchase.

Marcus had no idea where to get the services. He needed a provider nearby, since he did not have a car and Samson could not go on the bus. Marcus heard from his cousin, who also owns a dog, about a local spay/neuter clinic with package deals including shots. His cousin suggested that Marcus consider their services since they were more affordable than other places. Marcus was reluctant, as he did not plan to have Samson neutered. However, after a lengthy conversation with family members about the benefits, he decided to schedule an appointment where Samson would receive all the vaccinations and the surgery for $75. The appointment was set for the earliest time available—eight weeks later. A long stretch between the decision and the actual event is the first barrier.

During that time, Marcus kept Samson indoors, as much as possible, for fear he would get sick because he did not have his shots. Finally, on the day of the scheduled appointment, Marcus called the clinic to confirm the time he was to bring Samson because he had not received any phone calls or mail correspondence confirming the appointment or providing him with instructions. Lack of communication from the service provider is the second barrier. He arranged for transportation and saved the money to pay for the services. The third and fourth barriers are lack of transportation and available funds. The person who answered the phone said that she did not have a record of the appointment and was somewhat curt in response to Marcus’ expressed frustration. The fifth barrier is poor customer service from providers. The person told Marcus that the next appointment was in four weeks and ended the phone call before making a concerted effort to solidify another appointment. The sixth barrier is lack of follow-up and persistence.

Marcus was unsure about having Samson neutered in the first place. The appointment fell through so he decided to take Samson to a traditional veterinarian. He could not find transportation to the second clinic and after another negative experience, Marcus decided to give his dog to another person in his neighborhood who had a female “pit bull” and was interested in breeding his dog with Samson.

Three months after the first “unrecorded” appointment was set up, the clinic still had not called or made any attempt to reschedule. The new owner was approached and will consider the neuter after he breeds the two dogs at least once. Samson still has not received his basic shots. Unfortunately, Marcus’ experience is not an exception. This happens every day in most cities around the country. Most people try to make the healthiest decisions for their pets, so it’s important for service providers to encourage pet wellness by creating a positive experience and eliminating barriers.

Myth: Service recipients won’t be responsive to providers who don’t “look” like them (in terms of perceived differences in race, class, etc.)

The animal welfare field is currently not as diverse as it could be, and this is a serious problem. For example, there is a lack of resources and services in communities that are lower income and predominantly made up of minorities. Differences in culture and understanding often result in animal service providers who are uncomfortable about bridging the gap, hesitant to reach out, and unsure of how to effectively message and connect with a large segment of pet owners. Our experience indicates that what the service providers or the clients look like does not matter.
As long as people doing outreach exhibit a genuine friendliness, a willingness to listen, and an openness to learn, anyone can do outreach and be successful.

Cathy Wells
Animal Advocate, Baton Rouge, LA

Cathy lives in Baton Rouge and serves on the board of a cat organization that fosters, adopts, and manages a trap/neuter/return program. As a white woman in her 40s who helps cats, Cathy represents a common demographic in the animal welfare field. Cathy’s life experiences are very different from those of most people she meets while doing outreach work in under-served neighborhoods in her city. After discovering how much people care about their pets and how much she could build bridges between animal services and people who are unaware of these services, she realized that the differences are not as major as she thought. The community doesn’t think twice about what she looks like as long she cares and shows up. Listen to Cathy’s message about her “A-ha” moment.

The former attitude involves letting go of personal judgments. The latter is based on the judgment of people—usually strangers—and the assumption that they don’t have the compassion or skills to care for their animals. This attitude assumes that “free” things merely help pet owners who don’t deserve their animals. It’s human nature to seek a bargain and attempt to save money whenever possible, and for those in less affluent areas, it’s also a necessity. When free services are provided with compassion, friendliness, and without a “catch,” they will be valued, and the messages that accompany the services are more likely to be heard. This idea is detailed in Chapter 8.

The Coalition to Unchain Dogs is a group that works to free chained dogs by providing free fences and spay/neuter to the people who chain them. The group often witnesses how the bond between human and dog is elevated and how much people appreciate receiving these services. The changes in people’s outlook and behaviors are common; there is not just one individual story that sufficiently represents the value of offering services for free. Many of the Coalition’s clients are not able to afford a fence on their own. When volunteers spend time meeting them, transporting their dogs to and from the veterinary appointments, and a group of people show up to build the fence, many people are overwhelmed. They are moved by the fact that all of those people care and give of themselves, their time, their energy, and their money. They reconsider their dog’s status, because all of the attention is centered around him or her. The animal’s perceived value exceeds what it was while the dog was chained. Knowing that others are financially willing to assist and treat the owner with respect and dignity increases the value of the dog more than anyone can imagine.
How to Approach and Talk to People