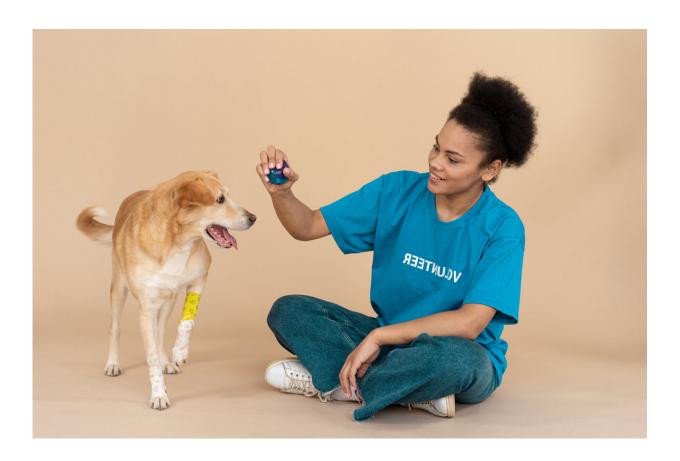# How to write better pet adoption ads

January 6 2020, by David Markowitz

Credit: Mikhail Nilov from Pexels

About 1.5 million dogs and cats are euthanized in shelters each year because they weren't adopted or had health problems that concerned potential owners.

Agencies often use "Adopt, Don't Shop!" campaigns to encourage people

to adopt from or donate to shelters, but [their effectiveness can be limited](#).

How can adoption agencies persuade people to rescue pets who need a home?

[In a paper published on Dec. 26](#), I investigated the pet adoption problem using advertisements from the online database [Petfinder](#). The paper quantified the language patterns of nearly 680,000 adopted and unadopted pet ads.

Concrete and analytic style

The use of articles, like "a" and "the," and prepositions, like "above" and "on," indicate concrete and analytic thinking.

For example, one highly analytic ad of a dog who was adopted read, "Meet Christina! Breed: Bull Terrier Mix, Estimated DOB: 8/21/18, Sex: Female, Weight: 6-8 lbs, Health: Up-to-date on vaccinations & preventatives, Rescued From: South Carolina."

By comparison, [pronouns and storytelling words](#) such as "he," "they" and "extremely" indicate a more narrative style.

An example of one ad that used many storytelling words read, "Look at the cuteness! This boy is adorable and he is full of love and is super playful. Make sure you have plenty of cat toys around because this boy loves his toys! Jack and his brothers are also super unique as they are polydactyl in their front paws."

Each ad received a score from 0 to 100, with [high scores](#) suggesting the ad's style was more analytic and less like a story.

The successful ads were more likely to contain a concrete and analytic style than the unsuccessful ads.

Animal adoption is not the only setting where such verbal patterns can have a persuasive impact. A study of HPV vaccination ads showed that parents and physicians viewed formal, fact-based messages as more persuasive than those that were less straightforward.

Related peer-to-peer lending research also suggests that people are more likely to receive money if their online ad is written in a concrete and analytic manner.

Linguistic style of pet adoption ads

A study looked at words used in ads on Petfinder for 115,318 unadopted and 560,686 adopted pets. Ads tended to fall between two distinct linguistic styles.

Narrative style with many social words	Buddy Love is our room-cuddler! He loves other friendly cats and you can always find him curled up with his roomies. He likes male and female kitty companions! He has no problem making friends with any sweet cat. Buddy Love is a bit shy in new situations. Just give him time to get to know you. He loves being petted and doted on.
Analytic style with few social words	ALL adoptions require a completed application and final contract. The application can be found at [hyperlink] and once your approved to adopt we will put you in touch with the foster to see if its a good match and then we can arrange a meet and greet. We are a RESCUE not a shelter. We conduct veterinary and personal reference checks during the application approval process. We select the best applicant for each dog, based on the dogs needs. Piper is a very playful, cute young maltipoo. She is about a year old, she loves to play, so the adoptive home would need to have another dog for her to play with. She is currently about 12 pounds, but may weigh 15 when fully matured. [Organization name] is a 501c3 whose primary focus is rescuing small dogs from the euthanasia list from high kill [state] shelters.

Credit: The Conversation

Facts and photos

A second important adoption indicator was the rate of social words in the ad, such as "buddy," "friend" or "helper."

The pet data revealed that social words might be red flags for potential owners. Most adopters care if the pet is healthy and has its vaccinations, and they want to learn about the adoption process.

Humanizing details—stating the pet is a "sweetheart" and will be a lifelong "companion"—might signal that the agency is hiding vital health details about the pet.

The lending study also found that people were less likely to receive money from strangers if their ad contained high rates of social words and humanizing details.

Words were not the only key features of adoption ads. On average, ads from adopted pets had more photos than unadopted pets. Photos may help to reduce uncertainty for owners whose introduction to a pet is online.

Changing how people feel about adoption

There is some evidence that language patterns can affect how people think and feel about the adoption process.

In an experiment, I had nearly 1,000 people from Amazon Mechanical Turk read an ad associated with adopted pets—analytic writing style with few social words—or unadopted pets—less analytic writing style with more social words.

Those who read the analytic and less social ad were nearly 6% more likely to say that they would adopt the pet and 4.5% more likely to say that they would visit its shelter than those who read the less analytic and more social ad.

These are small effects, but they can have a large impact since millions of pets need a home.

Writing style matters for pet adoption. If agencies are thoughtful about how their ads are communicated, pets can have an improved chance of adoption.

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