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Case Study



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Client
Animal Welfare League NSW

Title
How Animal Welfare League NSW turned passive scrolling into active adoption

Category
A10. Not-For-Profit Organisations

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Q1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY & WHY DOES THIS CASE DESERVE AN AWARD?

Every day, millions of people fall in love with animals they'll never meet. Thumb-flicking past an endless feed of dogs and cats for a quick hit of joy. We gave that behaviour a purpose, turning it into something that changes lives: animal rescue.

Animal Welfare League NSW (AWL NSW) does extraordinary work, finding thousands of animals new homes every year. Yet they are up against it when competing for a fair share of attention, affection and dollars.

Part of the problem is simple: too few people know of AWL NSW, what they do and how well they do it. But that's just the tip of the iceberg. People being aware of a problem isn't enough. They need to be moved from ambivalence to action.

And animals start behind. Given the choice, people are more likely to give to human causes and value human lives above animal ones. On top of this is a rising tide of compassion fatigue, and a growing community of less-committed givers.

So, we started with a human truth: people don't care just because they understand a problem, they care when they feel it.

Then we questioned the dogma that animal welfare is about pitying animals. Our insight was more uncomfortable: dogs love humans more than humans love dogs. And the moment you realise that imbalance, it's heartbreaking. The story is suddenly less about the animals and more of a question of ourselves.

That powered a shift. We would stop begging like a charity for deserted animals and instead invite people to join the League of the Deserving. A community worthy of a pet's unconditional love.

We didn't layer on guilt; we lathered on joy. Instead of interrupting the feed with another exhausting cry for help, Fur You Feed turned the joy of #PetTok into thousands of adoption messages. Slipping prompts for real, adoptable pets into the content people were already consuming.

Just like the videos, the results were a joy to behold:

- 33.9 million TikTok impressions at $0.29 CPC (71% below the industry average);
- Adoption page views up 1,042% and unique visitors up 1,550% year-on-year; and
- Adoption applications up 44.3% year-on-year.

By converting passive in-feed affection into real adoption behaviour, we were able to change how demand is created in animal welfare. And most importantly, at a time when people are tired of caring, we gave them content that made them glad to.



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Q2. WHAT WAS THE STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS CHALLENGE?

Animal Welfare League NSW. Who the, what now?

Animal Welfare League NSW (AWL NSW) is one of Australia's oldest and most respected animal welfare organisations. It has rescued, sheltered and rehomed abandoned and surrendered cats and dogs across New South Wales for more than 60 years through its network of volunteers and adoption centres [Figure 1].

Every animal in its care must be fed, housed and looked after until it finds a home. That costs money, so the faster an animal is adopted, the sooner the cost of its care ends and its place can be given to another animal in need.

AWL NSW receives limited government funding, so the organisation survives purely off the back of donations, bequests and adoption fees. So, their drive for adoptions isn't just a nice thing to do, it's mission critical in their efforts to help more pets find homes while making the most of the dollars that they have.

A meaningful vision at risk

AWL NSW have set out a vision of a future where every animal finds a safe and loving home [Figure 2], and they'd been showing some good momentum. 2023/24 was a strong year with 3,433 animals rehomed, and both stay and surrender wait times were down [1].

But the winds were changing fast. Rising pet care cost were starting to slow adoption and raise the risk of animals being returned to shelters [Figure 3]. For AWL NSW, this would mean more animals in care for longer, and more pressure on the budget to fund them.

Starting on the back paw, against household names

Our starting point is a brand that, for all its achievements, too few people have heard of. This is not all that surprising really given it has to compete against some of the most famous charity brands in Australia for attention.

Its most glaring rival: the poster child of animal welfare, the RSPCA. And the gap is not subtle.

The RSPCA is not just the most well-known and recalled animal charity, it's one of the most recognised and reputable charity brands in Australia, full stop [2]. Ahead of the Cancer Council, Red Cross and the Salvation Army.

That fame and renown has earned the RSPCA a vastly larger war chest, so that it can operate at a scale that's many multiples of AWL NSW's, with the marketing budgets to match.

In a category where giving flows to the familiar, this is a real challenge for AWL NSW. Because it's not whether AWL NSW does good work (it does, without question), but whether it's visible enough for people to care enough to help.

Getting on the radar of a community that's over caring. No, not over-caring. They are OVER caring.

Even if we cleared our mountainous awareness challenge, we would still have to contend with people who were increasingly ambivalent, suffering from compassion fatigue and less committed than ever to giving due to a cost-of-living squeeze that had them looking inward [Figure 4].

So, an animal welfare brand is, by behavioural default, fighting for a smaller slice of an ambivalent, fatigued, less-committed giver's wallet.

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People are more charitable towards people than animals

To make matters worse, given the choice, people prioritise human charities over animal ones. Research shows that humans are far more likely to donate to human causes and value human lives exponentially more than animal lives [3].

This was a deep structural issue, and one that took a century of brand building for the RSPCA to overcome. This left AWL NSW squeezed on both sides: behind human causes when it comes to people's care-factor, and not in cooee from an awareness point of view of the one animal welfare brand that anyone in Australia knows about.

Our pleas had been falling on deaf ears, so we needed to stop begging. If people weren't willing to be charitable to animals, we'd need to give them something they'd care enough about personally to engage with.

[1] Animal Welfare League NSW Annual Report 2023-2024
[2] National Reputation Health Report, Brand Institute of Australia and KANTAR
[3] Caviola et al, 2019



Figure 1: Who is Animal Welfare League NSW (AWL NSW)?



Figure 2: A strong year and a strong vision

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Figure 3: Not without its challenges. Overcrowded shelters as people forgo their furry friends due to the cost of care

Sources: ABC News, The Guardian, and AWL NSW



Figure 4: The rise of charity fatigue and a community of less-committed givers

Sources: ABC News, The Guardian, and AWL NSW

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Q3. WHAT WERE YOUR OBJECTIVES? State specific goals.

Business objective: drive demand for adoptions

Our primary measure of success is adoption applications. It's the immediate action that's within our control to influence. Of course, adoptions are important, but they are a harder to measure because the outcome often lags due to factors outside of our control like animal availability, matching, home checks and approval), so we were more modest with our expectations.

- **Adoption applications (primary):** Baseline: 307 (based on STLY), target: 370 (+20% YoY)
- **AWL NSW website visits (primary):** Baseline: 39,000 (based on STLY), Target: 78,000 (+100% YoY)
- **Adoption page visits (primary):** Baseline: 35,290 total views and 20,817 unique visitors (based on STLY), Target: ~70,000 total views and ~40,000 unique visitors (+100% YoY)
- **Adoptions (secondary, lagging):** hold or moderately grow YoY despite cost-of-living headwinds

Marketing objective: Drive meaningful recognition, not just recall

We set ourselves the bar of beating TikTok's independent brand lift norms in the activation, and used Ideally to understand the potency of our idea to change attitudes among those looking to adopt in the future towards AWL NSW.

- **Distinctiveness among our target audience:** beat the Ideally average benchmark of 69%
- **Intent among our target audience:** beat the Ideally average benchmark of 49%.
- **Intent to adopt from AWL NSW in the next six months:** beat the 1.3% category norm

Communications objective: Stand out and make every dollar work harder

- **Impressions:** Target a CPM below the category average
- **Engagement:** Our targets are based on essentially doubling pet care average benchmarks.
  For click through rate the benchmark is 0.26%, so we set our target at ≥0.5%
  For view through rate it's 11.2%, so we set our target at ≥20%.

Media efficiency: A CPC at or below the industry average of $1.
We set our target at half that, so ≤$0.50

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Q4. WHAT WAS YOUR STRATEGY AND HOW DID YOU GET THERE?

Grow our audience beyond the deeply committed few

By acting like any other charity, AWL NSW had inadvertently narrowed itself to a small audience of deeply committed people who already cared enough about animal welfare to act. This is obviously a pretty finite audience, and one that's been shrinking even further under the cost of living pressures that are squeezing Australia's discretionary spending [Figure 5].

Growth had to come from elsewhere: a larger group of opportunity givers. Those animal lovers who might feel something but rarely act. They are ambivalent, lighter givers, who claim to 'love dogs', but have never felt anything towards AWL NSW.

Getting over the "care factor" brick wall

We already knew, due to compassion fatigue, people were tired of caring. So, following the standard compassion-led charity playbook wasn't likely to yield any of us much joy. Literally and figuratively.

Sadness is a low-arousal, 'deactivating' emotion. The kind that people are least likely to respond to or pass along [4], and distress-led appeals are more likely to lead people to turn away than to help [5].

If we didn't change our approach, we risked running right into the wilful avoidance behaviour we needed to overcome.

Another earnest appeal designed to elicit pity would be skipped, and if people are prone to caring about humans first, a guilt-laden animal message would be skipped even faster.

A life changing realisation

We came to the realisation that if people cared less about supporting animals, perhaps we should point our message in a different direction.

And the clue was hiding in plain sight in AWL NSW's own mission: "We don't just rehome animals, we change lives" [Figure 6].

But, whose life is being changed? Anyone who's adopted a rescue knows the honest answer. The animal gets a home, but the human gets something that's harder to put into words. It was a duality that AWL NSW had been implying, it had simply never turned it directly at people.

This is the bit where research and actual human emotions divert

The research was telling us that people overwhelmingly prioritise humans over animals, and mostly we do. Yet there's a strange cultural contradiction that happens when we watch a movie.

A whole city can get blown up in a film and nobody bats an eye, but the second a dog dies everyone loses it. Some will even go as far as avoiding movies where the dog dies. In fact, there's a website that's devoted itself entirely to answering that most pressing movie question: "does the dog die?" [Figure 7].

It contains this response to the film John Wick that deserves to forever be immortalised in an Effies paper:
"Yes, and it's terrible, BUT John Wick spends the rest of the movie deliberately, gloriously, and violently avenging the dog, so it feels really pro-dog overall."

John Wick quote aside, the answer to why this contradiction exists is staring us right back in the mirror. It's not a contradiction at all. We still care more about people than animals, it's just that the person in question is us.

These stories force us to reflect on ourselves and what our pets give us. Their unconditional love and companionship, and how unevenly we return it. That despite their devotion, pets often get the short end of the stick from us, as was so eloquently put by someone from Reddit:

"Dogs would do anything for their humans – protect them, comfort them, wait for them. But people abandon dogs, mistreat them, or take them for granted. That imbalance is heartbreaking". [6]

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The insight: dogs love humans more than humans love dogs

Their love is greater than what they get back, and the moment you realise that, it's devastating.
They don't deserve how we treat them. They deserve better than us.

A dog's love is unconditional, ours comes with conditions.

That's because we prefer to do what makes us feel good, personally

We all act in a large part on how things make us feel. The private 'warm glow' of having done good far outweighs any selfless altruism [7], and positive feeling and prosocial action reinforce each other: feeling good prompts giving and giving feels good [8].

So, we concluded that we would elicit a far better response not by amplifying the animal's suffering or making people feel bad, but by making them feel good about themselves. Despite our behaviour.

Strategic pivot: From a charity of deserted animals to a league of deserving humans

We shifted our focus on the people, not the pet. Turning AWL NSW from a cause you're expected to feel sorry for into a community you want to belong to. A League of the Deserving, where all rescue animals deserve a loving home, and you deserve to feel good when you give them one. Support stops being an act of charity and becomes a mark of who you are as a person.

You don't have to be a committed giver to join; you just have to want in. Belonging is aspirational in a way that pity never is, and it makes rescuing an animal aspirational too. Not sad cases to be rescued, but companions of the kind of people we'd all like to be.

Not asking much, giving a lot

Guilt-led charity insists you should care more, but ultimately people don't. So, we didn't pretend that they did. We would take people as they were, where they were. Without guilt, lectures or judgment.

This thought was key to unlocking our creative strategy, and our greatest opportunity to connect to our audience's real-life behaviour. Meeting them in their joy, rather than interrupting them with an ask.

After all, billions of people get joy from animals in their social feeds every day, yet few realise they can easily live that joy through adoption. The feeling we needed already existed, it just wasn't pointed anywhere.

[4] Berger & Milkman, 2012
[5] Batson, 1991
[6] Reddit
[7] Andreoni, 1990
[8] Akin, Van de Vondervoort & Hamlin, 2018

SUPPORTING STRATEGY IMAGES

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Australians are increasingly opportunity givers

While the proportion of Australians giving remains consistent (81% in 2021, 82% in 2020), the way in which they give continues to change. Australian givers are most likely to be need responders, giving when they hear about a need or an issue (39%) followed by semi regularly throughout the year (25%), and when they are approached for a donation or support (22%). Just 15% of givers contribute on a frequent or regular basis.

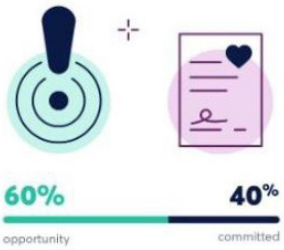


Figure 5: More Australians are opportunity givers than committed givers

Source: McCrindle



Figure 6: We don't just rehome animals – we change lives

Source: AWL NSW

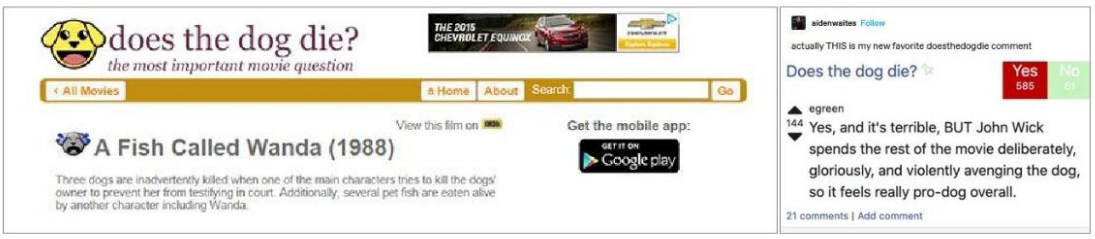


Figure 7: Where to go if you're looking for answers to that fundamental movie question: Does the dog die?

Source: doesthedogdie.com and Twitter/X

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Q5. HOW WAS YOUR STRATEGY BROUGHT TO LIFE?

A positioning that's more about you than a rescue

Animal charity, well most charity for that matter, has a template. Sad music, downcast eyes, an ask. We rallied against it, using warmth and humour to celebrate the love between people and animals.

We created a film that dramatised this lopsided love affair in a light-hearted, relatable way: rescue animals accept us, flaws and all, far more readily than we deserve. Without a flicker of judgment. The unconditional love of a pet, made literal [Figure 8].

It was an approach that more than proved its potential in testing. With likeability, distinctiveness and purchase intent demonstrating its power to cut-through and motivate those who would be most interested in adopting or rescuing a pet in the future [Figure 9].

This film was great for growing awareness and consideration in the AWL NSW brand, and making people feel good about adoption, but we were still a step removed from the bigger job that needed be done: moving people to action.

Getting a move on with #PetTok

We knew people wouldn't come looking for our dogs on their own accord, so we took them to them. Into the one place animal lovers already go to feel good: #PetTok, that adorable corner of the TikTok algorithm where people watch billions of clips of other people's cats and dogs every day [Figure 10].

Rather than interrupt their feed, we turned it into a message that inspired action. Among the sea of ridiculous pet videos, we inserted our own. After all, these videos are already the persuasive ad for having the joy of an animal in your life, and they cost next to nothing to make.

Meeting animal lovers where they were falling in love

Fur You Feed slipped adoption prompts for real rescue animals into popular #PetTok content, showing up in user's feeds at the moments they were already besotted. Each video linked directly to a real animal ready to adopt, with a clear call-to-action [Figure 11].

This transformed #PetTok from a place to passively watch pets into a place they can actively adopt them.

The mechanic ran in six steps [Figure 12]:

1. Tap into the #PetTok content that's already going viral;
2. Pair these videos with real AWL NSW rescues based on breed, personality and energy;
3. Layer bespoke, scroll-native prompts on over the videos to specifically match what people are seeing on screen ("The universe is giving you a sign, and it has paws", "Feel the wind in your hair and the dog in your car", etc);
4. Hide the ad in plain sight by running each video from the creators' own account, so they slotted seamlessly into native #PetTok content;
5. Let the algorithm do the targeting to serve content based on what people were already responding to. If they were into Staffycore, we showed them the Staffies they could adopt; and
6. Scale the feed with a deep library of content, so ads rarely repeated and we had every inch of #PetTok covered.

Eliciting feelings that are good enough to share

It wasn't just convenient; it was the most literal interpretation of our strategy: meet animal lovers where their affection already lives, remove the guilt and add a whole lot of joy, and then convert those good feelings into action.

It was also good enough to share because people are much more likely to pass along things that make them feel good than sad [9]. A joyful pet video is not just cheaper than a sad animal ad, it's infinitely more sharable, which makes AWL NSW's meagre budget work much, much harder.

[9] Berger & Milkman, 2012

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Figure 8: A rescue doesn't judge

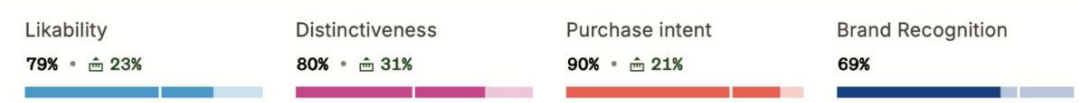


Figure 9: The approach proves itself in testing among those interested in adopting in the future

Source: Ideally, benchmarked to the Ideally average

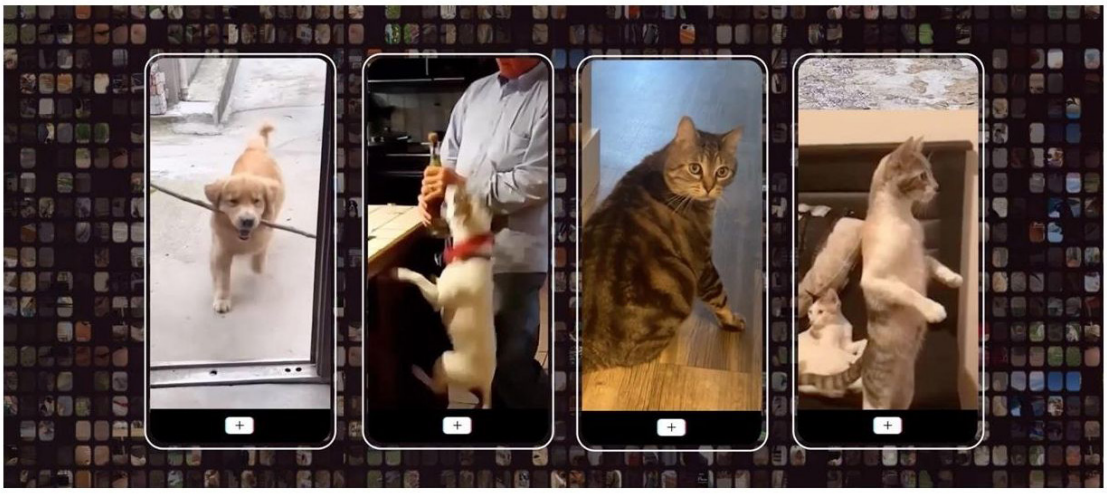


Figure 10: The adorable corner of the algorithm that is PetTok

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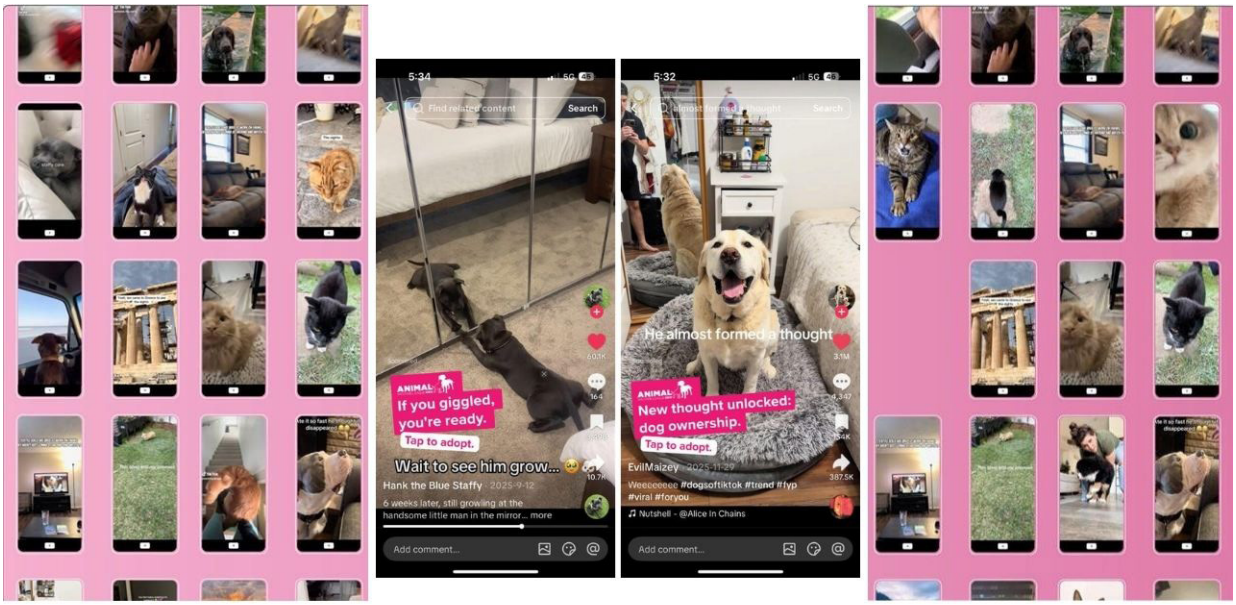


Figure 11: Meeting animal lovers where they were falling in love

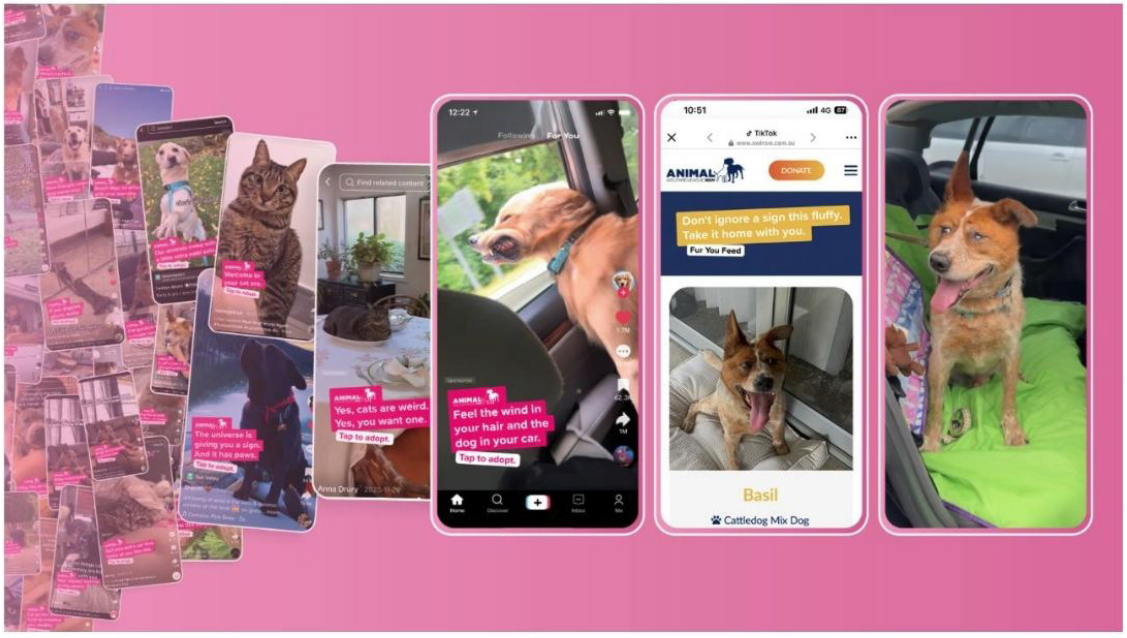


Figure 12: Turning TikTok from a place where people passively watch pets into a place where they can actively adopt them

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Q6. HOW DO YOU KNOW THAT YOUR CAMPAIGN WAS SUCCESSFUL?

Business objective: drive demand for adoptions – ACHIEVED

- **Adoption applications (primary) [Figure 13]**
  Baseline: 307 (based on STLY), target: 370 (+20% YoY)
  Result: 446 (+45.3% YoY)
- **AWL NSW website visits (primary) [Figure 14]**
  Baseline: 39,000 (based STLY), Target: 78,000 (+100% YoY)
  Result: 364,961 unique visitors (+830.2% YoY), the largest number ever by a very large margin
- **Adoption page visits (primary) [Figure 15]**
  Baseline: 35,290 total views and 20,817 unique visitors (based STLY),
  Target: ~70,000 total views and ~40,000 unique visitors (+100% YoY)
  Result: 402,905 total views (+1,041.7% YoY) and 343,431 unique visitors (+1,549% YoY)
- **Adoptions (secondary, lagging)**
  Target: hold or moderately grow YoY despite cost-of-living headwinds
  Result: 233, +19.79% (MoM); +12.65% above the 28-month mean

Marketing objective: Drive meaningful recognition, not just recall – SIGNIFICANTLY EXCEEDED

We tested both our film and activation in Ideally among those interested in adopting in the future to understand how distinctive and motivating they were.

Measured by an independent TikTok brand study, a controlled study that deliberately compares a sample of people who saw the campaign against a sample who didn't (control =382, exposed=495), which isolates the attitudinal effect.

- **Distinctiveness among our target audience [Figure 16]**
  Target: beat the Ideally average benchmark of 69%
  Result: 80% (+21%) for the film, 74% (+25%) for the activation
- **Intent among our target audience [Figure 15]**
  Target: beat the Ideally average benchmark of 49%.
  Result: 90% (+21%) for the film, 88% (+19%) for the activation
- **Intent to adopt from AWL NSW in the next six months [Figure 17]**
  Target: beat the 1.3% category norm
  Results: +2.7% (13.3% control versus 16.0% exposed). This is more than double TikTok's 1.3% category norm

Communications objective: Stand out and make every dollar work harder – ACHIEVED

- **Impressions:** Target a CPM below the category average
  Result: 33.9 million, which translated to a $2.36CPM.
- **Engagement:** Our targets are based on essentially doubling pet care average benchmarks.
  Target: For click through rate the benchmark is 0.26%, so we set our target at ≥0.5%
  Target: For view through rate it's 11.2%, so we set our target at ≥20%.
  Result: 0.83% click through rate, more than three times the 0.26% pet-category average, and a 30.7% view-through rate against a 11.22% benchmark. People watched and acted, rather than skipped
- **Media efficiency:** A CPC at or below the industry average of $1.
  We set our target at half that, so ≤$0.50
  Result: $0.29 CPC, 71% below the industry average

Just as important: people didn't just tolerate our message. They loved it.

In a category where audiences are tired of being asked to care, the response was the opposite of fatigue. Comments to the work included "I'm ready to adopt, I'm ready" and "It brought a smile to my face" [10]. Our approach made the message a joy to behold, not a guilt to discharge.

"*Fur You Feed demonstrated the power of creativity to turn attention into meaningful outcomes for animals in need. We're grateful to the teams for creating a campaign that introduced our adoptable animals to new audiences and contributed to an increase in adoptions during the campaign period, helping more deserving animals find loving homes*"

– Stephen Albin, CEO AWL NSW

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[10] Ideally verbatims

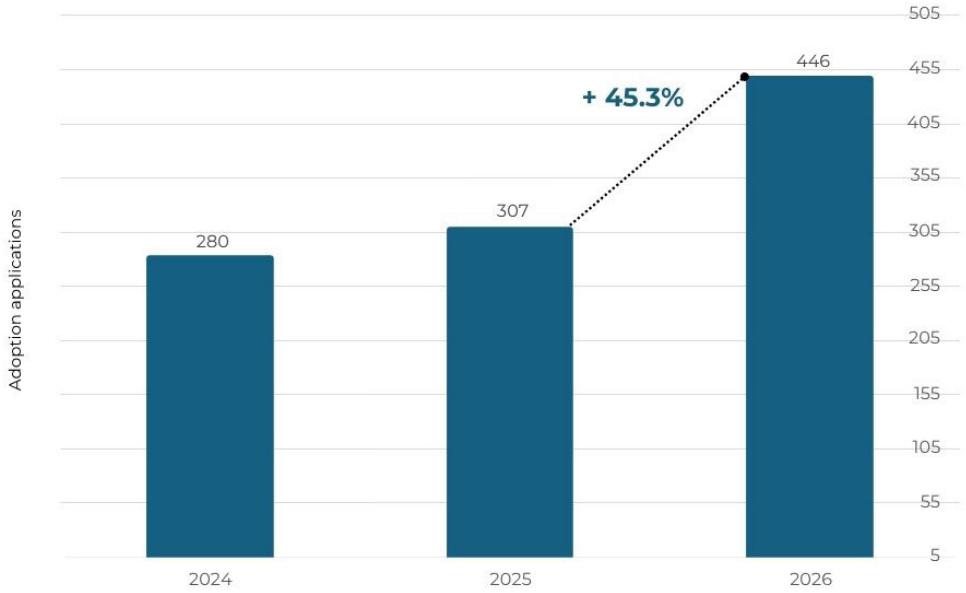


Figure 13: Adoption applications March YoY

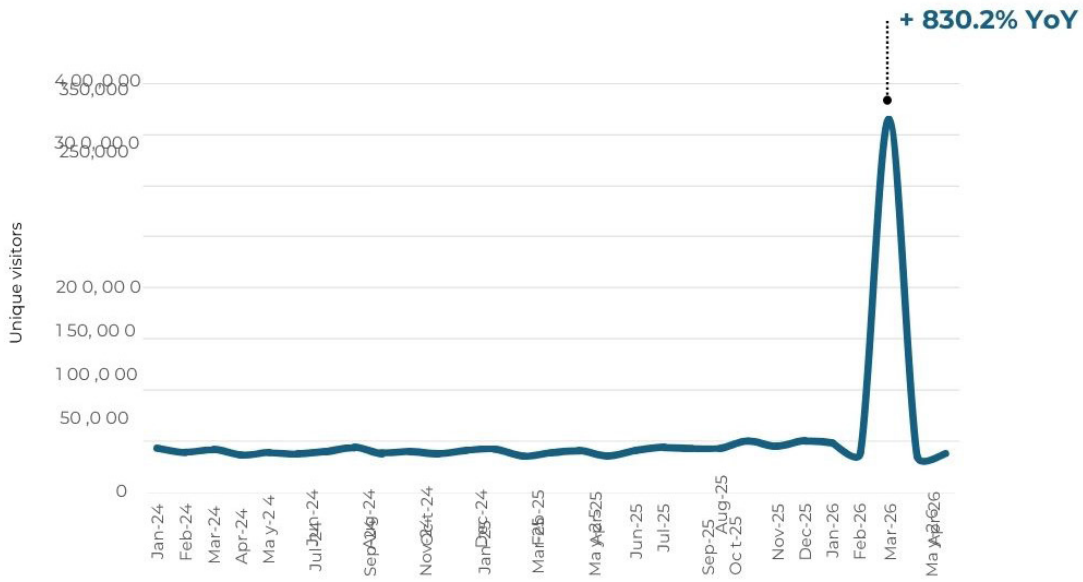


Figure 14: AWL website visits

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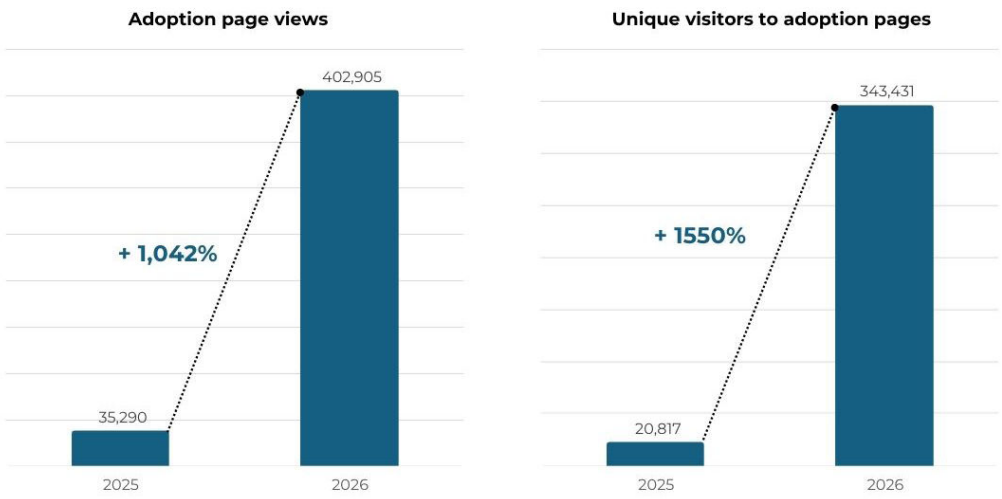


Figure 15: Views and unique visitors to adoption pages (dog and cat combined) March YoY

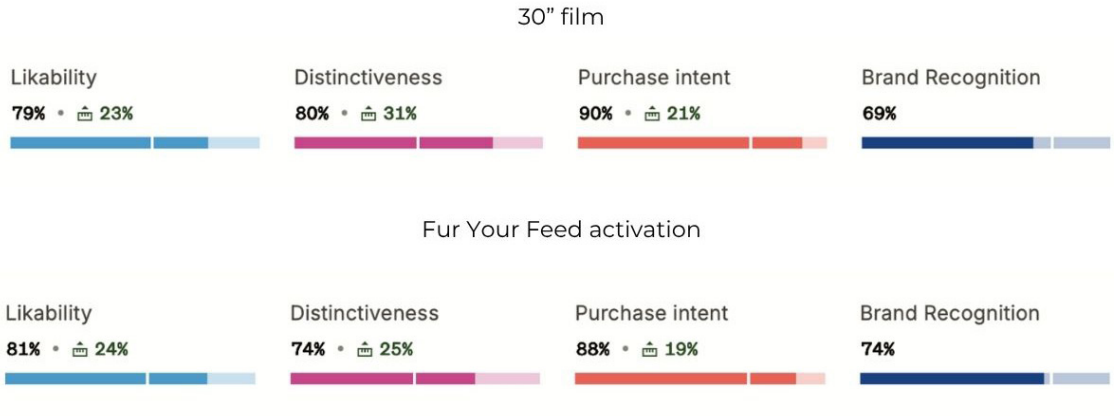


Figure 16: Testing results for both the film and the activation among those interested in adopting in the future
Source: Ideally, benchmarked to the Ideally average

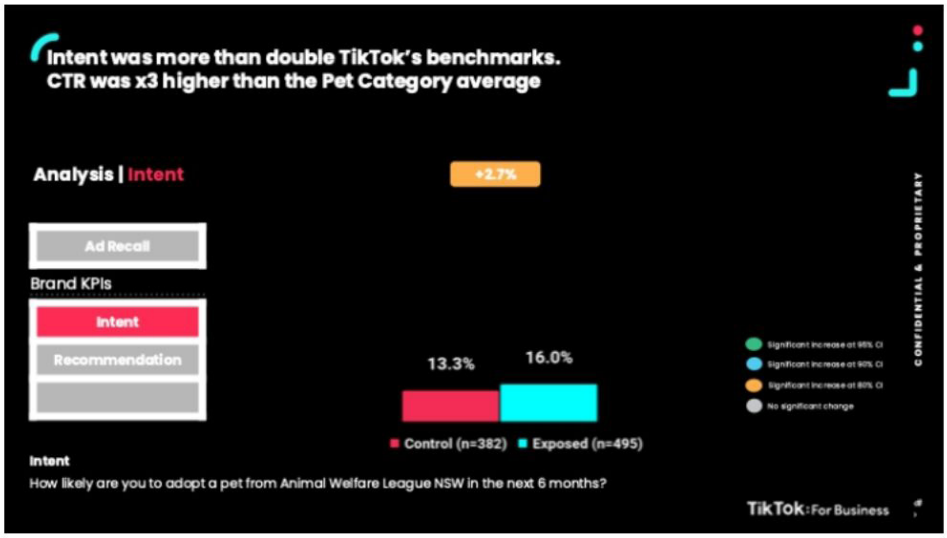


Figure 17: Intent was more than double TikTok's benchmarks and CTA was 3x higher than the Pet Category average

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Q7. WAS THE CAMPAIGN A GOOD INVESTMENT?

As a not-for-profit, AWL NSW's return is best expressed as Social Return on Investment (SROI), and the campaign's efficiency makes that return unusually strong.

In March 2026, AWL NSW recorded 233 adoptions, comprising 193 cats and 40 dogs.

Each converted adoption avoids a real cost of care. That cost per animal through an average shelter stay runs at $5,211.97 per dog (42.7 days) and $2,553.27 per cat (40.8 days).

Applying AWL NSW's cost-of care benchmarks to the adoption mix, the campaign is estimated to have generated $410,000-$620,000 in avoided costs.

This equates to a return of approximately 4.1x-6.2x on paid media investment.

Importantly, this is a conservative estimate. It excludes any incremental donations, the longer-term impact of increased awareness and consideration, and the broader societal benefits of placing animals into safe homes sooner.

For $100,000, with no other advertising support, a single month of activity generated 33.9 million impressions, more than doubled adoption intent and delivered a massive 4.1x-6.2x return on investment. In a category where AWL NSW is heavily undersized and outspent, that is an exceptional use of funds.

Put simply, this campaign provided measurable value in financial terms and meaningful value in terms of improved animal welfare outcomes.

Q8. DEMONSTRATE THAT THE RESULT WAS NOT DUE TO OTHER FACTORS

How do you know the result was a direct result of the work?

We have clean proof: a controlled brand-lift study, creative testing, and click-through rates.

TikTok's independent Brand Lift Study compared a control to an exposed group over the same period, drawn from the same audience. Whatever else was happening in March 2026, it happened to both groups, the only systematic difference was their exposure to our work.

The same lift was also seen in our Ideally results, which signals high adoption intent.

When two pieces of research run on different samples by different providers point the same way, the result is unlikely to be as a result of something else.

Wasn't it National Pet Adoption Month?

Yes, as it was the year before and the year before that. That's why our headline action metric is measured year-on-year, not month-on-month. Adoption applications rose +44.3% versus the year before. This is growth over and above the Adoption Month spike, which is present in both periods. Seasonality cannot explain a year-on-year lift of that size.

Was it your spend?

Quite the opposite. This campaign ran at $0.29 CPC, 71% below the industry average. Results dramatically outran spend, which points to the idea and the placement driving things, not brute media weight.

Was there any change to adoption fees, shelters or supply that could have influenced the result?

AWL NSW confirms there was no change to adoption fees, intake or supply, opening hours, locations or the adoption process during the period.

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Q9. GIVE CONTEXT TO BUDGET IN COMPARISON TO COMPETITORS.

Budget is less

Q10. GIVE CONTEXT TO THE BRAND'S OVERALL BUDGET.

Brand budget is less

Q11. MEDIA BUDGET ELABORATION

> The model was deliberately light on paid and heavy on earned and shared. Paid investment was focused in TikTok media, with creative sourced from existing content and run natively from creators' accounts. It was an activation designed from the get-go to be shared organically rather than bought into view.

Q12. DESCRIBE OWNED MEDIA ACTIVITY

> All campaign traffic drove to live, adoptable animal listings on AWL NSW's own website, where each animal could be adopted directly.

Q13. OUTLINE ANY SPONSORSHIPS

> This activation was developed as a world-first partnership with TikTok.

Q14. OUTLINE COMMUNICATION TOUCHPOINTS

> TikTok (in-feed, creator-led #PetTok content) as the hero channel, driving to AWL NSW's adoption website.

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