

Talk doesn't cook rice

—Chinese proverb

"Treating animals with respect is the heart and soul of what we're all about."

"These animals that come to the Humane Society, for the most part, were someone's cherished pet."

"These animals that have precious souls... who don't have a voice, who don't have a home, who somehow lost their home... but it is our sacred trust to care for these animals."

"The respect that we have for these animals is paramount to everything that goes on in this shelter, every single day."

"It's all about the animals..."

"We can't be the Humane Society if we're not showing respect, love and compassion. These are as natural to us as breathing."

You hear all of these heart-tugging comments in the opening of the Humane Society of Indianapolis's [YouTube video promotion](#). The video, played at "The Face of Love" fundraiser breakfast, has a steady, pulse-like cadence capable of tugging dollars out of the pockets of potential donors. After all, your financial support ["will help us end problems for Indy's animals — once and for all!"](#)

If you haven't seen the video, check it out before reading on.

The gift and opportunity offered when working with an animal is gaining and maintaining its trust. This is achieved based on our actions. The biggest challenge that an organization like the Humane Society of Indianapolis has is gaining and maintaining the trust of potential and current donors, patrons and critics by its actions. Does the organization over-inflate what it says and advertise about itself? If so, does it do so consciously or unconsciously? Is it slick promotion or innocent exuberance?

Late on the afternoon of November 24, the day before Thanksgiving and the start of the long holiday weekend, a kind, soft-spoken psychiatric social worker called me to ACT (mtA), claiming this call was her last hope. She reported that she had called "as many numbers as I could find, including the Humane Society of Indianapolis," seeking help for a client whose adolescent Labrador needed just five days of temporary foster care. The client, who required a brief hospitalization, had no family, no relatives or friends to help out. The dog was all her client had.

The social worker related that HSI couldn't help her and she would have to take the dog to Indianapolis Animal Care and Control and relinquish it.

"I couldn't believe what I was told, because they advertise that they do this*," the social worker told mtA. "They were even rather rude about it."

What happened to the "sacred trust to care for these animals"?

For those not acquainted with the history of HSI, this is not the first time the [actions didn't match the words](#).

Actions speak louder than words

Anyone familiar with animal welfare in Indianapolis recognizes that relinquishing an animal to IACC means a high risk of disease and the likelihood that the animal will die. Every possible effort should be made to find any other option, making it all the more disappointing that an HSI representative would dismiss the concerned social worker's call for help with such a "solution."

At the October 14th Indianapolis Animal Care and Control (IACC) board meeting (which, incidentally, had no quorum and therefore should have been cancelled, according to precedent), the kennel operations manager, Darcie Kurtz, reported that the live release rate of animals is approximately 45%. The statistics:

- approximately 50 animals per day are received at IACC
- 30 animals per day are "euthanized"
- 15 animals leave via transfer
- 5 animals are adopted
- 3 are returned to owner

Ms Kurtz goes on to state, "We need to get intake down. It would be nice to get to the day when the animals we're dealing with are the ones that *need* to be here, brought in by the officers due to negligence and cruelty, not those that people are dumping on the shelter."

What is wrong with getting "... to the day when the animals we're dealing with are the ones that *need* to be here," right now, today?

So our social worker was instructed that she could "dump" the dog at IACC, where its chances of ending up in the landfill are greater than 50%. This is "treating animals with respect"? Over the years, how often has this advice been dispensed from HSI when some thoughtful, in-house dialogue may have arrived at an alternative, life-saving answer?

This social worker, advocating for *both* a person and their dog, is the one who acted with compassion. She cared about the welfare of both her client and the dog. She recognized that the dog might well be her client's most important, life-saving, healing resource — a grounded connection to a selfless, unconditionally loving spirit.

It's only a value when it is acted upon

HSI's "values", listed on its [Website](#), include:

Respect: *We recognize the strong bond between humans and animals and are compassionate in the decisions we make and actions we take that impact that relationship.*

Integrity: *We can be trusted to do what we say we will do. We tell the truth, even when it may be painful. We make decisions based on what we believe is the right thing to do for the animals, their owners and their prospective owners.*

Doesn't Integrity mean doing the right thing when no one is looking? Does the recommendation this social worker received from HSI reflect respect for the bond between humans and animals? Does the HSI recommendation instill confidence that these values truly reflect the integrity of the HSI marketing campaign?

The progress in the care and treatment of the animals inside the walls of HSI has improved dramatically with the hiring of Christine Jeschke. The low-cost vaccine clinic is a nice addition to HSI's services. The agency's staff who physically care for the animals every day — certainly DO demonstrate care and concern for their charges. Unfortunately, they don't set communications policy or create the marketing campaigns. The disconnect between the marketing/promotional image and the reality of what happens when someone comes to the HSI threshold for help is vast. It is costing lives and doing little to gain institutional trust.

And then there's customer service

Anyone in business knows that when a company or service agency (for-profit or nonprofit) receives a call from an individual with a problem, the customer service representative's role is to do their best to help resolve that problem. If they can't solve it personally, they put the caller on hold and consult with their coworkers. If that provides no ideas, a responsible CSR asks for a callback number and researches the problem to come up with the very best available solution.

In the case of our social worker, the representative answering the phone at HSI might not have been familiar with the PetSafe program. (If HSI is properly training its employees and volunteers that shouldn't happen, but still....) Nevertheless, an

organization honoring its self-proclaimed “sacred trust to care for these animals” can be expected to come up with a better answer than to recommend surrendering this dog to IACC. Is that a creative resolution from an agency touting itself as “the leading voice for the welfare of animals?”

The outcome of a customer’s interaction is the signature of that business or agency. Accountability for that outcome lies with top management, be that the CEO, Executive Director, or President. Is the board of directors listening? Heart-tugging stories about treating a dog with an imbedded collar or a dog or cat with a mangled leg are noble and good fund-raising stories, but one must beware of virtuous self-promotion.

A real solution

This story does have a happy ending after being turned away by “the leading voice for the welfare of animals.” The social worker was asked if a crate would enable someone to take the dog home while the client was hospitalized. “Oh, yes!” she replied. “That would be so great, that would work!” It was arranged to deliver a size-appropriate crate (with instructions) and supplies to the agency location and was placed in the social worker’s car. The social worker, whose compassion is as natural as breathing, was then able to take the client’s dog into her own home (with her own three dogs) for the temporary fostering.

This is the season of giving, when most nonprofits increase their pleas for financial assistance and when most of us, full of holiday spirit, willingly open our wallets. Giving makes us feel good. But the appeal of heart-wrenching videos like “The Face of Love” must be supported with actions at all levels. The action for thoughtfully triaging calls and arriving at solutions does not require money. If an organization doesn’t live up to its self promotions, well-meaning donors are being deceived. There is no room for deceit in a rally to save animals’ lives and as a note - no one organization or person holds a monopoly on compassionate breathing.

Indianapolis animals and animal philanthropy deserve a Humane Society with promotions and marketing that can be trusted. Are we there yet? You be the judge.

[How do you choose a charity you can trust?](#)

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**From HSI’s Web site*

[PetSafe](#) *The Humane Society of Indianapolis offers temporary care for animals whose owners are experiencing a crisis, e.g. fire, flood, etc. Requests for*

temporary animal care must come through the Red Cross or other designated shelter. For more information, call 317.872.5650, x111

Addendum: Since the publication of “Talk doesn’t cook rice” in the “Learning the language” segment of the [December 2010 mtA newsletter](#), the Humane Society of Indianapolis redesigned its website, consequently breaking the links to this article. In the process of visiting the new HSI website to refresh the links for this article, the promotion for the PetSafe program seems to have been deleted from the website.