

**Paws on Parole: Strategic Plan**

**Better by Bechtel Agency**

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### **Problem Statement**

Despite Paws on Parole's long-standing physical presence in Gainesville, the organization has not successfully built a digital presence. The organization's lack of consistent social media use has led Paws on Parole to miss opportunities for community outreach, involvement and awareness, ultimately remaining stagnant. According to an Edge Research survey among the animal shelter and rescue community, 86% of people found that social media increased general awareness about their organization, 66% said it increased animal adoptions overall and 55% reported an increase in adoptions of harder to place animals, like senior pets and those with medical issues (*New Research Points to Social Media as Important Tool for Animal Shelters and Rescues*, 2018). Social media creates new opportunities for organizations and helps generate public support. The inability to obtain a robust online presence does not align with the program's main goal to increase the adoption and retention rates of selected dogs at the Alachua County Animal Shelter.

### **Opportunity Statement**

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, 72% of social media users' say their average screen time has dramatically increased (Wold, 2020). The pandemic places Paws on Parole in the optimal position to maximize its digital communication efforts. Additionally, people are much more willing to foster and adopt dogs as a result of the pandemic. Paws on Parole has an opportunity to capitalize on this increased human desire to adopt dogs through strategic social media campaigns.

## **Background of the Situation**

### **Brief History of Social Media**

According to Merriam-Webster, social media is defined as “forms of electronic communication through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages and other content.” 72% of American adults use some form of social media, according to a 2019 Pew Research Center report (Maryville University, n.d.). The first social media site was born in 1997 with the creation of SixDegrees.com. MySpace created a “place for friends” in 2003, Twitter hatched in 2006, Instagram was introduced in 2010 and Facebook celebrated one billion users in 2012 (Samur, 2018). Facebook is the most used social media platform with 2.7 billion users and Instagram is trailing behind with 1 billion active daily users. Although, Instagram can generate over four times more interactions compared to Facebook. Moreover, 71% of Instagram users are under the age of 35, 71% of businesses in the U.S. use Instagram and 50% of Instagram users follow at least one business (Mohsin, 2020). Over the last several months, the COVID-19 pandemic has skyrocketed the consumption of social media.

Screen time is reaching an all-time high. According to a recent study, 72% of respondents agreed that their social media consumption has increased during the pandemic and 69% said Instagram is their most used social media platform. Users are also using social media to shop. 82% of respondents said that social media is the most common channel from which they get information about a brand and its products (Wold, 2020). These data points express the importance of the strategic use of social media, specifically Instagram, for organizational outreach.

**Adapting to the New Normal**

The pandemic impacted every industry in the world, and animal shelters and rescues are no exception. Shelters across the country closed their doors in an effort to slow the spread of the coronavirus. Many shelters moved into crisis mode, doing everything in their power to get healthy pets adopted and have room to care for the sick or injured, avoiding euthanasia (Craig & Overland, 2020).

As a result, shelters adapted to new technology including Zoom and social media platforms. Without the ability to do open house-style meet-and-greets, some locations shifted to appointment-only and curbside adoption, while others made the whole process virtual from first meeting to home inspection. To make the process easier, many shelters are waiving adoption fees to ease the financial burden new pet parents might be facing. Shelters are taking to social media to make pleas to their communities to foster pets until the pandemic is over, including live streaming adoptable pets on Facebook and Instagram (Ellis, 2020; Craig & Overland, 2020).

**The Response**

The industry moved quickly in the early days of the pandemic to adapt in hopes of spiking fostering and adopting, and in some communities, the response was overwhelming. Jessica Gutmann, operations manager at Santa Rosa County Animal Services in the Florida Panhandle has an optimistic outlook. Gutmann's shelter in the Florida Panhandle euthanized a majority of abandoned pets in the past but was able to find homes for nearly all of its animals at the end of March (Craig & Overland, 2020). According to Kitty Block, president and CEO of the Humane Society of the United States, the rates of fostering have increased by 90 percent in some cities (Ellis, 2020). Gainesville is one of those cities. Margot DeConna, director of advancement at The Humane Society of North Central Florida, said she expected a significant decrease in pet

adoptions at the shelter as a result of Alachua County's COVID-19 emergency orders; however, that shelter documented more than 1,600 adoptions since January, and the demand steadily continued. At the end of August, the location reported 282 adoptions, which is an increase of more than 70 adoptions from the same time last year (Savage, 2020).

Nationwide, animal shelters are reporting massive upswings in the numbers of animals they have been able to adopt out or place in foster homes. New York City and Los Angeles were two of the first cities to become a hot spot for the virus and implement restrictions on social gatherings. In those cities, The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty (ASPCA) had more than 600 people complete online foster applications in March. Additionally, the Chicago Animal Care and Control's Adoptable Pets program was able to share that they had no dogs available for adoption for the first time in the shelter's history, and one Pennsylvania shelter reported its foster application numbers increased from three-to-five per week to 40 per day (Ellis, 2020; Whitten, 2020).

People know they will not be traveling, and being forced to stay home from work or other obligations is both optimal for house training and bonding with their new animals. Many people who agreed to take in foster dogs at the start of the pandemic had adopted them permanently by late June. It truly is a frenzy that has consumed the consciousness of the entire nation, and for a good reason (Kavin, 2020).

### **The Health Benefits of Pets Amid the Pandemic**

Dogs are very beneficial to people who are spending more time at home. Animals provide company and comfort during times of uncertainty. Sandy Branson researches the impact of pets on human well-being at the University of Texas' Cizik School of Nursing. In a WIRED article by Emma Ellis, Branson said that "being socially isolated, you're at risk for depression

and loneliness, and, in older adults, we know loneliness is associated with early death and Alzheimers” (Ellis, 2020). Pets cannot entirely fill the void left by isolation from other humans, yet they still provide emotional support, fulfill the human need for touch and relieve stress and anxiety levels by increasing feel-good hormones like dopamine and oxytocin. In addition to proven psychological benefits, having a pet around the house will likely help owners stick to daily exercise and structure, key strategies to getting through quarantine (Ellis, 2020).

As observed from the success of other shelters across the country and screen time statistics, social media is an imperative tool for community engagement, audience building and strategic messaging amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **Background of the Organization**

### **Who is Paws on Parole?**

Paws on Parole is an exceptional program in which people are not only adopting a dog, but they are adopting an American Kennel Club's Canine Good Citizen (CGC) certified dog. Through providing experience and education in dog care to inmates, Paws on Parole teaches inmates responsibility, helps find a home for dogs and delivers families a well-trained animal. Consequently, Paws on Parole seeks to increase the adoption and retention rates of dogs from the Alachua County Animal Shelter.

### **How the Program Works**

Throughout an eight-week training course, selected dogs and their paired inmates learn basic obedience and daily dog care before being eligible for adoption. The adoption fee is \$40 and includes spay or neuter, microchip and vaccines, in addition to the dogs already being

domestically and socially trained. According to the Alachua County website, as of 2016, Paws on Parole had a 100% adoption rate for canine graduates, and 80% of the inmate trainers never returned to jail after going through the program (Alachua County Take 5, 2016). This statistic supports the positive behavioral incline of inmates and the public's increased attraction in adopting a fully-trained dog.

### **What Could be Next for Paws on Parole**

Although the organization offers a great opportunity for dogs, owners and inmates, Paws on Parole has experienced fallbacks due to lack of awareness. Paws on Parole has a limited outreach in its community, primarily through means of social media, with a little over 5% of the Gainesville population following the company's Facebook account. Even less than that, the company has under 1,000 followers on Instagram, which equates to less than 1% of the Gainesville population.

The minimal external outreach through social media leaves the company with missed opportunities as it is not obtaining nearly its full media potential. It is important to establish organizational advantages over competitors and adequately communicate positive attributes about the brand's identity throughout different media channels.

Other companies with similar organizational efforts and values obtained their media presence in unique ways. For instance, in New Orleans, the company Villalobos Rescue Center brings together pit bulls and people on parole. This company used media to the fullest extent by having its own TV show that created massive publicity for the company. The TV show is titled "Pit Bulls and Parolees," which has brought the company large amounts of attention and business. While tapping into television networks is a sizable jump for Paws on Parole, this example represents a missed opportunity for the organization; if the social media efforts were

more extensive and innovatively targeted, there is great potential for audience growth and increased media presence.

The majority of the company's successful efforts to reach the surrounding Gainesville public have been through local community events including themed events and adoption gatherings. This external environmental outreach is one of the main ways the company is able to access the community's attention and put forth the company name. The public's perception of Paws on Parole is favorable but is limited because it only represents a small portion of the community that attends the local events. Furthermore, COVID-19 hindered social events, making it extremely difficult for Paws on Parole to engage with audiences.

The organization also gains recognition through articles about the events that spread a positive perception of the company. For instance, Business Insider wrote an article about Paws on Parole just four years after it opened, discussing the organization's success and giving the readers a look at the kinds of inmates that care for these dogs (Rodgers, 2012).

The article sheds light on the love and attention that these dogs receive through images of the inmates training, playing and rolling around with the dogs. These images show a comforting perception of inmates training dogs for adoption. The purpose of the organization is to give inmates and dogs a second chance; however, people may be uncomfortable with the fact that inmates are the ones training these dogs. A publication's view like Business Insider's allows the audience to see the information as authentic. This external outreach allows the organization to reach a broader audience without paying for advertisements. This is also a form of earned media because it increases credibility and is free publicity.

The organization strives to reach the aware and latent publics in the surrounding community that are interested or considering adoption. However, the company has failed to

recognize that once it gains customers, it most likely won't see those customers again or for a very long time. Adopting a dog is not something people do every day; once they receive a customer, they most likely will not see them again or will not see them until they want another dog, which may be many years later. Thus, the target audience must be continuously expanded.

### **SWOT Analysis**

**Strengths:** Paws on Parole's unique and engaging strength is that it builds mutually beneficial relationships among dogs, inmates and future adopters. It allows the opportunity for dogs to be trained and cared for outside of a shelter environment, for inmates to practice responsibility and improve behavior and for prospective adopters to parent a fully-trained, CGC certified dog at a modest cost.

**Weaknesses:** The organization's greatest weaknesses stem from its absence of brand awareness, and a major lack of presence on social media. This seems to be from the shortage of funding allocated to public relations strategies, leaving no way to properly promote the organization and the perks of adopting a Paws on Parole dog. There are several missed opportunities in the social media realm. The organization stays up-to-date on the website but fails to regularly utilize its Facebook and Instagram pages to better engage with the local community. The organization does not use Instagram features such as reels, IGTV, stories and highlights. Paws on Parole lacks a consistent following and marketing strategy throughout social media platforms. However, as society's fear of the pandemic lingers, and people continue to live and work mostly remote, there are inexpensive ways to advertise Paws on Parole through social media to increase following.

**Opportunities:** Identifying external opportunities requires the organization to be constantly active on social media, especially when screen time among users is at an all-time high. Paws on Parole can find and target specific publics by using social media to advertise the perks of Paws on Parole and the competitive edge it has over other adoption shelters. Paws on Parole can also communicate the benefits of animal behavioral therapy, which is known to display significant beneficial results in the treatments of inmates as well as elders, adults and children experiencing mental illnesses, PTSD, anxiety and depression, in addition to the similar benefits of having a pet amid the pandemic (Mims & Waddell, 2017)

It's also important to make the public aware that even though Paws on Parole is one of 16 and counting prison-based dog programs in Florida, it is Gainesville's only local prison-based dog program. Furthermore, Paws on Parole should capitalize on being one of the top three cheapest adoption rates out of all the Florida programs (Corrections Foundation, n.d.). Collaborating with the social media audiences, Gainesville's array of local celebrity figures, such as the University of Florida football team, will gain publicity and spread brand awareness.

**Threats:** Paws on Parole's external threats are most challenging since some of these circumstances may be out of their control. In regards to increasing social media activity and following, the greatest concern is not gaining enough traction to reach the desired audience. Failed efforts would lead to a loss of time and money. There is also the consideration of other local adoption shelters and the process of adopting a dog. A majority of people are attracted to puppies, but the Paws on Parole dogs range in ages. Older dogs could be discriminated against during the adoption process.

### **Existing Digital Communication Techniques and Efforts**

Paws on Parole communicates with the public through Instagram and Facebook as well as through updates and links on their website. The organization posts on their website about its current academy, upcoming events to meet dogs, opportunities to get involved in the program and collections of news articles and headlines about the program.

### **Strategic Communications Channel and Messages Paws on Parole Created:**

#### **On Facebook and Instagram:**

- Use of various marketing efforts through campaign headlines;
  - Dynamic Duos, Rolling Bone, Pup's Life, etc.
- Customer involvement and engagement through use of hashtag campaigns such as, #dogstagram and #dogsofinstagram
- Showcasing the dogs in the program through graphics posted on social media platforms
- Detailing events and training sessions promoting the well-being of the dogs and people involved in the program
- The organization builds mutually beneficial relationships among dogs, inmates and future owners

Throughout the organizations social media platforms Paws on Parole utilizes various marketing campaigns that highlight the dogs they have available for training programs. The organization involves hashtags and numerous graphically designed images to showcase aspects of the animals that will draw attention to the program and its benefits. Also, on each platform the organization posts and details the various events it holds where community members can meet

the dogs and learn more about the program. However, there is a lack of consistency and a limited positive public perception for adoption-ready CGC trained dogs.

**Traditional news media outlets (Gainesville Sun, WCJB):**

- Highlighting adoption events and fee discounts in ads and articles
- Community events are featured; this tactic is the only consistent public outreach strategy

By incorporating traditional news media outlets within their communication strategies the organization attempts to reach a broader audience that they may not reach through their social media strategies. Paws on Parole highlights their events on these traditional news media outlets and acknowledges discounts that are available to potential adopters in effort to increase adoption rates. However, Paws on Parole is lacking external outreach to set the organization apart from competitors.

**Additional links and strategies** (Youtube, CCPDT, Pet Professional Guild Trainer Search, Kikopup, Donna Hill, All Dogs go to Kevin, Victoria Stilwell Positively, Dog Star Daily, Clicker Training, Ultimate Puppy, ASPCA, Fearful Dogs, Care for Reactive Dogs, AKC CGC, & AVSAB):

- Find a trainer
- Training videos and articles
- Behavior modifications

Incorporation of additional information on the organizations website allows the organization to have continuous involvement and feedback with its target publics, even after

adoption. By utilizing various links that help the organizations target audience Paws on Parole incorporates a long term relationship building strategy between itself and its publics.

A brief search proved that Paws On Parole does not garner international news media coverage. Additionally, Paws On Parole does not have a Tik Tok or Pinterest account. Currently, Paws on Parole lacks external outreach attention that could allow the organization's strategic efforts to reach its large latent audience, ultimately getting domestically and socially trained dogs good homes while simultaneously aiding current inmates with behavior training.

### **Description of Targeted Publics**

Paws on Parole has minimal community outreach. The organization aims to reach Alachua County residents with an interest in adoption. The active publics within the Alachua County community are those community members that are aware of the Paws on Parole events and have considered adopting or already adopted from Paws on Parole. The aware publics share the issue of parolee dog training programs and adoption, but they are not organized to discuss or act on it. The latent public is a group that shares the same values as the organization but has yet to realize the connection. The public perception of Paws on Parole is favorable, but it is limited because it only represents the local community members who attend the events and the small social media following. The organization's latent audience is large, but the lack of public awareness due to the organization's lack of promotional strategies and effort disables the organization to reach that immense audience pool.

Part of the organization's active publics are volunteer trainers who are a part of the selection process; they also test the dogs around other animals and match them with inmates at the work camp. The organization has positive relationships with its targeted correctional facility

partner. Furthermore, the dogs up for adoption live with and are trained by the inmates at the Florida Department of Corrections Gainesville Work Camp for eight weeks; each pair is under the supervision of volunteer professional trainers.

Although there was a period where the program was on standby during the pandemic, Paws on Parole got the program running again after only a few months. To set the organization apart from other shelters and organizations that are taking advantage of high market periods, such as the coronavirus pandemic, the organization must attract the aware audience.

## Strategic Plan for Paws on Parole

**Target Audience:** We are targeting University of Florida students and faculty who identify as “fence sitters” and reside in Alachua County. "Fence sitters" are individuals looking to acquire a pet within the next year, but remain undecided on where they will acquire their pet (*The Shelter Pet Project*, 2019).

**Goal:** Better by Bechtel will expand Paws on Parole’s social media efforts to continue making a difference in the lives of local dogs, inmates and residents.

**Objective:** Increase the number of University of Florida students and faculty who follow Paws on Parole on Instagram by 20% by February 2021.

**Strategy:** Create a social media campaign with the University of Florida football department.

### Tactics:

- At the start of SEC season in September, have a socially distant photoshoot event in Ben Hill Griffin Stadium with the athletes and dogs.

This benefits the goal because we are encouraging athletes to post the professional photos taken on Instagram and tag Paws on Parole; Paws on Parole will highlight the posts on their story on Instagram called “Dynamic Duos: On The Field.” This is extending Paws on Parole’s ongoing campaign, Dynamic Duos, the launch of the series involving football athletes.

- At the end of October, host a Florida vs. Georgia football ticket giveaway on Paws on Parole’s Instagram.

To increase traffic to Paws on Parole profile, participants must tag three friends to enter. For an additional entry, participants can re-story the giveaway post and tag Paws on Parole.

- Host “Paws The Game” Halftime Event in November and broadcast the event on Instagram Live to increase engagement with aware publics who are not attending the game.

To form relationships with targeted publics, UF cheerleaders will walk five Paws on Parole dogs out onto the field while the band is playing. We will display live footage along with Paws on

Parole's Instagram handle on the jumbotron and encourage fans to post with the hashtag #PawsTheGame.

In order to communicate that Paws on Parole dogs are quarantine companions and that Paws on Parole dogs are CGC certified, someone who has adopted from Paws on Parole will walk out with their dog to share the success story of their companionship while a montage of pictures of the owner and dog plays on the jumbotron. The speaker can also emphasize the advantages of having an already trained dog.

- Create a video titled "24 Hours with Kyle Trask" to post on Instagram in January.

The video will be a three-minute IGTV video featuring Kyle Trask going through his daily fitness routine with a Paws on Parole dog. Throughout the video, Trask will emphasize the benefits of having a dog as a companion during quarantine: the dog keeps him active and holds him accountable to a routine, in addition to providing emotional support.

Additionally, in order to increase engagement, in the caption, Paws on Parole will ask followers to comment on how they stay active with their pets. Kyle Trask and the UF Football team will repost the video to increase its reach among the target audience.

### **Why "24 Hours With Kyle Trask"?**

Kyle Trask is the University of Florida's starting quarterback. He has remained at the top of USA TODAY's college football quarterback rankings for the majority of the season, he is projected to be picked during the first round of the 2021 NFL draft, and he is a frontrunner to win the Heisman trophy this year (Myerberg, 2020). People all over the country are fascinated by this player, and he is considered a local hero and influencer among University of Florida students and faculty. We felt it was best to select the star player to star in the Paws on Parole IGTV video.

However, we cannot rely on consumers to adopt or foster a Paws on Parole dog just because Kyle Trask supports it. This campaign tactic uses Trask to get the audience's attention and then maximizes key messaging to communicate the benefits of having a dog during quarantine: We are all supposed to be socially distancing from other humans amid the pandemic,

but a Paws on Parole dog can be your teammate. Pets cannot entirely fill the void left by isolation from other humans, yet they still provide emotional support, fulfill the human need for touch and relieve stress and anxiety levels by increasing feel-good hormones like dopamine and oxytocin. In addition to proven psychological benefits, having a pet around the house will likely help owners stick to daily exercise and structure, key strategies to getting through quarantine (Ellis, 2020).

This tactic aligns strategically with the overall campaign. Our strategy is to partner with the UF football team for a social media campaign; this tactic is featuring a football player and taking place on Instagram. It is set to be posted on the Instagram pages of Paws on Parole, Kyle Trask and the UF football team. Our objective is to increase the number of UF students and faculty who follow Paws on Parole on Instagram. By utilizing someone who already has an immense following among our target audience and employing an engagement-focused caption, we are driving traffic to Paws on Parole's Instagram page and increasing the likelihood that dogs get adopted. Ultimately, this aligns with our goal to expand Paws on Parole's social media efforts to continue making a difference in the lives of local dogs, inmates and residents. With this IGTV video, we are expanding the social media efforts in a unique way, producing content that this organization has never attempted before, and connecting with the target audience on a deeper level.

### **Key Messages of the Campaign:**

- Adopting from Paws on Parole is like “adopting a teammate.”

While you are socially distancing from other people, a Paws on Parole dog can be considered your closest teammate.

- Paws on Parole dogs are quarantine companions.

Paws on Parole dogs can provide emotional support and help with creating structure during such an unprecedented time.

- #PawsTheGame

Increase engagement with latent publics through utilizing the hashtag feature throughout social media.

- Paws on Parole is building mutually beneficial relationships among dogs, inmates and future adopters.

This sets Paws on Parole apart from competitors in the area.

- Paws on Parole dogs are CGC certified

You do not have to train a Paws on Parole dog, you are simply fostering or adopting a dog with whom you will develop a special bond.

- By adopting from Paws on Parole, you are supporting a local community organization.

### **Insight into Execution of Tactics:**

Strategy: Create a social media campaign with the University of Florida football department.

### **Tactics:**

At the start of SEC season in September, have a socially distant photoshoot event in Ben Griffin Hill Stadium with the athletes and dogs.

- Ensure Paws on Parole staff members, UF football team members and photographers are tested for COVID-19 prior to the photoshoot.
- Require masks in all photos.
- Hire photographers.
- Establish a filter theme so all photos look cohesive.
- Bring food and water for the dogs.
- Make sure Paws on Parole volunteer trainers are available to look after the dogs during the photo shoot.
- Coordinate transportation for the dogs from the shelter to the football stadium.

At the end of October, host a Florida vs. Georgia football ticket giveaway on Paws on Parole's Instagram.

- Hire a graphic designer to create a graphic that illustrates the entry rules.
- Coordinate with UF Football's Instagram manager to disseminate the giveaway on their page in addition to Paws on Parole.
- Use an excel sheet to randomly select winners from the Instagram comments.
- Confirm set of tickets for the winner with the box office.

"Paws The Game" Halftime Event in November.

- Have portable chargers available for Instagram Live broadcasting.
- Coordinate with the producers at Ben Hill Griffin Stadium to display live footage along with Paws on Parole's Instagram handle on the jumbotron.
- Bring the Paws on Parole dogs to a UF Cheer practice to perfect the halftime show.
- Hire a video editor to create a montage of the selected dog and owner.
- Work on a script with the guest speaker to emphasize the advantages of having an already trained dog.
- Bring food and water for the dogs.
- Make sure Paws on Parole volunteer trainers are available to look after the dogs during the event and before and after halftime.

"24 Hours with Kyle Trask" video for posting in January.

- Ensure Trask, Paws on Parole staff members and the production team are tested for COVID-19 before filming.
- Ensure the weather is nice for filming.
- Carefully select the Paws on Parole dog that will have a sense of chemistry with Kyle Trask and behave well on camera.
- Acquire the appropriate equipment, including a high-quality camera and microphone.
- Plan a series of activities for Trask and the dog to complete throughout the day.
- Select non-copyrighted music for the background of the video so it is not flagged by Instagram.
- Write a script for the video.
- Make sure a Paws on Parole volunteer trainer is present at all times.
- Provide food and water for the dog.

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