Showcasing Adoptable Pets Through Photos and Videos: Increasing Visibility, Interest, Traffic and Maybe Adoptions Too

Seana Dowling-Guyer MS
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Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts University
Agenda

• What does the research tell us?
  • CSD Research
  • Other Research

• Recommendations, Tips, & Techniques
  • Resources
  • Critique

• Hands-on Practice
  • Photo Review
When I saw this cat’s Petfinder profile, I knew this was the cat I should adopt.

40% agreed

Workman & Hoffman, 2015
Clicks negatively correlated with length of stay for cats

Workman & Hoffman, 2015
what? never heard of “if it fits, it sits” before?

them’s the rules and i’m sticking to em
Influence on Perception

Increases Interest

Does Not Increase Interest

Tufts Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine

NEFHS 2018
CSD Research
Conducted by Helia Zarkhosh, MS
Masters in Animals & Public Policy program

Mentored by
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Seana Dowling-Guyer, MS
Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine
at Tufts University
• Does photo condition affect potential adopters’ interest in and perceptions of adoptable dogs?

• Does the effect of photo condition vary by breed type?
CSD Research Method

• Experimental design
  • Exposure to one condition
  • Random assignment to condition

• Online questionnaire
  • Anonymous
  • August 2013
  • <15 minutes

• Recruitment
  • Banner on Petfinder.com home page
CSD Research
Photo Considerations

• Consider:
  • Condition: environment, location (inside, outside, cage, room)
  • Quality: focus, background, DSLR or phone camera
  • Composition: close-up or full body, from above or eye-level
  • Dog posture: eyes, ears, mouth/tongue, tail, paws, sitting, standing
  • Accessories/props: collar, leash, toys, furniture
  • Dog size, color, breed-type, age
CSD Research
Photo Conditions

• 4 Conditions:
  • In kennel, in room, in room with person, outside

• 3 Breed Types:
  • Mixed breed, pit bull type mixed breed, black mixed breed

• DSLR and iPhone

• Sitting from above

• Collar only

• Mouth open, tongue out
“Lady is a 2-year-old medium-sized mixed breed dog who has found herself at our shelter in search of a forever home. A shelter is no place for this girl, so won’t you please consider adopting her?”
“Lady is a 2-year-old medium-sized mixed breed dog who has found herself at our shelter in search of a forever home. A shelter is no place for this girl, so won’t you please consider adopting her?”
“Lady is a 2-year-old medium-sized mixed breed dog who has found herself at our shelter in search of a forever home. A shelter is no place for this girl, so won’t you please consider adopting her?”
CSD Research Questionnaire

- Intro & photo display
- Interest measures
- Personality measures
- Adoption intent
- Demographics
“Through this project, which is sponsored by Petfinder.com and the Center for Shelter Dogs, we hope to help shelters improve how they display their adoptable pets online. You will be shown a picture of a dog that was previously available for adoption (but has since found a home) and then respond to some questions about the dog featured, the photos, as well as some general background information about yourself.”
CSD Research Measures

- Appeal of photo
- Appeal of dog
- Interest in getting more info about dog
- Interest in adopting dog
- Likelihood of recommending dog to friend who lives alone
- Likelihood of recommending dog to friend with children <10

- Personality attributions to dog (MCPQ-R*)
  - Extraversion, motivation, trainability, amicability, neuroticism

Likert-type rating
1=not at all___
10=very ____

*Monash Canine Personality Questionnaire-Revised
Ley et al., 2009

NEFHS 2018
CSD Research Participants

- 2,153 participants reduced to 1,132
- 956 (84%) female
- 954 (84%) Caucasian
- 619 (55%) between ages of 30-59 yrs old
- 313 (28%) had children under the age of 18 at home
  - 164 (53%) of those had children under age of 10
- 1,085 (96%) had a dog at one point in their lifetime
  - 730 (65%) currently live with at least one dog; 428 (38%) of these respondents had adopted most recent dog
- 353 (31%) had no intention of adopting in the next year
  - 779 (69%) plan to within the next 6 months
  - 733 (94%) of those planning to adopt a dog
## CSD Research
### Participants by Condition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Photo Condition</th>
<th>Mixed Breed</th>
<th>Pit Bull Type Mixed Breed</th>
<th>Black Mixed Breed</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kennel</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>294</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shelter Room</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>285</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Room with Person</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>280</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outside</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>273</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>383</strong></td>
<td><strong>376</strong></td>
<td><strong>373</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,132</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** NEFHS 2018
Results
Mean Adoption Interest Rating by Condition

Scale: 1 = not at all interested, 10 = very interested

- **Kennel**: 4.2
- **Room**: 4.9
- **Room with Person**: 4.7
- **Outside**: 5.1

*2,4 *1 *2 *3 *4

$p<.05$

Mean Adoption Interest Rating

NEFHS 2018
Mean Amicability Score by Condition

- Kennel: 62
- Room: 68
- Room with Person: 68
- Outside: 68

*p<.05

Less friendly → more friendly

NEFHS 2018

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Mean Adoption Interest Rating by Breed Type

Scale: 1=not at all interested, 10=very interested

- Mixed Breed: 5.3
- Pit Bull Type Mixed Breed: 4.2
- Back Mixed Breed: 4.6

*p<.05

Mean Adoption Interest Rating by Breed Type

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NEFHS 2018
CSD Research
Mean Amicability Score by Breed Type

Mean Amicability Score

Less friendly…………………more friendly

Mixed Breed
Pit Bull Type Mixed Breed
Black Mixed Breed

*2,3 *1 *1

p<.05

NEFHS 2018
CSD Research

Mean Adoption Interest Rating by Condition & Breed Type

Scale: 1=not at all interested, 10=very interested

- Mixed Breed
  - Kennel: 4.7
  - Room: 5.2
  - Room with Person: 5.3
  - Outside: 6.2

- Pit Bull Type
  - Kennel: 3.5
  - Room: 4.6
  - Room with Person: 4.3
  - Outside: 4.3

- Black Mixed Breed
  - Kennel: 4.4
  - Room: 4.9
  - Room with Person: 4.4
  - Outside: 4.7

*4
*p<.05

Pit Bull Type p=.05

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NEFHS 2018

Center for Shelter Dogs
CSD Research
Mean Amicability Rating by Condition & Breed Type

Mean Amicability Rating by Condition & Breed Type

- Mixed Breed
  - Kennel: 67
  - Room: 70
  - Room with Person: 68
  - Outside: 76

- Pit Bull Type
  - Kennel: 57
  - Room: 68
  - Room with Person: 65
  - Outside: 64

- Black Mixed Breed
  - Kennel: 62
  - Room: 68
  - Room with Person: 72
  - Outside: 63

*p<.05

Less friendly — more friendly

NEFHS 2018
Main Findings

- Photo condition did influence perceptions
  - In-kennel photos usually rated lowest
- In some cases, differentially by breed, particularly amiability
  - Mixed breeds rated higher outside
  - Pit bull types rated higher in a room
  - Black mixed breed rated higher in a room with person
CSD Research
Limitations

• Online survey, convenience sample
• Potential adopters (at what stage in process) vs just visitors
  • Hypothetical scenario
• Social desirability bias
• Only 3 dogs – specific characteristics of dogs
• Only 4 conditions -- specific characteristics of environment

• What about in-person observations and interactions - weighted more heavily?
Other Research
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Study</th>
<th>Species</th>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Findings</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experiment Thorn &amp; Mitchell</td>
<td>Dog</td>
<td>Location – in kennel or out</td>
<td>Photos of dogs out of kennels generated higher adoption interest (ratings)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2012)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiment Wells &amp; Hepper</td>
<td>Dog</td>
<td>Location-cage cleanliness,</td>
<td>Dogs in a clean cage were preferred over those in a fouled cage. Dogs pictured with a toy in their cage more preferred than the same dog without a toy in the cage</td>
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<tr>
<td>(1992)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Object-toy</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Experiment Thorn &amp; Mitchell</td>
<td>Dog</td>
<td>Object-collar</td>
<td>Dogs wearing a collar generated higher adoption interest (ratings)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2012)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiment Kogan (2017)</td>
<td>Cat</td>
<td>Object-ribbon, toy</td>
<td>Higher perceived adoptability for black cats with brightly colored ribbon around neck No effect of toy, same as being alone</td>
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<td>----------------------------------</td>
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<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Experiment Isgate &amp; Couchman (2018)</td>
<td>Dog</td>
<td>Pose</td>
<td>Sitting rated highest for friendliness &amp; adoptability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiment Gunter (2013)</td>
<td>Dog</td>
<td>Handler</td>
<td>Next to child &amp; elderly woman –</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Increased perceptions of intelligence, friendliness &amp; adoptability</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Decreased perceptions of aggressiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiment Isgate &amp; Couchman (2018)</td>
<td>Dog</td>
<td>Handler</td>
<td>Friendliness-Golden Ret &amp; Rottweiler highest when sitting with handler</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Adoptability-Golden &amp; Rottweiler highest when sitting with handler</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Aggression-Doberman highest sitting with handler</td>
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<tr>
<td>Experiment Pyzer, Clarke, &amp; Montrose (2016)</td>
<td>Dog</td>
<td>Video vs photo</td>
<td>Dogs viewed via video were considered to be more trainable, intelligent, friendly, and gentle and less dominant, aggressive, and unsociable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>But 2 dogs seen as more hyperactive in video</td>
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<td>Retrospective</td>
<td>Dog</td>
<td>Various</td>
<td>Photo traits that positively impacted adoption speed: Photo quality rating (young dogs) Direct canine eye contact with the camera (young dogs) Dog standing up (young dogs) In focus (non-blurry) image (adult dogs) Photo being appropriately sized (not too small) (adult dogs) Outdoor photo location (adult dogs) Photos taken in a cage, dogs wearing a bandana, dogs having a visible tongue, presence of a toy, and camera angle had no effect on how fast dogs of either age were adopted.</td>
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<td>Photos with toys clicked more frequently than photographs without toys (only 20% of photos with toys showed cat interacting with toy) Photos of cats outside cages clicked more often (trend but non-significant difference) No effect: pose, whether the cat was looking at the camera, size of the cat’s pupils, or the position of cat’s ears, decorative clothing, a blanket or bed, or a human in the photo</td>
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Experiments – Influence of Person in Photo with Dog

• Gunter (2013) – Dog breed stereotypes and effects of handler appearance on the perception of pit bulls
• Next to child & elderly woman –
  • Increased perceptions of intelligence, friendliness & adoptability
  • Decreased perceptions of aggressiveness
Experiments – Influence of Person in Photo with Dog

- Isgate & Couchman (2017) - What makes a dog adoptable? An eye-tracking investigation
  - Friendliness: Golden Ret & Rottweiler highest when sitting with handler
  - Adoptability: Golden & Rottweiler highest when sitting with handler
  - Aggression: Doberman highest sitting with handler
Experiments – Effect of Pose (Dogs)

• Isgate & Couchman (2017) - What makes a dog adoptable? An eye-tracking investigation

• Friendliness - sitting highest
• Adoptability - sitting highest; Golden & Rottweiler highest when sitting with handler
• Aggression - walking on leash highest; Golden highest standing alone; Doberman highest sitting with handler

Figure 1. From left to right: Doberman Pinscher, Golden Retriever, pit bull, and Rottweiler in four standardized poses, from top to bottom: standing alone, sitting alone, sitting with handler, and walking on leash.

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Experiments - Effect of Pose (Dogs)

• Wells & Hepper (1992) - The behaviour of dogs in a rescue shelter

• Dogs in a clean cage were preferred over those in a dirty cage

• Subjects preferred the dog at the front of the cage and not barking
Experiments – Effect of Location

- Thom & Mitchell (2012) - Factors that influence adopters’ preference of shelter dogs

- Photos of dogs out of kennels generated higher adoption interest (ratings)
Experiments – Presence of Objects in Photos

- Thom & Mitchell (2012) - Factors that influence adopters' preference of shelter dogs

- Dogs wearing a collar generated higher adoption interest (ratings)
Experiments - Presence of Objects in Photos

- Kogan (2017) - Black cats: Does manipulation of photographs impact perceptions? A pilot study

- Photographing cats with a brightly colored ribbon around their neck led to higher perceived adoptability for black cats

- No effect of toy in photo, same as being alone in photo
Experiments-Presence of Objects in Photos

• Wells & Hepper (1992) - The behaviour of dogs in a rescue shelter

• Dogs pictured with a toy in their cage more preferred than the same dog without a toy in the cage
Pyzer, Clarke, & Montrose (2016) - Effects of video footage versus photographs on perception of dog behavioral traits

Dogs viewed via video were considered to be more trainable, intelligent, friendly, and gentle and less dominant, aggressive, and unsociable

But 2 dogs seen as more hyperactive in video
Retrospective Studies

- Lampe & Witte (2014) - Speed of dog adoption: Impact of online photo traits
- Photo traits that positively impacted adoption speed:
  - Photo quality rating (young dogs)
  - Direct canine eye contact with the camera (young dogs)
  - Dog standing up (young dogs)
  - In focus (non-blurry) image (adult dogs)
  - Photo being appropriately sized (not too small) (adult dogs)
  - Outdoor photo location (adult dogs)
- Photos taken in a cage, dogs wearing a bandana, dogs having a visible tongue, presence of a toy, and camera angle had no effect on how fast dogs of either age were adopted.
Retrospective Studies

• Workman & Hoffman (2015) - An evaluation of the role the Internet site Petfinder plays in cat adoptions

• After controlling for cat age at adoption, primary coat color, and sex:
  • Photos with toys clicked more frequently than photographs without toys (only 20% of photos with toys showed cat interacting with toy)
  • Photos of cats outside cages clicked more often (trend but non-significant difference)
  • No effect: pose, whether the cat was looking at the camera, size of the cat’s pupils, or the position of cat’s ears, decorative clothing, a blanket or bed, or a human in the photo
Eye-Tracking Study

- Isgate & Couchman (2017)
- For all breeds:
  - Standing alone drew the most attention to the eyes of the dog
  - Sitting alone had shortest time to first fixation, longest total fixation duration, highest fixation count, and largest percent fixated
Recommendations Based on Research

- Good quality photo
  - In focus
- Outside of the kennel if possible, in cage for cats ok if done well
  - No “through the bars”
- Pose – close-up of face, looking at camera, sitting, maybe standing
- Personalization can help – collar, bandana, toy, etc.
  - But not a requirement, may not matter for all animals
- Adding people can help but pick the right person
- Multiple photos
- Video – but be selective in what you show
- Sad saps vs happy pets

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Future Research

- Test greater variety of animals, environments, & people
  - For breeds, coat colors & lengths, sizes, sexes, histories (surrender vs stray)
- Examine influence of collars, leashes, toys systematically
- Explore effect of photo quality & composition
- More standardization needed across studies
- Examine impact of photo vs video
- **Explore the reasons why there may be an effect** (personality attributions?)
  - Qualitative research
- Investigate influence of written descriptions
- Examine relationship of photos to clicks/engagement, adoption outcomes, & lengths of stay
- **Explore how online photos relate to visibility, traffic, perceptions, and adoption outcomes** for organizations in general

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Center for Shelter Dogs
Recommendations & Resources
General Recommendations

- Aim for “good quality”, in focus photos
  - Optimize composition, location, background (see next slide)
- Be strategic and choose where you make more of an effort
  - Kittens and puppies vs adult and harder-to-adopt animals
- Multiple photos
  - Close-up of the face, one sitting or standing, one that shows off personality or with a friendly-looking person
- Video – but be selective in what you show
- Be patient – let your animal warm up, get them comfortable with the equipment, set yourself and your animal up for success, take lots of photos – or wait for the shot you want
  - If point & shoot or DSLR camera, may want to use view screen (cats esp) – tho check focus
- Track analytics

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Location & Composition

• Location
  • No “through the bars” photos!
  • Get out of kennel/cage, use a room or go outside
    • In cage may work for cats but get dogs out of kennel
  • If in kennel or cage, open door & get animal to edge of cage in better light

• Composition
  • Close-ups (face) – the money shot!
    • Be sure eyes are in focus
    • Ears at attention, head tilts are appealing! (dogs)
  • Sitting, perhaps standing
  • Eye contact or looking toward camera
  • Think about angle/perspective -- eye-level photos are compelling but try several angles to add interest
  • Plain, decluttered background
• Adding people can help but pick the right person
  • May not matter for many dogs
• Personalization can help – collar, bandana, ribbon, toy, etc.
  • But not a requirement, may not matter for some animals
  • For black or dark colored animals, consider using a collar, ribbon, or bandana to break up body outline
  • May want one photo with something to help gauge size
• Try to avoid other animals in the photo, unless adopting together
  • Esp avoid including an animal cuter than the one you are adopting out!
Tips

- Create a space dedicated for photos
  - Everything ready to go with little set-up
  - KEY: Lighting, plain background, and comfortable space for animals
- Have an assistant – ideally someone who knows the animal
  - Set expectations so they know their job (work with you, not against)
- Attention-getters like dangling toys (feathers) for cats or squeaky toys for dogs – and treats!
  - Have options in case something doesn’t work or is a distraction
- Have a plan, best effort, know when to stop, try again another day → keep it positive
- Stay safe
Set Yourself Up for Success

Shelter Me Photography
Technical Recommendations

- DSLR, point & shoot, phone cameras will all work fine
  - But know the strengths & limits of your equipment
- Shelters are low-light environments so find ways to add light
  - Use window light or get outside (consider direct sun vs shade)
  - DSLRs: Lenses with large apertures, 2.8 or 1.8, will help if flash doesn’t work, increase ISO & slow shutter speed (but not too slow, probably not less than 100)
  - Constant lights (LEDs are great, or fluorescent natural light balanced, they don’t get hot)
    - Phone cameras will appreciate you adding light!
  - Indirect flash will help in low-light settings – bounce or diffuse the light
    - But may scare your subject so use cautiously
    - Avoid using direct flash (aimed at the animal) (unless diffused)
  - Reflectors can help (2x3 white poster board works great)
Camera Settings - iPhone

- Try burst mode
- Tap-to-focus/exposure
- Lock focus/exposure
- Zoom in but be aware of camera shake
  - Better to be in focus and crop later
- Other apps like Camera+ give you more control
  - Shutter speed can be adjusted in Camera+ and other apps but not native app
iPhone – Using the Focus/Exposure Point
• Try portrait mode with good light & quiet subjects
• Try sports mode for fast shutter with busy subjects
• DSLR: try shutter priority for fast shutter (1/125 for still animal, 1/400+ for moving animal)
  • Faster shutter will cut light
• DSLR: for blurry background, try aperture priority & choose wide aperture (f4, f2.8 but shallow depth of field can make focus harder)
  • Wider aperture allows more light
• Increase ISO (or use auto ISO) to increase light sensitivity
  • Can add noise but can be reduced in post-processing
Exposure Triangle

ISO

Aperture

Size of Lens Opening

Depth of Field

Freeze

Exposure Time (in Seconds)

Shutter Speed

Motion

Blur

Exposure Triangle

Low < Noise < High

50 100 200 400 800 1600 3200 6400

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Center for Shelter Dogs
Shooting Modes – Nikon & Canon
Aperture

Aperture Size

Larger/Wider Aperture

Smaller/Narrower Aperture

Amount Of Light Reaching The Sensor

More

Less

Depth Of Field

Shallow

Deep

How Blurry The Background Is

Very Blurry

Not Blurry At All

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Aperture – Depth of Field

Capturing different amounts of light

Large aperture  Medium aperture  Small aperture

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To Flash or Not?

Fill Flash with Bounce Card

no flash  Pop-up Flip-it! flash

http://www.dembflashproducts.com/products/pop-up/

NEFH 2018
Photographing Black/Dark Colored Animals

- Proper exposure (good lighting) is important
  - Expose for coat so not too shadowed but not greyed out
  - Direct sun not ideal, aim for shade or go inside
  - Consider fill flash if outside or bounced flash if inside

- Consider using a collar, ribbon, or bandana to break up body outline
- Lighter, decluttered backgrounds worked well
- Embrace the shadows for moodier photos

24mm, 1/125 sec., f/2.8, 200

NEFHS 2018
Shy Cats

- Keep comfortable – photograph inside cage
- Entice to edge of cage if possible (better light)
- Use focus tap on phone or wide aperture/aperture priority and/or slower shutter and/or high ISO
  - Allow as much light as possible for inside cage shots
- Use wider aperture to blur background
- Attract attention with food or toy
  - Aim for looking toward camera if at camera isn’t working
- Try “detail” shots (ear, a paw) or other angles (profile) to supplement & add personality
Photographing Cats

• [https://youtu.be/9NcM5Exno0w](https://youtu.be/9NcM5Exno0w)
Most photos can benefit from editing

- Lightroom, Photoshop or Elements, Picasa 3, Gimp, Picnik, photo apps like Snapseed, fotor, Instagram
- Adjust lighting, add contrast, noise reduction if needed, sharpen, crop/remove distractions, selective blur
• Photos & videos are only part of the story –
• Descriptions/bios
• In-person presentation
• Cage/kennel info
• Adoption staff interactions and information
• Shelter/location environmental factors
• Visitor/adopter factors
• ……. 

But what about…
Marketing Tips (Social Media)

• Use online listing sites
• Return to your web site (optimize SEO)
  • Sign up for Google’s Non-Profit Ad Program: https://www.google.com/grants/how-it-works/
• Blogs & e-newsletters to drive traffic to your site
• Social media – FB page engagement, add YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat strategically
  • Update social media – edit posts but also add comments
  • Get staff & volunteers to engage
  • Utilize relevant hashtags
  • Cross-post and tag
  • Boost FB posts and try FB Ads
• Track analytics

Good info:
http://chewonthis.maddiesfund.org/2017/11/facebook-zero/

• Multiple good quality photos
• Short videos that highlight personality
• Short, descriptive bios – honest but positive
• Easy to find contact info – one click
• Keywords, tags, searchable fields
Resources

Taking great adoptable animal photos:

• https://savageuniversal.com/blog/10-tips-for-new-shelter-animal-photographers/
• https://www.purinaone.com/dogs/articles/shelter-photo-tips-nanette-martin
• http://onepicturesaves.com/learning-videos/
• http://www.sophiegamand.com/photo-tips-for-rescuers/
• https://www.heartsspeak.org/photographing-shelter-cats-tips-from-a-pro/
• http://www.broandtracy.org/phototips/index.shtml
• https://kamoorephotography.com/2013/01/26/shelter-cat-photography-secrets/
• https://PRETTYFLUFFY.com/pet-lifestyle/pet-photography/5-tips-for-photographing-shelter-pets-with-mcgraw-photography
• https://www.diypetphotography.net/10-tips-create-better-animal-photos-rescue-shelters/
• https://focusonrescue.com/2017/05/31/shelter-cats-saving-lives-with-your-camera/
• https://focusonrescue.com/five-tips-for-better-dog-photography/

Resources for sheltering organizations:

• https://www.sheltermephotography.org/ - Nanette Martin (site seems quiet...)
• http://onepicturesaves.com/
• https://focusonrescue.com/

For people thinking of volunteering to take photos of adoptable animals:

Photo Critique
Hands-On Work

Upload photos to:
https://tinyurl.com/yb769rgn
Questions

Center for Shelter Dogs
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References


