

How to Write Pet Profiles to Find Good Homes for Your Adoptables

By Elizabeth Doyle

Here are some general rules for writing blurbs to go with your adoptables' photos:

1. Facts are uninspiring.

The fact that Joey is two years old, black and brown, 46 pounds, a mix of German shepherd and pit bull, and has digestion problems will not inspire anyone to adopt him. People may be curious to learn these things, and they should be included. But none of it will get him adopted, and this stuff should never be the focus of the blurb.

2. Tell it from the animal's perspective.

The most compelling thing you can write on behalf of an animal is what you imagine the animal is thinking, feeling or remembering. The fact that he ducks his head when you try to pet him is not all that compelling. But the fact that he "seems to remember something hurtful" whenever a hand is raised draws the reader toward the animal.

3. Make the reader a hero.

Don't tell the reader how great the animal is and how lucky the reader would be to have such an animal. For emotional reasons, this never works. Instead, tell them how lucky the animal would be to have them, how grateful the animal would feel toward the wonderful human being who would bless this animal with a home. This is reverse salesmanship: Don't tell them that this is the animal everyone wants – imply that it's the animal nobody wants. That is what they want to hear. And it keeps them from thinking, "Well ... someone else will surely adopt him. He doesn't need me."

4. Be gentle with restrictions.

Restrictions, while often necessary, are always strikes against the pet. For example, even people without children will sometimes be scared off by "Must go to a home without children" because they wonder what's wrong with the animal! Whenever possible, soften a restriction with your wording. For example, "Jo-Jo's such a goofy bundle of energy, he might be a little too much for small children!" is worlds better than "Must go to a home with no children," which leaves the reader raising an eyebrow. Another example: "Matilda would make an excellent companion for another slow, older cat who understands that lazing about on a window sill is enough excitement for one day!" instead of "Must go to a home with older cats only."



5. Adjust the emotional weight to match the urgency.

There is an important trade-off to consider when writing an adoption blurb. The more tragic you make the blurb, the more replies you will get. But on the other hand, some people will resent your heavy-handedness and stop looking at your website. You have to decide. In an emergency, there is a style of blurb that can be written which pretty much guarantees an adoption ... but it plays off people's deep-rooted sense of personal injury, particularly their memories of rejection. Best Friends will not print blurbs like that. However, kill shelters absolutely should, because it's life or death. You have to decide what is the right level of sympathy-mongering for you.

6. Remember, be nice.

Anytime you put something in writing, you are taking a risk. To some extent, there's nothing you can do to make sure that nobody will object to anything you write in your blurb. But when it comes to writing adoption blurbs, you can avoid some of the common pitfalls by following this advice:

- Remember that every breed of everything has someone out there lobbying on its behalf. Avoid statements about breeds. Not even this: "While some people may think Rottweilers are mean, this girl is a complete sweetheart!" I got 57 hateful e-mails for a sentence very much like that one. Don't even allude to a breed stereotype.
- Don't ever print anyone's name, except in a flattering light. Especially, don't ever give the name of the person who abandoned the animal, since this can actually cause a legal problem as well as an interpersonal one.

7. There's someone for everyone.

What do you do when you have to write a blurb about an animal who just isn't your favorite? Don't feel bad! It happens to everyone. It's okay to love one cat just a little more than another – we're only human. But with adoption blurbs, you have to treat everyone equally. So the trick is ... use your imagination. Imagine you are the kind of person who would love this animal the best – and then write the blurb from this imaginary person's point of view.

For example, if you prefer calmer dogs, you might be inclined to write, "He has a lot of energy, which some people might find overwhelming." But the following would probably be more effective in finding the dog a home: "He's the kind of dog who feels like a real companion when you go out for a walk. He keeps up with you – he wants to keep going – he keeps dancing in appreciation." The potential adopter might read the first sentence and think, "Hmmm ... too much energy? Doesn't sound good." But the second blurb might cause this reaction: "Yes! That's what I want."

Some Sample Blurbs

OK, now it's time to practice on some sample blurbs. See if you can figure out what's wrong with these, and do a rewrite.

Common Error: "Jeffrey is just the sweetest dog. He is so cute. You will love him. He licks your hand! He has this cute way of cocking his head. He is so friendly."

Why an error? It's not the dog's point of view. Without a taste of who the dog is, and how he feels, we're not inspired to adopt him.

Try Again: "Jeffrey hasn't known many people who loved him as much as he loved them. Maybe he tries too hard. A lick on the hand, a cock of the head – he doesn't even know he's being cute. He's just trying to say, 'Thank you. Thank you for loving me back.'"

Okay, that's a little bit of hardball. But, not too bad. I would call it "middle ground." But you see how thinking a moment about how Jeffrey feels makes us more drawn to him, more interested in meeting him.

(Another tip: Don't make this stuff up. Spend a few moments with Jeffrey while you guess his thoughts. That way, when people meet him, they'll be able to see what you mean.)

Common Error: "Josephine is the sweetest bunny! You'll just love her tender little affectionate ways. She's a little shy, so she must go to a home without other rabbits. She's a little nippy, so she must go to a home with no children. She's a little scared, so she'll need a very patient person who's home all day. She's a little traumatized, so she'll need to have a home without dogs or cats. But she's so sweet! For the right person, she'll provide a lifetime of love."

Why an error? Yikes! Is there anything redeeming about this rabbit? Vague remarks like "sweet" and "affectionate" are not enough to counteract all the frightening restrictions we just heard. Plus, they don't make sense! She's affectionate, but she doesn't get along with anyone?

Try Again: "Josephine is a dreamy rabbit who lives in a world all her own. At night, she spins imaginative tales of fancy, and during the day, she hides in her alcove ... watching, smiling, remembering. Her eyes are always alert. She doesn't miss a beat. Josephine is so lost in herself that it may not work to introduce her to a household full of other creatures or children. But still, she dreams that there's a place for her. Would you like to meet her?"

In this way, we're able to turn her negatives into positives. By imagining an interesting and positive way to describe her phobias, we can keep the blurb from being a list of restrictions. But, we still get our message across.

Common Error: "Today is your lucky day! Penelope, this gorgeous calico you see before you, will go to one lucky home. She is the purrrfect cat. Beautiful, sweet, smart, affectionate ... how can you lose? So don't let another moment pass! Grab this girl before someone else does!"

Why an error? If someone else is going to adopt her, then she doesn't need me. While the above blurb might be cute and fun, cute and fun does not necessarily help the animal get adopted. Most adopters don't need a new animal. They're motivated by wanting to help an animal. It doesn't sound from this blurb that Penelope needs anyone's help. And that will hurt her chances.

Try Again: "Why Penelope has not yet been adopted is a mystery! There's absolutely nothing wrong with this elegant cat. She looks like a postcard – she's gorgeous! Her heart is warm and flowing. She exhibits the kind of affection you might associate with a cat who would be the first to find a happy home! Yet, she just hasn't been picked. Perhaps we need to say more about this sweetheart..."

By changing the focus, we can impress upon the reader that Penelope is a perfect adoption candidate – without making it seem that she doesn't need anyone's help.

Common Error: "Danny the goat was brought here by Leslie and John Shmucko who had shot him twice and then – oh, gee, we feel so bad – changed their minds about killing him and dumped him on us! The Humane Society was no help, of course, as usual. They were just gonna kill him. Gee, thanks! So we had to take him. Why do people like that live in this world? But it's not Danny's fault! He's a sweet guy and is looking for a great home, with someone who's actually nice, for a change."

Why an error? First of all, with all the names that were dropped, it may be time to hire a lawyer! Second, while hard-luck stories do help to get the animal adopted, and should be used, they should be presented in a manner that draws sympathy to the animal, rather than wrath toward the folks who hurt him or didn't care about him. Wrath doesn't inspire adoption, but sympathy does.

Try Again: "Danny has had a terrible lot in life, so far. His family didn't want him, and please don't tell him, but there was even talk of shooting the poor little guy. At a regular shelter, his fate might not have been any better. So we took him, hoping there might be somebody out there who'd want to hug a little goat like this. He just loves everyone – is there someone who might finally love him, too?"

In this way, we can tell his story without expressing anger toward anyone, only sympathy toward the goat. In addition, we've elevated the tone of the language, giving ourselves as an organization a gentler, more sophisticated image than the first blurb presented. Remember that everything you say reflects not only on the animal or on the people who abandoned him ... but on you, too. You never want to sound angry or out of control. No matter what you're writing, you always want to sound like someone who is calm and patient enough to be entrusted with a large and lovely donation.

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