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To: ["Direct to Mayor and Council"](#)

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Subject: Emerging Issue: Animal Services Social Media Accounts

Good afternoon Mayor & Council,

I am writing with regard to recent communications from Animal Services volunteers requesting the creation of City of Vancouver-branded social media accounts. We are aware this issue is generating some conversation on social media and continued requests to Council for support. In response, staff have prepared a package with key messages, key facts and relevant Q&As that may be helpful to you responding to these inquiries.

Issue in brief

The City's Animal Services shelter is supported by a team of passionate volunteers who aid staff in caring for animals under the City's temporary guardianship. Volunteers would like to see animals placed into adoptive homes faster and are calling on the City to allow for the creation of City-branded social media accounts to promote available animals to the public.

Communications approach in brief

The City's Civic Engagement and Communications (CEC) team is strongly supportive of increasing adoption-focused content on City social media channels and had recommended an initial strategy and cadence to ensure this content was being seen at opportune moments by the City's 85,000 followers on Facebook.

As agreed with the Animal Services team, the strategy was to begin to publish these posts, to test what types of content landed best with the audience, understand what community management support may be required (e.g. should unanticipated questions arise about other City services or by-laws) and ensure the post copy and images to illustrate these posts adhered to City, social media and accessibility standards.

In line with CEC's wider brand guidelines and strategy, the creation of stand-alone channels is not supported at this time but this could be revisited further ahead when analytics on these posts are understood and a collaborative relationship with the Animal Services team is more firmly in place. Should the content continue to generate a positive and effective response and a regular cadence established, there may be an opportunity to start City-branded channels.

Key messages

- The City's Communications team supports increasing adoption-focused content on existing City channels and had recently landed on an arrangement with the Animal Services team to ensure the delivery of regular, quality content to strategically grow this focus.
- While many areas of the organization would like stand-alone channels focused on their specific subject matter, running a social media account on behalf of a large municipality is a significant undertaking that requires a depth of experience in social media strategy, issues management, knowledge of algorithms, platform-specific content and accessibility standards to ensure success and protect the reputation of the City.
- Future, stand-alone accounts have not been taken off the table. The CEC team's intention is to work collaboratively with the Animal Services team to understand how this content performs, how community management will be handled and any adjustments that may need to be made to ensure the success of this content and inform the best path forwards.

Below are some myths and facts to aid your understanding of this matter.

Myth: The City refuses to allow the Animal Services team to create their own social media channels.

Fact: The City remains open to potential channels in the future. They have communicated that some groundwork must be done to gain a better understanding of how to support the communication goals and ensure content is rolled out in a strategic way.

Myth: Other municipality animal services have their own social media channels.

Fact: This varies. While some neighbouring municipalities such as cities of Surrey and Langley do have social accounts dedicated to their animal services department, they typically have a far smaller audience and therefore less reach. Many other municipalities, including the cities of Burnaby and North Vancouver promote animals for adoption through province-wide platforms such as BC SPCA or Petfinder, which have the advantage of an incredibly large and dedicated reach.

Municipalities may also have different strategic considerations behind resource allocation and account management, including policies on whether non-staff are permitted to have access to an organization's affiliated accounts. As one of the largest municipalities in the Lower Mainland, the City of Vancouver receives a significant amount of attention and public scrutiny, and as such maintain robust security measures and protocols for risk management around our channels.

Myth: The public will be unaware that pets are available for adoption if dedicated social channels are

not created to publicize this information.

Fact: Starting a social media channel(s) from scratch involves time, strategy and data to support success. A new channel demands time to build up an audience to understand what content resonates with them best. Using the City's established Facebook account that has an in-built audience of 85,000, ensures adoption posts are seen by thousands of people within the target audience, instantly. Other communications tactics exist to draw attention to adoptable animals, including media relations, printed collateral and advertising. CEC is currently exploring these options and confirming budget with the Animal Services team.

Myth: This should not be such a complex ask: setting up social media accounts is easy.

Fact: Effective social media content and channel management demands a level of expertise so significant that it is now a full-time profession and service offering in which companies invest to ensure success. Development of new social media accounts requires additional resourcing and potential budgetary considerations in order to streamline account set up, implement standards that adhere to the City's security policies, and provide ongoing oversight and training for both community management and post scheduling within our pay-per-seat social media management software.

Questions & Answers

Q: What are the risks of having stand-alone social media accounts?

A: Without proper and ongoing training, there are reputational risks associated with operating City-branded social media accounts, including members of the public sharing confidential information or being quoted as official City spokespeople. We know that Animal Services occasionally receives complaints related to by-law infractions, such as dogs off-leash in public spaces. With their depth of knowledge on subject matter, internal connections and responsibility to adhere to respectful interaction with the public, it is City staff who are best placed to manage these conversations, not volunteers.

Q: Has anyone spoken to the volunteers to understand their concerns and reiterate the City's stance?

A: A meeting is being scheduled between the staff member who leads the Animal Services staff and the volunteer group to further understand their concerns and offer some reassurance that the City shares their goal of increasing adoption rates for shelter animals. They intend to help the group understand that CEC is trying to support the shared goal, but this must be done strategically, carefully and in line with our broader social media policies for success.

Q: Why is the City opting to push animal adoption content on its main channels only?

A: The City's social media strategy focuses on using one main account rather than multiple department-specific accounts that have small followings. This approach helps us to maintain a unified brand voice, keep messages clear and consistent, build trust with our audience and reach a wider group of people.

Creating a large enough audience so that social media posts can be impactful takes time and resources. The City of Vancouver's social media platforms have developed a broad reach and have a small, dedicated team to create compelling content that is effective in getting the message out. Animal Services has been able to use these platforms to share reminders and promote seasonal programs, often resulting in high engagement.

Q: How does the City promote VAS and adoptable animals?

A: The CEC team works closely with the Animal Services management team to support all communication needs. A process is in place for collaborating on social media and earned media content.

Throughout the year, CEC posts and plans special campaigns on various topics. For example, last year we launched the "Yellow Bandana Project" and "Home for the Holidays" campaigns, which promoted responsible dog ownership, leashing, and pet adoption. These campaigns garnered media attention, including spots on local outlets like Global TV BC's Morning News. This is one example of how our coordinated efforts can effectively raise awareness.

Given this is an evolving issue, we will provide a follow up note if context or messaging requires updates. If you have any questions about the foregoing, please reach out to Maria at maria.pontikis@vancouver.ca.

Best,

Paul

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The City of Vancouver acknowledges that it is situated on the unceded traditional territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səliłwətaʔ (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations.