

Change through community consultation - a case study

Peter Adamson, Belinda Beynon, Arthur House, Alicia Kennedy

ABSTRACT

A local city council in Western Australia was put under pressure to enforce a "blanket" ban on dogs in certain parks in that area. These developments caused a great deal of concern within the dog owning community.

This paper outlines the steps taken by a local private veterinary hospital in response to this proposed action.

Following a program of education and communication positive steps were taken towards the development of an urban animal management advisory committee in the region and a strategy for urban animal management.

INTRODUCTION

In 1995 Rockingham City Council came under considerable pressure to ban dogs in certain parks and public areas.

Sporting groups and other citizens using parks objected to:

1. Excessive dog excreta
2. Unruly and antisocial dog behaviour.

These citizens began to exert considerable influence. Many letters of objection were received by Council in a concerted and well organised effort to try to eliminate antisocial habits and unruly dog behaviour in parks and public open space. As a result of this pressure Councillors felt obliged to act on behalf of this group.

These citizens were concerned about health and aesthetic principles. Many were outraged. At the time the Council thought that the best course of action was to ban dogs in certain public areas including the city square.

The Veterinarians at Malibu Veterinary Hospital disagreed with the blanket ban approach. We were concerned that some dog owners would become more defiant in response to the imposition of by laws banning dogs. Ultimately such action on the part of these owners could substantially retard progress in responsible urban animal management strategies. Similarly we felt that a precedent could be set and bans could be extended to many other parks.

Many of our Veterinary Hospital clients expressed similar concerns. A reasonable percentage of these clients are elderly citizens without transport. These people were worried that parks in close proximity to their homes, in which they exercised their dogs, may become "No Dog Zones".

As the professionals in petcare and urban animal management we elected to act as a catalyst for community discussion on the broad subject of urban animal management. The banning of dogs in parks was one issue among many on which we intended to encourage debate. It was our view that citizens were entitled to be vociferous and annoyed by the doggy events taking place in their parks. We also felt that dog owners had a right to use public open space in a responsible and considerate manner.

To be an effective catalyst in this debate we saw our role primarily as educators. We also felt that it was important to provide a forum for discussion. Ultimately the realisation of two important goals would help improve urban animal management in our city.

Goal 1

The establishment of an urban animal management advisory committee to advise council on important issues.

Goal 2

To develop an urban animal management strategy to plan for the future needs of our rapidly growing city.

OUR ACTION LIST AS A CATALYST

To ensure our effectiveness as a catalyst, we generated the following action list:

1. Communicate with pet industry members. (Veterinarians, pet shop owners, kennel owners, dog obedience clubs and breeders.)
2. Communicate and closely liaise with the local community media encouraging them to write about the issues.
3. Liaise with the local dog obedience club.
4. Inform our local community leaders and council executive officers about the true nature of Australian pet ownership.
5. Provide a forum for community debate on animal management issues.
6. Promote responsible pet ownership via education programs.

1. Communicating with other pet industry members

A letter was drafted and sent to pet shops, boarding kennels, dog breeders and other local Veterinarians. This letter served to inform the significant players in the pet industry of proposed changes to the by-laws.

We asked the pet industry members two questions:

1. Do you think that we need to call a public meeting?
2. What do you think we should do now?

Response to this letter was excellent with many people writing back to us unaware that changes to the by-laws were being proposed. Most respondents agreed that a public forum to discuss pet issues would make a valuable contribution.

2. Communicate and liaise with the local media

Close cooperation with the local community newspapers over previous years allowed us to present the issues for wider community comment. Various news articles inspired ratepayers to write letters to the editor. This public debate saw different views presented.

3. Liaise with the local dog obedience club

We asked the dog club executive to consider what plan of action, if indeed any, they should take. The members elected to present a petition to council opposing the banning of dogs in parks.

4. Inform community leaders and council executive officers about the true nature of Australian pet ownership

Malibu Veterinary Hospital has put in place a continuing education program for Councillors and Council executive officers. Every quarter we update our Councillors and Council executive officers with the latest urban animal management information. To date the following resource material has been placed at council:

- What Australians Feel About Their Pets
- Pets in Urban Areas
- National People and Pets Survey
- Secret Power of Pets
- Health Cost Savings: The Impact of Pets on Australian Health Budgets
- People and Pets Newsletter
- CatChat

5. Organise a forum for community debate on urban animal management issues

It was our opinion that an open forum would allow interested ratepayers to contribute to the debate on banning dogs in parks. However we saw the wider issues of an advisory committee and a city strategy as being the way to a better future in urban animal management. Accordingly Malibu Veterinary Hospital presented a forum entitled "Living with Pets in our Community". Approximately 150 ratepayers, pet industry members, Councillors and rangers attended this very successful evening discussion.

Overwhelming support was given at this meeting for the formation of an urban animal management advisory committee to Council and for the formation of an urban animal management strategy for our city. A report on the forum's outcome was forwarded to Council officers and good media coverage was received.

6. Promote responsible pet ownership through education programs

School is Cool

An exciting development in the last twelve months has been our "School is Cool" program. The program is based around school visits by a small group of our staff and some of their interesting pets. This non profit making project aims to encourage a positive attitude to education.

We also aim to develop appropriate attitudes to animals and pet care and to concurrently promote to children that school is pretty cool. We send children home with a "Cool Pak" of information to enhance their awareness of the role that pets play in the community. Our responsibilities to both our pets and other members of the community are clearly discussed.

Puppy Preschool

Following in the footsteps of others, our highly successful Puppy Preschool classes have continued to attract a strong local following. Word of mouth has helped attract good patronage to the classes.

The classes improve the social skills of pups and educate the owners with regard to common problems found in young dogs that may go on to become more serious issues in adulthood. We hope that this program will help contribute to a decrease in the number of problem dogs in our community.

Other Community Activities

Information evenings are conducted with Dog Obedience Club members. We aim to work together to educate members of the community on responsible pet ownership. Malibu Veterinary Hospital prints and distributes important fliers free of charge titled:

- Who's the leader of your pack?
- Why do some dogs bite?
- Avoiding a dog attack
- Dogs in parks

This information is designed to help people understand basic dog behaviour. It is hoped that this will result in fewer dog attacks.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Peter Adamson

Davies Adamson and Associates

Malibu Veterinary Hospital

120 Malibu Road

Safety Bay WA 6168

Telephone (09) 528 3333

Facsimile (09) 592 3551

Peter Adamson graduated from the School of Veterinary Studies Murdoch University in 1979. He completed his Internship and Residency in Equine Medicine and Surgery at Murdoch University and the University of California, Davis CA. He is the principal of Malibu Veterinary Hospital in the City of Rockingham, Western Australia. Malibu Veterinary Hospital is a community leader in veterinary medicine and urban animal management. The hospital has been a Telstra Small Business award winner for the area in three of the past five years.

[UAM 96 Index Page](#)