

# INSTAGRAM

FOR ADOPTABLE DOGS



how-to guide  
for rescues,  
fosters, and  
volunteers

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**for every weirdo dog looking for a  
home, there's a weirdo human out  
there looking for that dog**

here's to finding the perfect weirdo

## CASE STUDY: TITAN

A few hours after this post went up on Instagram, Titan had multiple adoption applications from followers on Instagram. The man and dog who would be Titan's new family visited him twice that day and took him to his forever home the same day as the initial post.

It's not always this fast, but often it's this effective. Most people aren't visiting local shelters on a regular basis, but most people ARE scrolling through social media daily. Together, we can give great dogs like Titan a platform to say hi to the community.





# ONLINE PRESENCE

There are tons of hilarious and cute animals on social media. Gazillions of eyes land on animal posts daily. If more of this entertaining animal content was created by rescues and volunteers, we could better harness the power of social media for animals who need the exposure. I hope ultimately this online movement will shift society's preconceptions of what kind of dogs may end up looking for a family through an animal rescue. This guide is meant to be a basic outline for volunteers and rescues to work together to help give each weirdo dog the best chance at finding their weirdo human.





# social media for **VOLUNTEERS**

The goal is to help each dog find not just 'a home', but the perfect family for their unique character.

After volunteering with over 30 animal rescues and showcasing hundreds of dogs on social media with a more-often-than-not success rate, I've learned a lot. I want to share the most valuable bits here in hopes of helping adoptable pups far and wide access the essential online representation they deserve.



# 3 EASY STEPS

## #volunteer

1 sign up to volunteer at your local rescue and let them know your goal is to take dogs for adventures.

# 2

## #pupfolio

when you take a pup out, document the dog doing the things the dog does with photos and videos.

# 3

## #post

put your best stuff on social media tagging the rescue and inviting them to collaborate to maximize exposure to potential adopters.



# DAKOTA

@TRAILSANDBEARS



# WHAT THE HECK IS AN ADOPTION ADVENTURE?

If you've volunteered as a dog-walker before, you probably have a familiar walking route in the shelter's vicinity. Dogs in shelters rely on walks around these routes for daily enrichment, social time (with you), and general mental and physical wellbeing during their temporary stay.

An adoption adventure is more of a demonstration for potential adopters. The goal is to incorporate as many circumstances as possible that may come up in their lives with adoptive families to show (in videos) how they act; **a drive, a hike, and a picnic** cover a lot of these situations.

**There should be scenery** (the dog almost never cares if there's scenery, but their post is more likely to make it in front of the right eyes of you take a nice cover photo, which usually means scenery).

There should be **some plan of a journey or goal while remaining flexible** and willing to change the journey and goal constantly during the day when needed. Example: goal: "we will drive to the woods and climb the tallest mountain and take the most beautiful mountain top pics". But your new buddy is dog-reactive (allegedly) and the parking lot at the tallest mountain is packed so you keep driving to the 48th tallest mountain where no one wants to hike and take a walk along the goat path by the river instead only you encounter a bear so you turn back and have your picnic in the car while the bear wishes he had a turkey sandwich. Have a plan, but throw it out the window when it's no good anymore. Have a few plans.

Adoption adventures should be fun and easy, but they are more likely to be stressful and time-consuming. I encourage volunteers to consider the gravity of the responsibility while also trying to have a good time. While a fantastic outcome (finding the perfect family online) is more likely, if not done with proper consideration, the day has the potential to cause major setback to the reputation of rescues and if your new buddy makes a mistake (bite) due to a situation he wasn't ready for: he will be the one with the permanent record and/or potentially paying the ultimate price. Through no fault of their own, some adoptables are down to their last chance so remember how much your attention matters. Ideally, **there should be no other dogs or people** with you to distract from the mission or to yammer on during videos of the dog in the scenery (if you are with friends, explain your mission and let them know you need some videos to be dog- and nature-centric they will probably be as helpful as possible). This may be the hardest part for most volunteers as you likely have your own pup(s) who would be so happy to come on the adventure. Bringing friends can take your attention away from getting to know the dog which will detract from the dog's much-deserved representation, and will also hamper your vigilance/situational awareness. Here's a fun thing I do: think of adoption adventures like very important work: arrive on time and prepared, take it seriously, act professionally and courteous, leave my dog at home, don't have friends loitering around, and keep calm while at the same time remaining hypervigilant about everything that could ruin the day, the mission, and the dog\*.

\*every dog has the potential to bite when scared, confused, or feeling threatened. Since we don't know the dog we're adventuring with, we can't know the things that scare that dog. It's imperative to give other trail users space when passing and keep an eye on the dog's body language throughout the day.

# ADOPTION ADVENTURE PACKING LIST

- backpack:

big enough to carry all your things with easy-access treat pockets (or add a fanny pack for treats and phone)

- camera:

recent smart phones are perfect for capturing close-up photos and videos in wide angle. use a fancy camera for the cover shot if you want but it is not a necessary piece of the puzzle. also handy: GoPro

- charger pack or extra batteries:

adoption adventures are taxing on your phone and camera. plan a way to recharge so you don't look like a dummy in front of your new buddy when you run out of power at the scenic photo spot

- snacks/lunch:

something for you and something for your new buddy to enjoy at the picnic spot. pack many little pieces that can be used to train and keep attention during photos. you can almost always make a friend with dried beef liver but it's a good idea to ask if the dog has any food allergies in advance

- drinks:

water plus a container/bowl. I keep a container under the seat in my car to offer hydration before and after adventures and also pack water for the adventure (though it's usually rejected in favour of lake and stream water)

- bear spray:

depending on your adventure habitat

- well-fitting neutral coloured harness + collar:

minimal flair so the dog's character can shine. less purple sparkle, more plain black or brown. avoid logos, patterns, and sports teams: you want everyone to be able to picture this dog in their life, even if they like the wrong team or the wrong sport or the wrong colour

- sturdy leash + body attachment:

in the name of not losing any dogs (that would be embarrassing) and having two free hands, I attach the leash to my body. during moments when the leash is hand held, keep in mind you're only one squirrel away from being empty handed (and embarrassed). for a secure hand hold, don't hold the handle - instead, put your whole hand through the handle and hold the leash (with the handle snug on the back of your hand). then reconnect to your body at the earliest possible opportunity.



- foster tag with your phone number:

in the embarrassing event that you decided to hand hold the leash against better judgement and dropped it or were otherwise outwitted by your new buddy and become separated from him or her, you'll panic only slightly less if you've attached your phone number to the dog's collar. you can get a tag engraved at most pet stores with "FOSTER DOG". the relative ease of mind is well worth the small cost in my experience. free alternative: make your own or borrow your dog's tag for the day

- squeaker:

steal one out of a toy (a dog may already have extracted one for you). use it to elicit facial expressions at photo time or make yourself sound more interesting during conversation than you really are

- park pass:

location dependant. every adoption adventure around here requires either a national park pass or a provincial park pass

- basic first-aid and survival gear:

this one is personal preference and adventure dependant. on my easiest adventures, I bring a knife, matches, lighters, duct tape, cash, painkillers, elastics, zip ties, extra layers, eye protection (sunglasses or clear glasses to protect from excited paw swats and pokey branches when being pulled through the woods). Other adventures call for drysuits, wetsuits, PFDs (dog and human), dry bags etc.

**after you've completed your carefree  
looking adoption adventure, take a  
sigh of relief; you're halfway done**

next step: post on social media

"is there anything particular I need to consider when posting?" you're probably wondering.

I'm glad you're (probably) wondering; the answer is "yes".

## VOLUNTEERS AND FOSTER PARENTS

The work done daily at shelters all over the world by volunteers is the reason so many pups get a chance at life. And "fostering saves lives" is more than just a hashtag.

Volunteers and fosters are the ones who get to build a relationship with adoptable dogs. Each dog reveals his or her character at every interaction and experience.

Every single one of these **special moments** is packed with the magic that will help the perfect families fall in love with the pup: whether monster or goober.

Next time you notice your heart melting a little bit, take a video or photo to show these adoptable dogs living happy life in spite of their situation. Photos (and especially videos) of happy dogs in shelters helps the public realize that shelters aren't full of terrible, scary dogs (yes, people do think this). I get messages regularly through my Instagram account from people who are shocked to see such lovely pups homeless. Yet, as you probably know, the shelters are FULL of lovely pups!

"But I don't have very many followers..." Neither did I when I started.

**You don't need thousands of followers on Instagram or all the friends on Facebook to help adoptables get out there.**



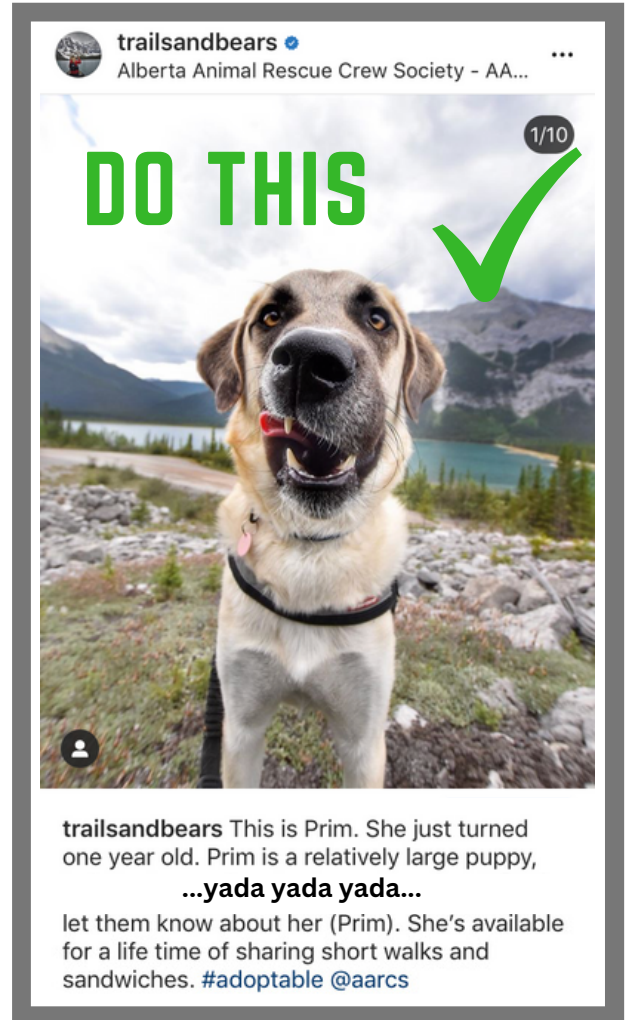
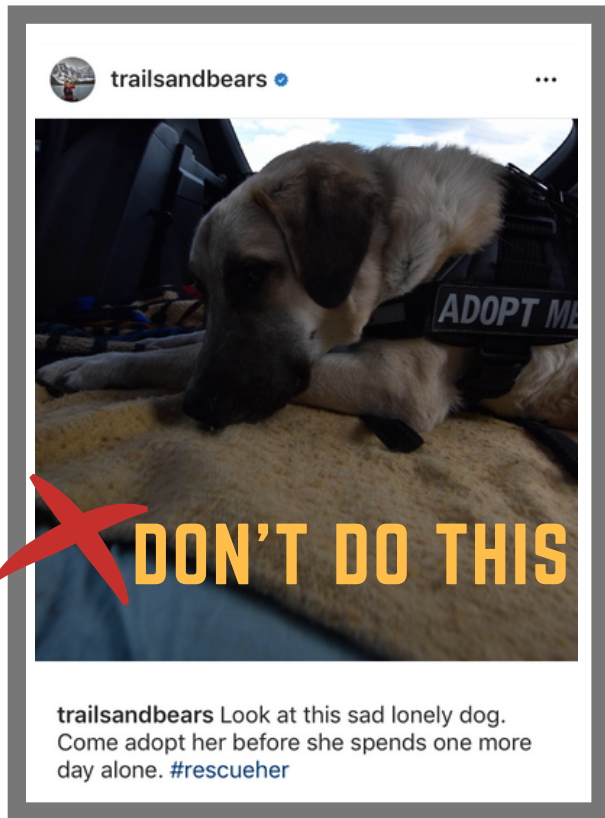
# JANICE

When you post your buddy on **Instagram**, be sure to TAG and GEOTAG the shelter, and HASHTAG "adoptable". For example: Scully, a recent adoption adventurer buddy posted on @trailsandbears, was available through Fostering Hope Animal Rescue in Red Deer, Alberta. Both the photo and caption included the tag "@fosteringhopeanimalrescue", "#adoptable" in comments, and the geotag: "Fostering Hope Animal Rescue Foundation". This helps people know where she is, but also allows the rescue to easily repost for greater exposure for Scully (which they did and she was adopted lickety-split).

When posting on **Facebook**, the same goes for "checking in" at the rescue (not the town it's in, but the actual org.; in this example I used "Fostering Hope Animal Rescue Foundation" as the Facebook location. You should also mention the rescue in your post by starting to type their name immediately after "@". When the right name pops up, just click on it and it will appear in bold so viewers can click on it and admins at the rescue will be notified of the post and able to share.



# ADOPTION POST DOS AND DON'TS



- Whoops! Where's the geotag? This is an easy way to deliver simple and valuable info to your audience. Use it to tag the location of the shelter.
- We can't see the dog's face clearly, and she doesn't look overly joyous here (even though she was!). How will your audience connect with the animal if they can't see his or her face? Try to catch the dog when they are overtly happy or playful for their cover photo.
- Don't portray or describe a dog as "in need". Guilt and pity have no place in an adoption decision. Every dog is unique and amazing. Why waste a caption with a sad appeal to the masses when you can give useful information instead? Write about exactly what is special about this dog. And keep your post about the dog. They probably don't have their own Instagram account yet, so this is their chance to make a debut.
- Who is this dog? What's he like?
- Where would I find the dog? Make it easy! Use the @tag for the shelter in the caption AND the photo.
- square orientation will ruin your composition and doesn't maximize viewing real estate

- Geotag.
- Clear photo of a happy(?) dog with eyes visible.
- Caption with basic info and some traits Prim has to offer, and how she reacted throughout the day
- The "@aarcs" tag in the caption conveys where Prim is and allows followers to get directly onto AARCS' page, it also alerts the shelter admin of the post. This is one of the most important parts because the shelter can then share the amazing post you've created with their followers.
- Using "#adoptable" in the caption allows followers to see at a glance that she's adoptable while scrolling.
- Using portrait orientation for all content shared affords Prim the most possible real estate in front of viewers (same width as a landscape shot but taller).
- Use the maximum (ten) allowed photos and videos per post. One cover photo for attention plus nine videos of her day to show her character is one successful formula.

# 6 INTEGRAL ADOPTION POST ELEMENTS

**1. Include the animal rescue organization as your geotag** ("location" - goes at the top of the photo). Use the rescue even if the photo wasn't taken there. This indicates to the scroller that this post is more than just a fun dog photo and might entice further reading.

**2. Include the @tag of the rescue in the caption.** This allows the reader to click to the rescue's page and alerts the rescue of the post.

**3. Use a hashtag that will catch the scroller's eye.** #adoptable

**4. Add info about how this dog is unique and great.** What does this dog bring to the table that would make a human lucky to have him or her for life? Include age.

**5. The cover photo.** Instagram is a visual platform. If the cover photo stinks, the whole post stinks. Try to capture the dog close up and happy. Make sure the photo is in focus and find the best background possible. Think hikes, forests, urban jungles, parks, car rides.

**6. Videos.** You can (and should) write a thoughtful description of your day together, but it will never compare to what dogs can convey for themselves.

Everything in this guide is just one lady's opinion. **In my opinion:**

- An adoption post should not include breed. Focus on the dog's unique character. Dogs vary greatly in character amongst the same breed, and naming a breed can bring memories to readers of an experience that has nothing to do with this dog. It's useless (worse: misused) information. To top it off, breed mix of a rescue is almost always someone's guess. Don't publish guesses. Instead, get to know the dog in front of you and talk about their individuality.
- An adoption post should omit the dog's past experiences (unless the dog is a retired sheep herder, fire rescue dog, movie star, or some other info that describes their talents). Telling readers a sad story about a dog's sad history is irrelevant info and a waste of caption space. If the dog has had a bad life, that speaks about humans, not the dog. Though this information may be needed for certain fundraising posts, we don't want folks adopting dogs out of pity or guilt. We want people to adopt because they fall in love with the animal (and vice versa) based on compatibility and lifestyle goals (not looks, breed stereotypes, or some rescue hero complex).

# instagram "stories"

"stories" are attention sucking tidbits of videos and/or photos that expire in 24 hours and keep people all over the world glued to their phones for a depressing number of hours every week. on a happy note: it's a great tool to get your new buddy in front of local dog-lovers (if you do it right)

## tips

- introduce the dog in the beginning of the story (with a great photo) and basic information including the most important: that he or she is #adoptable and from what rescue
- use videos to tell the story of your adventure. say less, show more.
- tag the rescue and any of your friends or family who offered ahead of time to share. shrink all tags and move off the slide so they don't distract from the story (leave the rescue's tag visible in at least the first and last slide of the story)
- stories should have a beginning, a middle, and an end. good stories have a conflict and a resolution. fortunately, the nature of adoption adventures usually offers multiple things that don't go according to plan affording great storylines. elaborate, but don't be too elaborate. keep it simple and the videos will carry most of the entertainment responsibility.
- add a link at the end to the rescue's website where people can learn more and apply to adopt
- use actual sound as much as you can (rather than adding songs). it's more engaging to the viewer. there are exceptions where maybe you stubbed your toe and said a bad word or other exceptions



# social media for **RESCUES**

Underused and misunderstood, social media is a free tool that can drastically expedite the home-finding process while also helping to assure a well-suited forever for animals in your care.

*"social media is no longer a nice-to-have for rescues, it's a need-to-have" - Heart Mountain Rescue founder Briana McLeod*



**ZAIRA**

# RESCUES

There are strong supporters of animal rescues in every community. A social media page for your animal rescue organization will grow a following by default. The goal is to bring meaningful and engaging information to this audience and get people involved *outside* of this core dedicated default group. A great post on an animal rescue account could be:

- a high quality photo of a happy/ playful/ loving/ smart/ unique animal for adoption or fostering
- a follow up story (and photo) of an animal who has found the most wonderful forever home
- a photo or video of a volunteer or foster parent with information about their unique way of helping animals. Spreading this information is a great way to recruit new volunteers from your internet supporters. It may come as news to your audience that volunteer help comes in many different forms.
- avoid images with text in the majority of posts. put images in the images and text in the captions.



**User generated content** from volunteers with adoptables should be the main source of content for your rescue account. It helps followers (potential volunteers) imagine themselves in useful roles and helps show adoptable animals to potential forever families. One of the rescue's I like following most always has a story and feed full of volunteer's content. So check social media throughout the day and share stories when you're tagged. When you're tagged in a post, consider if it fits with something you want to reshare and at the very least: like, comment, and save (these all help the post get seen by more people, so don't leave it to do later; the post will be done it's rounds later).

In order to get more user generated content to share, encourage your volunteers/fosters to follow the steps in this guide and engage with their content: they went out of their way to make it.

**There's lots to be done at animal shelters; any operational help and especially any ideas to innovate and make adoptions more efficient are invaluable. You may have followers who are able to help with something you didn't even think of yet!**



# PHOTOS

People often ask about my photos. The first (and sometimes only) question is usually, "what kind of camera do you use?".

If I could only tell you the hundred most significant things that get the kind of photos I like, the camera I use wouldn't make the list. (I realize I could have just told you by now, but I'm trying to make a point.)

Having the option to change lenses is important for photographers who have a certain style in mind, but it's not necessary. So what IS?

- **the dog has to feel safe.** If the dog feels life or limb is at risk, then you certainly aren't going to get photos and videos of their true character. Make a loose plan for the day, but be flexible. Put the pup first; this is about helping them find the best home to live in for their **WHOLE** lives (it's a pretty big deal for them). Be flexible and empathetic to make sure you aren't putting anything before the pup's interests.
- **background.** Find a background that's pleasing to the eye but not distracting. Be creative to find spots that will enhance the photo. A background that helps tell the story of your time together is key.
- **eyes.** We connect through the eyes, so for most shots you'll want to have the eyes in view and focus.
- **connect!** Try to find out what kind of nut you're dealing with and show that nut to your followers. Offer a good quality stick or invite the pup to run around like a hooligan with you. Ask him or her to do some basic tricks for snacks - if they know the commands, it will help them realize that they have a way to communicate with you (which helps them feel confident, secure, and happy). Then take some pictures!



**GARRETT**

**Most pups will smile for photos in exchange for snacks. Make it clear that you're paying; they aren't fools.**

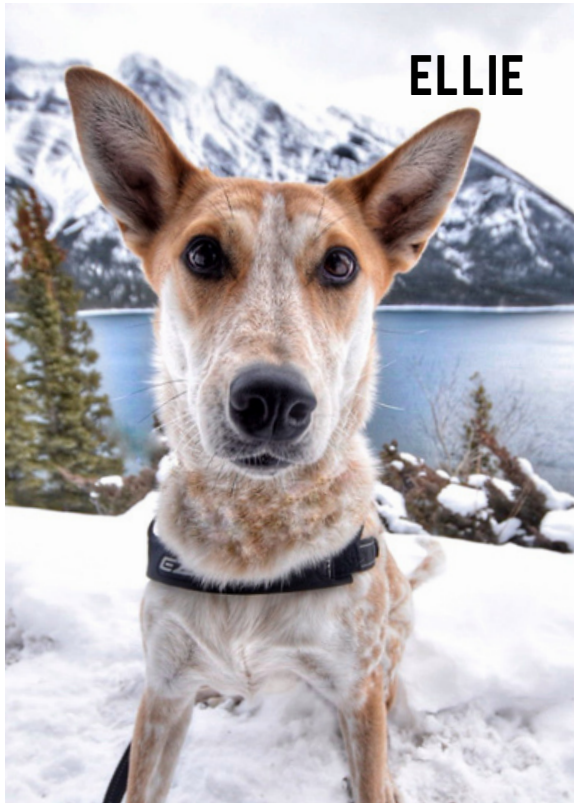




# VIDEOS

Videos convey infinitely more than a photo; it's an invaluable tool for you to show who the dog is. It won't matter if your cinematography is subpar or your writing stinks. Just take plenty of videos of the dog being him/herself in different common situations: eating a meal, walking on a trail, playing with other dogs if it's not against shelter rules, playing with you, being a passenger in the car, going through a drive through... pretty much anything you can think of to show what this pup likes (or doesn't like). Videos give potential adopters information that may save them from adopting a dog who won't fit into their lifestyle and then re-surrendering (a setback for the dog, the shelter, and the family who brought them back). Videos will help the perfect person realize this dog belongs in their life.

This effective deterrence of the wrong families and promotion to the perfect families isn't just a function of videos, it's the job of the entire post. GOAL: deliver info about the pup's character.



**Use a smartphone to record the whole situation, usually set to the widest angle. It helps to show the situation so the viewer can imagine him or herself there. The feeling of being there with the pup will usually elicit some kind of feeling for potential adopters. Whether positive or negative feelings, it's helpful information to realize sooner than later in the process of adoption.**

- In the car, you can mount a camera to show what kind of passenger the pup is.
- At meal time, you can document their eating style.
- On hikes, you can record what kind of adventure companions they are.
- At bodies of water, you can show how they react.
- Video as much as possible from the dog's level and showing his or her face.

## Shoot vertically.

Instagram is a mainly vertical platform. Photos and videos are meant to be viewed on phones in a portrait orientation. Take all your photos and videos vertically for posts and stories to get the most viewing area.

PORTRAIT



LANDSCAPE



## RESOURCES THAT WILL MAKE YOU A BETTER FRIEND TO DOGS:

YouTube: 10 things your dog wishes you knew: Chirag Patel

Podcast: FDSA: ep. 299 Julie Daniels - Every Baby's a Genius

Podcast: Animal Training Academy: ep. 216, Chirag Patel

**"Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not."**

**-The Lorax**