Remote Customer Service Toolkit

What is remote customer service?

Remote customer service is all of the ways that animal services can provide support for the community without requiring an in-person interaction between the animal care organization and the customer. These no contact services can be provided via telephone, texting, web chat, email, or video chat. By increasing efficiency and customer satisfaction, organizations can assist more people and animals, provide solutions and resources earlier, and return lost pets to their homes quicker.

What problem is remote customer service trying to solve?

Historically, in order to get help from an animal shelter, community members had to come, in person, to the shelter. This is often inconvenient, especially for people who do not live in close proximity to the shelter or do not have reliable, pet accessible transportation. Additionally, many services can be delayed while community members are awaiting appointments, finding time to get to the shelter, or awaiting a response. Using technology to increase remote customer service often reduces these delays.

Benefits of Remote Customer Service

- Improve customer satisfaction
- Save money
- Save staff time - increased efficiency
- Grow volunteer support
- Keep more people and animals together
- Reduce the number of animals housed in the shelter
- Decrease length of stay in the shelter
- Reduce intake
- Increase adoption and/or rescue placement
- Increase the number of animals returned home
- Promote responsible pet ownership
- Increase public safety
- Move animals through the shelter system faster

Getting Started

1. Conduct an inventory of what services you currently provide only in-person vs. those that can be provided remotely. If you need a starting point, here is a remote customer service checklist a list of services that you could provide remotely, or in person.

2. Choose one or more areas or programs you want to begin piloting. Here are some ideas for starting points:

    a. Allow people who have lost pets and finders to text or send via email their lost and found reports, so reports can be immediately made public. See Pima Animal Care Centers' Lost and Found Pets page for an example.

    b. Provide remote adoption counseling. ASPCApro Virtual Adoptions Resources can help you get started.

    c. Implement live chat services for the public contacting you with questions.

    d. Begin practicing telehealth for foster appointments. See this virtual triage example from Austin Pets Alive!

    e. Change paper forms to online forms for intake procedures, so people can complete intake paperwork prior to coming to the shelter. Dallas Animal Services Intake Forms are available online in English and Spanish.

    f. If your city requires dog licensing, move to online dog licensing instead of in-person licensing. See the LA Animal Services Online Licensing information.

    g. Start an intake-to-placement program, remotely matching waiting fosters and adopters with animals before or at the time they enter the shelter. See the HASS Element: Intake-to-Placement.

3. Choose your technology solution from the variety of available options in the Human Animal Support Services Technology Catalog. This is a partial list so please contact us if you have something that should be added to our technology library! Some technology platforms are very inexpensive at just a few hundred dollars per year, while others are more costly so you'll want to consider how you will pay for technology you need. Eventually, using remote technologies will result in a decrease in staff time, so you should realize either cost savings or a neutral budget impact.

4. Make a plan for who, what, when, where and how you will offer this new service. While most remote customer service options will save time in the long run, they may require extra staff and/or volunteer hours while you are getting started. Animal shelters are already complicated operations and a change from in-person to remote customer service can impact multiple areas of the shelter.

5. Pilot services on a small scale to identify challenges

6. Communicate with all internal stakeholders so there is widespread awareness of the change in service provision and people have a place to voice questions or concerns and get a response. Communicate proactively and positively, letting people know you are working to streamline and improve your services to the people and animals who need your help.

7. Track your data to determine the results of implementing remote services. Most technologies will allow you to see time spent per interaction (so you can potentially show a reduction in time per service) and the outcomes of the interactions.

Ideas to Increase Remote Options for Your Community

Website:

- Basic shelter information (hours, locations, and phone numbers) listed online
- Instructions for what to do if you have lost or found a pet that include options other than "bring pet to shelter."
- Lost and found resources like links, forms, templates, social media pages, etc. listed on the website
- Photo and location of lost and found animals on website
- Pet owner resources online - behavior tips, information about public services, microchip and fence assistance information, etc.
- Online reporting of complaints and concerns including neglect, cruelty, safety issues
- Online live chat with staff or volunteers
- List of all animals in your care, regardless of their 'available status'

Telephone service:

- Scripts and FAQs for staff and volunteers answering phone calls
- Non-emergency phone lines answered during business and/or shelter hours
- Emergency phone lines answered by someone who can help most or all hours

Volunteers

- Can sign up and complete initial orientation online through an automated system
- Can log hours, share notes, read animal information, access records from the shelter and home

Adoption and Foster

- Customers can schedule their own appointments online or via telephone
- Fosters can schedule medical and other appointments online
- Updates and important information automatically sent to foster caregivers and adopters on a scheduled and automated basis
- Fosters can access 24/7 remote help for emergencies
- Telehealth services available for adopters and foster caregivers.

- Access to important information available online and fosters and adopters know how to find it
- Remote Adoption/Foster Protocol

Success Stories, examples and samples

Need a side-by-side:

Traditional sheltering: People found a stray and had to bring it to the shelter and turn in

HASS: people find a stray pet, can call or text the shelter and immediately upload pet info and photos and get help and information about what to do with the pet. People are offered solutions to hold the pet for 48 hours....

Traditional sheltering: Field services are called on a small breed dog that is matted and passers-by are concerned for animals well-being. Once arrived, the owner tells the staff member that if they need to take the dog, they understand because the dog is matted. The owner tells the animal services staff member that she doesn't have enough money to groom the dog. Officer takes the dog to the shelter.

HASS: The staff/volunteer connects the owner with a groomer in the community that the owner can afford OR the officer offers the owner subsidized groomers that will groom the dog for free. See how Gateway Pet Guardians helped Chloe Ann's owner with a groomer so she could keep her pet.