Trainer's Challenge of the Unwanted Horse

An event held on behalf of the MN Hooved Animal Rescue

The Trainer's Challenge of the Unwanted Horse, held Saturday, September 13, 2008, was a unique event; it was just as educational and awareness building as it was promotional, and it was synergistic in its partnership marketing and use of electronic media. The event was held in the newly opened Leatherdale Equine Center at the University of Minnesota, and featured twelve untrained MHAR horses that were presented by 12 professional trainers. Each trainer made use of 100 days to develop communication, rapport, and skill building to transform an untrained, unwanted horse into a pleasurable and rideable mount. Trainers were given the opportunity to show their expertise before hundreds of enthusiastic horse lovers and compete for $4,000 that was awarded to the trainer that the judges deemed most effective.

After the presentation, the horses were auctioned off to the highest bidder who could provide a suitable and safe home. The bidders who attended were given a fantastic opportunity to witness the horse work through halter, equitation, trail class, and freestyle before bidding on a professionally-started mount.

Numerous breed and riding styles were selected for this event: paints, quarter horses, thoroughbreds, and arabians with suitability in reining, cutting, natural horsemanship, dressage, eventing, hunt seat, and western pleasure.

The full-featured, newly-opened Leatherdale Equine Center hosted the event. This exposure to a prime market of 500 horse enthusiasts will help future bookings of equestrian events. It also promoted the University of Minnesota degree program for equine-related careers.

Awareness Building

This was a great awareness-building event for the MHARF. Posted prominently on the MHARF Web site is this quote: "Whenever an animal is somehow forced into the service of men, every one of us must be concerned for any suffering it bears on that account. … No one may shut his eyes and think the pain, which is therefore not visible to him, is non-existent" (Albert Schweitzer). This event was inspiring to see how horses from dire conditions can be transformed into an enjoyable and competitive mount.

Headquartered in Zimmerman, Minnesota, the MN Hooved Animal Rescue Foundation (MHARF) is a registered 501(c)3 non-profit foundation the runs exclusively on donations. Founder and Director Drew Fitzpatrick has been rescuing and restoring the health of horses and other animals in distress with MHARF since 1996.

Horses come from a variety of circumstances. Some are donated as a result of personal hardships like divorce, financial or medical calamity. While others are seized by law enforcement when severe neglect and abuse have been reported, such as the Pine County case in 2002 where over 50 starved horses were lawfully removed. Others are abandoned, no longer wanted, or sent to auction. With the help of volunteers and foster homes, MHARF has rescued and placed hundreds of horses into safe and suitable homes over the last 12 years (mnhoovedanimalrescue.org).

The Trainer's Challenge of the Unwanted Horse event provided MHARF great exposure to potential future horse owners that rescue horses are trainable and suitable for many riding disciplines. It also raised awareness for donations and foster homes.

Educational

Few people realize the importance of proper horse training, especially with horses that have been abused or neglected. This event was brilliant in the way that it educated horse enthusiasts to realize the need for professional training and the importance of learning how to effective communicate with horses. It is much more effective to communicate with a horse in the way a horse understands instead of making the horse understand humans. Just having a love for horses is not enough to being an effective rider, nor is sending a horse to be professionally trained. According to the MHARF, "Training a horse is a lifetime commitment, even after giving it a good start." The trainers demonstrated effective communication very well – taking horses that were untrained and in 100 days transforming them into suitable mounts for knowledgeable riders.

This event raised awareness for the need to learn how to effectively communicate with horses in a language they understand. The results were breathtaking and inspiring. As a former foster home for the MHARF, I donated my time and financial resources to train and show horses to prospective adoptive owners. The horses I worked with had trust issues to overcome and weren't suitable for beginner riders. Many of the prospective buyers had little experience which was a bad combination: inexperienced riders get hurt, the horses become even more distrustful of human handlers and are then returned to the rescue. Nobody wins in this scenario. This event demonstrated effective handling that anyone can learn. This doesn't come through love and good intentions; it must be learned. Through effective communication with a horse, everyone wins. The horse is happy, and the rider is happy—*this is priceless!*

Most Effective Fundraising Efforts

According to Petfinder.com, an online search Web site for unwanted animals, there are 300,914 adoptable pets from 11,856 adoption groups in the United States listed with Petfinder.com alone; 2,345 are rescue horses in need of new homes. This doesn't include the hundreds who are not registered with Petfinder.com like Old Friends Equine, a horse rescue that takes in retired race horses (Horse Haven and The Horse Rescuer).

Web sites have been a great way to promote adoptable animals and place them into new homes. The MHARF Web site receives 1,400 hits per day on average. On every site is an online donation option. Other ways to raise funds include events such as tack sales, book sales, garage sales, and walk for animals events as hosted by the Animal Humane Society.

While these are a means to raising some awareness and funds, they don't compare to other events as the "Extreme Mustang Makeover" that was hosted by The Mustang Heritage Foundation (MHF), in partnership with the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and sponsored by Fort Dodge, a manufacturer of equine immunizations, sponsored the first-ever event of its kind in 2007 called the "Extreme Mustang Makeover". The event a "standing room only" crowd of hundreds of enthusiastic onlookers as they watched "the results of 100 trainers working 100 days to tame 100 of America's iconic wild Mustangs". It was a unanimous success and all 100 horses were auctioned off and placed into suitable homes. A second event will be held September 18-21, 2008 (Mustang Smackdown).

No doubt the success of the Extreme Mustang Makeover event inspired Drew Fitzpatrick to host the first ever Trainer's Challenge of the Unwanted Horse. It was educational, entertaining, informative and inspiring. The Trainer's Challenge of the Unwanted Horse is no comparison to traditional fund raising efforts like tack sales and garage sales that only focus on

generating revenue. This event drew hundreds of equine enthusiasts to see first hand how adaptable MHARF horses are with correct training.

Promotional

While the event itself was unique, the front-end publicity and marketing was weak. The event was loosely known within the circle of MHARF volunteers and not promoted outside this scope to saddle clubs and breed specific organizations. Being a foster home for the MHARF the last four years, I didn't even know about the event until I stumbled upon a craigslist.com ad from one of the trainers that directed me to their Web site. Within the Web site, it wasn't prominent nor was it easy to get to the information when looking for it.

Once I knew about the event and how to navigate the Web site to get to the information, there was a great collaboration of electronic promotional media: print, electronic, Web site and blog with updates and photos, trainers reachable via email or phone to talk with prospective bidders, some of the trainers advertised on craigslist.com which is how I found out about the event that linked me to the MHARF Web site. All of these were cost-effective means of communicating the event, provided the target market stumbled upon it.

Effectiveness

It is unlikely that this event to market broke horses broke even. Although there was great synergy between cost-effective electronic media sources (craigslist.com ads linking to the MHARF Web site linking to trainer's blogs), it wasn't marketed to the right people, nor was there integrated marketing between advertising and public relations.

The event was well attended by over 500 enthusiastic horse lovers, yet it was poorly attended by bidders. Only 11 bidders were present with 12 horses for auction. One hundred days of profession training accounts for $1,500 plus the cost of the horse should easily sell for $2,500-$3,500. Sadly, the horses were auctioned off for as little as $350 and only 7 out of the 12 horse presented were sold.

A direct mail campaign could have drawn more prospective bidders. Acquiring a mailing list from the numerous saddle clubs, horse organizations and membership groups would have improved the front-end marketing. Lists could have been attained from the MN Horse Council; 4H and community saddle clubs; breed associations such as AQHA and MN Arabian Horse Registry; discipline-specific groups such as western pleasure, games, dressage and event clubs; pony clubs; the MN Horse Expo and MN State Fair horse show circuit. A sample of an effective direct mail piece that may be mailed to the acquired lists is attached. It includes event information and includes an offer for a chance to win a MHARF horse of your choice.

In addition, press releases capturing a news hook like "Extreme Makeover: Equestrian Style" could have been sent to newspapers and local television news stations. Banner ads could have been posted on main search sites as: petfinder.com, dreamhorse.com, agdirect.com, equine.com, horsetopia.com, equinenow.com and link back to the MHARF Web site.

The MHARF Web site obtains 1,400 hits per day. A simple form could be added to the Web site to capture email addresses and names and a monthly e-mail campaign sent out to inform interested horse enthusiasts of upcoming events, new horses in the rescue, stories from trainers and from those who have adopted horses from MHARF.

Timing

Poor timing was another reason for the lack of bidders. The economy is in a downturn and the horse market is oversaturated. Hundreds of quality horses are not selling, so marketing rescue horses is even more challenging. In addition, the event could have been moved up two months to capture more people in the market for a new horse. Historically, fall is not a good time to sell a horse in Minnesota.

Nevertheless, the need for new homes is growing as the economy produces more and more circumstances of neglect (Paulo Prada). The closing of the slaughterhouses in the United States has also accounted for a growing number of unwanted horses (Horses Deserve Better). There have been reports of people turning their unwanted horses loose in state parks. Horses need to move into new homes even more so in a down-turned economy and the Trainer's Challenge of the Unwanted Horse was an exceptional idea to promote the trainability and quality of MHARF horses to a captive audience. Currently over 50 horses are in MHARF foster care awaiting new adoptive homes.

Key details and Logistics

Key details in a promotional campaign for this event would begin with timing, capitalizing on free and low-cost promotional media and a direct mail piece sent to the target market: horse owners.

The event needs to be held earlier in the Minnesota riding season to be more effective. Most people are shopping for a horse in the spring and early summer than in the fall. It costs a lot of money to winter a horse that isn't ridden much until spring, unless an indoor arena is available.

Prior to the event, press releases need to be sent to news media and equestrian publications and the event well promoted on the MHARF Web site. Since MHARF is low on funds for promotion, the Web site could be maximized. Since 1,400 hits are averaged each day, a simple e-mail form could be added to the Web site and capture names and e-mails to receive monthly e-news about events, stories, and horses new to the rescue. This would be one way to improve communication within the MHARF volunteers who are the best word-of-mouth advertisers.

In addition to online media, a direct mail piece, such as the one attached, could be mailed to acquired equestrian lists six weeks from the event with a follow up postcard mailed three weeks before the event.

While the event didn't generate the funds expected, it was a great effort for a first-time event. Much can be strengthened next year to attract more enthusiastic horse shoppers.

Direct Mail copy:

Trainer's Challenge of the Unwanted Horse

An event held on behalf of the MN Hooved Animal Rescue

Saturday, September 13, 2008

10am-6pm

New Louise Leatherdale Equine Center

University of Minnesota

Twelve unwanted, untrained horses. Twelve professional trainers. One hundred days of training. It all comes together for the first ever Trainer's Challenge of the Unwanted Horse. Don't miss this unique opportunity to watch trainers transform untrained horses into rideable

mounts and work them through several classes: farrier handling, halter, trailering, trail, equitation and freestyle. A prize of $4,000 will be awarded to the trainer that the judges deemed most effective, and at the end of the day, these professionally trained horses will be auctioned off to the highest bidder with an approved home.

Don't miss this opportunity to bring home a professionally trained horse. Horse breeds featured are paints, quarter horses, thoroughbreds, Arabians and suitabilities in western pleasure, reining, cutting, natural horsemanship, games, trail, dressage, eventing, and hunt seat. Plus, register to win one of 54 MHARF horses of your choice!

MN Hooved Animal Rescue Foundation (MHARF) is a registered 501(c)3 non-profit and has been rescuing and restoring the health of horses and other animals in distress since 1996.

 For more information, visit www.mnhoovedanimalrescue.org.

Register to win a MHARF horse of your choice.

Simply complete this card and drop it in the drawing barrel at the event.

Must be present to win. Free horse drawing applies to horses that have not been bid on.

Sources

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