2015 ARF DAVID OGILVY AWARDS

Campaign Title: The Shelter Pet Project

Brand: The Shelter Pet Project

Company(s) Involved: Research: Nielsen, Creative Development: FCB Chicago, Campaign Management: The Ad Council, Sponsors: The Humane Society & Maddie's Fund

Category: Government & Nonprofit

Summary

Despite high rates of pet ownership in the US, relatively few pets are adopted from shelters, with the consequence that millions of potential pets are euthanized every year. The Shelter Pet Project is a public service advertising campaign aimed at increasing the adoption rates. In this study consumer neuroscience methods were used to help guide a bold new refresh on the campaign, which aimed to reduce the fear and uncertainty associated with shelter pet adoption. Research insights were used to find an optimum balance between high emotional engagement with the pets depicted in the creative and effective communication of brand and key messages. Since the Shelter Pet Project was implemented, national reporting has found a significant increase in adoption from shelters and rescues and a corresponding decrease in euthanasia. In support of that trend, the launch of the refreshed ads was associated with a significant surge in search and social media activity related to pet adoption relative to the pre-launch.

Marketing Challenge

Every year in the US, 6-8 million cats and dogs find themselves at shelters. Only about 35% of dogs and 43% of dogs and cats in homes came from shelters or rescues. , and millions of healthy and treatable pets that aren't adopted are euthanized each year. To address this problem, the Ad Council, with support from Maddie's Fund and the Humane Society of the United States, undertook a PSA campaign called the Shelter Pet Project with an aim to significantly increase the rate of pet adoptions from shelters and rescues. The low rate of pet adoptions reflects in part concerns on the part of prospective pet owners about the demeanor and health of pets in shelters. Although many prospective pet owners believe adoption is the right option, they lack confidence in shelters and the pets housed there. In response, the PSA campaign targeted adults seeking a cat or dog, but who may be on the fence about adopting from a shelter or rescue group. The communication goal was to reduce the fear, uncertainty and doubt around shelter pets. A campaign refresh was targeted for launch in early 2014, and the pro bono ad agency, FCB Chicago, took a new creative approach to the problem, one which diverged greatly from that employed in prior years. Prior to launch, innovative pro bono neuroscience research was undertaken by Nielsen in order to help optimize the copy and ensure that the new creative approach would resonate with the target audience.

Methodology

Nielsen's consumer neuroscience unit collaborated with the Ad Council's campaign management and research teams to field a laboratory study that evaluated the implicit neurological responses of target viewers. A combination of eye-tracking and electroencephalogram (EEG) measurements made while viewers watched 0:30sec television commercials was used to determine the impact the ads had. The audience was adults interested in acquiring a cat or dog in the near future. The neuromethods permitted second-by-second analysis of the degree to which individual scenes were emotionally engaging and memorable, as well as measurement of the degree to which the executions implicitly primed key communication points. An initial round of testing was conducted on rough-cut executions, where the results provided key insights critical for identifying highlights of the ads with respect to their ability to emotionally engage the target audience, as well as weaknesses in their ability to communicate key messages and branding elements. The findings yielded several actionable recommendations aimed at sharpening the impact of the creative. Following refinement of the executions, a second round of neurological testing was conducted to confirm that high emotional engagement was maintained while memorability for key messages and branding elements was improved.

For non-profits with big ambitions and small budgets, maximizing each ad to be effective and memorable is essential. Nielsen and the Ad Council used consumer neuroscience to do just that for The Shelter Pet Project, a non-profit with the goal of making shelters the first place potential adopters turn to when they're looking for a pet. The Shelter Pet Project already had a strong-performing ad. The ad's star, Jules the dog, earned the PSA a 6.8 out of 10 for overall effectiveness, which ranks in the top 40 percent of Nielsen-tested ads. But there was room to improve. Using consumer neuroscience, Nielsen graphed how people's brains responded to the ad to help the creative team identify, second-by-second, which scenes did and didn't resonate. Using a combination of electroencephalograph (EEG) and eye-tracking measurements to determine the impact the ads had on viewers, the team effectively quantified the power of the pooch. It did so by confirming previous facial processing research claiming that showing that faces on screen—including dogs'—boosts viewers' emotional engagement. But when Jules was off screen, attention and emotional levels dropped. They also determined that showing Jules, the logo and the website URL at the end of the ad competed for viewers' attention—causing confusion. So the team needed to eliminate that confusion and refocus the audience on the PSA's final call to action.

Creative Execution

To reinvigorate the Shelter Pet Project's effort, a bold refresh to the existing creative approach was undertaken. Given the overall goal of unraveling the fear and uncertainty around shelter pets, the main idea of the refresh was to show that pets from shelters can make great companions. The creative approach was to communicate "There's a shelter pet who wants to meet you". In different spots an individual dog or cat would walk on a blank stage without back drop or storyline, like an actor in a "screen test" auditioning for a role -- in this case with an aim to convey the prospective pet's personality and charm and hence suitability for adoption. An approach lacking conventional narrative or structural elements to support the animal's audition incorporated significant creative risk. Neurological testing indicated that while the pets could highly engage viewers by their compelling onscreen presence, and while the approach succeeded to implicitly communicate that the animals were friendly and loveable, viewers were failing to also fully encode the call to action and branding elements. In particular, it was observed that the pets could be too successful at stealing the scene, detracting attention and undermining encoding of key elements such as the Shelter Pet Project URL. Based on the neurological insights, tactical re-editing to draw greater attention to the key messaging components succeeded in improving their memorability, while permitting the emotional connection with the viewer to be maintained. The creatively refreshed Shelter Pet Project campaign was relaunched in early 2014.

Business Impact

With respect to the effectiveness of the current generation of campaign creative executions, in the first three months after the February 2014 launch there was a 133% increase in traffic to TheShelterPetProject.org, and a 28% increase in searches directed to the PetFinder.com database linked to the site. Between the launch of the campaign in February and mid-December 2014, over 25% of visitors to the website were converted to key campaign goals such as searching for a pet in the online database, searching for a shelter, or learning more about pet adoption and the campaign. There was also a 116% increase in Twitter mentions of #Shelterpets, and a significant increase in "likes" month-over-month for the Shelter Pet Project Facebook page. Most critically, since the campaign was first initiated in 2009, estimated national trends indicate that adoption of dogs and cats from shelters and rescues has increased significantly[1], while the rate of euthanasia for shelter pets has correspondingly dropped.

[1] PetPoint data, 2010-2014; see http://www.petpoint.com/reportspage/.