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Raise Your Paws If You Like Open Data

Posted on Apr 28, 2014 by Drew Wilson

Tags: Data and News

Meet [@CutiesInDenver](#), a Twitter bot that periodically shares cute photos of adoptable animals from Denver's shelter. Sure, the bot features loads of pictures of cute adoptable dogs, but it's also an example for how Denver can use open data to make the city a better place to live.

awwww-look-at-tiny-tim

When our Code for America Fellowship team was in Denver in February, we met with dozens of government agencies and a handful of organizations in the community. One that really struck us was our meeting with Alice Nightengale, the director of the Animal Care and Control department.

Denver's shelter is pretty awesome

Alice walked us through her brand-new LEED certified building, showing us the animal intake room, the outdoor walking area, the playrooms, the kennels, the medical rooms, the poop disposal system, and even the room where some unadopted animals are euthanized. She has done the hard work of improving the infrastructure and work process, and now she's looking towards technology to improve the shelter.

omg-sabrina-is-cute-as-heck

...But the shelter still fills up

The new facility can house thousands of dogs, cats, and other small animals, but when summer comes around, the shelter quickly reaches capacity with new litters of stray kittens and puppies filling up all the kennels and cages. Alice explained to us that even the best shelters are not good places for animals. Over time animals stuck in shelters develop health issues, the stresses of living in a shelter have a psychological impact on the animals, and all of this makes it less likely that dogs and cats will look attractive to families who are looking to adopt. In the past two years, Alice has used a variety of innovative programs to keep

animals from staying in the shelter for too long. The shelter began running a trap-neuter-release program to manage cat populations. The department works with local non-profit shelters and rescue groups to move adoptable animals from their shelter to rescue groups who can devote resources to finding these animals permanent homes. And here's a really interesting one: the shelter began a process of sharing photos and descriptions of their adoptable animals on the city's website.

duke-is-so-hella-cute

Making city data actionable by bringing it to residents

Right now if a resident wants to get info about adoptable animals, he or she needs to go to a government webpage and look through a list of animals. Here's a scenario of how someone finds adoptables under the current model:

Sally is interested in adopting a pet. She goes to denvergov.org and a couple clicks later, she's on a webpage for the animal shelter. She browses through a list of dogs or cats, but doesn't find one who she likes. So she leaves the webpage a few days later goes back and looks through the list again. This time she finds one that she likes. She calls the animal shelter and sets up an appointment to visit. When she gets to the shelter she meets the dog, fills out paperwork, and begins the adoption process.

The fact that Sally can look through the shelter pets online is actually pretty huge, there are many cities that have online listings of adoptable animals but most cities don't have anything like that. In this regard, Denver is a step ahead of many other cities. But the process could still be improved.

In this scenario, Sally is already motivated to adopt an animal so she's willing to go a webpage a few times to look through a list and then decide if there's a good animal for her. If we want to get more families to adopt and help the city empty the shelter faster, we need to set the target on people who are not already explicitly looking for a new pet. Instead of making folks go to city websites for info about adoptable animals, why not bring the info about animals to where people are already communicating? So we thought, let's push this data to Twitter. The city is already taking these photos and putting them on the web, let's just put that info in a place where there are people already communicating and sharing. If we can get more people to look at these animals, they might share them with friends and spread the word and maybe their friends will be able to adopt.

whos-a-good-boy-ikes-a-good-boy

Bigger implications

The strategy of CutiesInDenver is to bring information to the online places where people are already interacting and communicating. Instead of making people go to a City webpage and look at a list of trash pickup days, why not put it somewhere where residents are already finding information? Instead of building a single better website, cities can push data out to residents. This strategy is a reproducible pattern. Cities can apply this strategy to different areas: voting info, info about community meetings, street closures, and so on and so on. Making information social, actionable, and shareable can lower the barrier to citizen engagement.

@CutiesInDenver is an Example for Open Data

CutiesInDenver wouldn't be possible with just a data dump; it needs live data. Data portals alone don't make for strong citizen engagement. Right now there are around 180 datasets on the Denver open data portal and in the next year the City is planning to double that number. Datasets are important, but *actionable data* in a usable format is even more powerful. Instead of thinking about open data as only a series of large sets of comma-separated values, think also about API's. API's are used by all the the most successful tech companies out there like Facebook, Twitter, Meetup, and Google. If cities follow suit and provide their open data as API's, we can very literally turn governments into software platforms. Residents will be able to build applications on top of city data.

why-the-heck-havent-you-adopted-lexi-yet

Let's see if this works.

So right now we're testing this out. Do people like it? Will the Twitter bot result in more adoptions? Will it help Alice get animals out of the shelter faster and get them into good homes, saving the City money in the process? It's all to be determined.

CutiesInDenver is small project built over a few days with a small team of people. There were a total of four of us working on this project, three Code for America Fellows and a volunteer from the local Colorado Code for Communities Brigade. Our goal with Cuties was to illustrate a tangible outcome from opening up City data and some techniques for making information more accessible, actionable, and sharable. This project was mostly a proof of concept, but hopefully it will also help some adorable dogs and cats find new forever homes.

We have a few more experiments like this in the works, so stay tuned for more. And go follow @CutiesInDenver.

This project was a collaboration between Denver brigade member, David Viramontes ([@dviramontes](#)) and 2014 fellows, Becky Boone ([@boonrs](#)), Kavi Harshawat ([@KaviH](#)) and me, Drew Wilson ([@drewSaysGoVeg](#)).

Archived post

Code for America recently moved its blog to a new home. We didn't want to leave anything behind, so we moved this post by Drew right here. We hope you enjoy it.

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