

Morris Animal Foundation

2009 Survey: Helping Cats Find Homes

Background

Although more cats than dogs live in U.S. homes, fewer of them receive veterinary care, and less health research is conducted on their behalf. Over the past several years, Morris Animal Foundation has worked with our veterinary, corporate and individual partners to help determine why scientists aren't studying cats and to find solutions to that problem. The Foundation launched the Happy Healthy Cat Campaign in November 2008 to increase funding for feline health and welfare research and for training of new feline-focused scientists.

The pet industry has also asked why many people who have pets choose not to have a cat. Morris Animal Foundation recently conducted an online survey to gather information about perceptions of cats and likelihood of cat ownership among non-cat owners. The Foundation believes that if cats can be placed in good homes, receive excellent veterinary care and be afforded the best therapies through humane research, then MAF will have once again met its mission to advance animal health and welfare worldwide.

Survey Methodology

Morris Animal Foundation surveyed 1,102 respondents using an online survey tool (Zoomerang). Current and previous cat owners were excluded, although respondents could own another pet (dogs, fish, etc.). Data were collected from September 23 through September 25, 2009.

Results

Attitudes/Perceptions: One-quarter of those surveyed had a neutral opinion of cats, while more than half had an overall negative attitude toward cats. The three top-rated negative behaviors cited by non-cat owners included "jumps on counters/tables," "scratches furniture" and "spits up hairballs." The three top-rated positive behaviors cited included "likes to play," "entertains itself" and "makes people smile." Top factors driving positive opinions about cats included the match between a cat and a person's lifestyle and a cat as being a potentially good pet for children. Top drivers for negative opinions were litter box smell, shedding, unprovoked biting and a perceived inability for cats to get along with other pets. Thirty-one percent of respondents indicated that they did not own a cat because someone in their household was allergic to cats.

Ownership Potential: Approximately 10 percent of the non-cat owners would definitely or probably consider having a cat; an additional 12 percent indicated that they would maybe consider a cat. Those individuals would most likely go to a shelter or humane society to get the animal.

Demographic Factors: Younger (18-24 years old) and single respondents had a more positive attitude toward cats than did older or married respondents. Suburbanites had a more positive attitude than did those living in urban or rural areas. Hispanics were more likely to consider a cat

than respondents of other ethnicities, and men were more likely than women to consider a cat. Households with dogs had a slightly more negative opinion about cats than households without pets or households with pets other than dogs. Respondents earning less than \$40,000 or more than \$80,000 annually were more likely to have positive attitudes about cats.

Discussion and Action Plans

The National Council on Pet Population Study & Policy cites allergies as one of the top three reasons why an owner relinquishes a cat to a shelter, and the Foundation survey identified similar responses. Allergies do not come up among the top 10 reasons for relinquishing a dog (www.petpopulation.org). Because of this issue, Morris Animal Foundation has funded research at the University of California-Davis to study the specific feline salivary antigens that lead to allergies in humans. If cats could one day be tested for these antigens before adoption, then those animals that do not carry the troublesome antigen could be offered to potential owners with known allergies to cats.

It is interesting that the primary negative factors for not owning a cat are issues that can be readily addressed, indicating that awareness and educational programs could increase cat ownership. With appropriate behavioral training, scratching posts and specific diets, cats should rarely jump on counters, scratch furniture or spit up hairballs. The positive perceptions are those that could be emphasized through well-coordinated media and public relations messages. For example, although dogs are often described as a human's best friend, cats could be described as the pets most likely to make their owners smile. In addition, cats seem to be a good match for potential owners who have limited living space or are physically unable to walk a large dog.

Younger individuals, single individuals, Hispanics, and men were all potential cat owners in our survey. Yet very little current marketing is directed to individuals representing these demographics. These data might not be transferable to groups in general-because our survey was conducted online and as such might be skewed-but the survey provided evenly distributed groups in many categories. Representation among genders was balanced (50 percent each), married respondents accounted for 54 percent of those surveyed, and age was distributed among six categories (18-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55-64 and 65 and older). Sixty-two percent of respondents had no children in the household.

Therefore, it seems potential targets for future cat ownership might exist, and this pilot study should serve as an impetus for a larger study to validate the results. The 2009-2010 National Pet Owners Survey, reported by the American Pet Products Association, stated that 38.2 million U.S. households own 94 million cats. Based on the Morris Animal Foundation survey, if 10 percent of households not owning a cat would consider one, an additional 6.2 million cats might find a home. The number of cats and dogs euthanized at U.S. shelters each year is lower than this number, so strategies to market the messages from Morris Animal Foundation's survey could have a dramatic impact on reducing the numbers of unwanted cats and increasing the products and services provided to cat owners. Targeting the correct group with the correct message might allow for many more of our feline friends to find loving homes.

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