

Getting the on the road



Photo: L. A. Croft-Elliott

Cats Protection (CP) has attended large external shows and trade events for about 15 years, primarily as a way of raising the organisation's profile and attracting new supporters.

During this time the Shows team has flown the flag for the charity all over the UK and Northern Ireland, introducing CP's work to millions of people from all walks of life via its brightly coloured promotional vehicles, friendly staff and, more recently, the wind machine lucky dip – a highly visual people magnet if ever there was one!

In keeping with the difficult economic times in which we find ourselves, the shows function is undergoing some changes to maximise its contribution to the charity – it's important that our shows activities demonstrate value for money by working closely with other departments and complementing our other marketing activities.

Advance preparation

Arranging a CP presence at a show requires an enormous amount of planning and behind-the-scenes work involving a large number of people. Applications for the summer county shows start during the preceding autumn, so we have to start the internal process of planning the following year's shows timetable in September! Many of the county shows are extremely popular and are often over subscribed. There is a rich history of hundreds of years in some cases, so it's essential we submit our application on time in order to have a chance of getting a place.

Most of the county shows traditionally take place well before the harvest, starting towards the end of May and running through to the beginning of July. While many of them have moved away from their early agricultural origins, some remain firmly rooted in their local farming communities, including the Royal Wales Show, the Royal Highland Show and the Royal Cornwall Show. All have shopping areas and local food courts as well as a large, mainly non-companion animal presence, making county shows a fun but exhausting place to work.

Once we've decided where we're going and made the various applications, the next stage is to plan what we would like to do at each show. We need to be focussed about our activities and ensure that what we do is working and worthwhile. Attending shows and events is an expensive business so we need to constantly ask ourselves if the charity's considerable time and money investment is appropriate.

Spreading the word

These days, the idea for the outdoor county shows is that they offer a display case for the CP network in that region. To this end, a regional staff member manages CP's presence at each event and works closely with local branches and adoption centres to maximise local fundraising and communications opportunities and promote local rehoming, neutering and education initiatives. Anyone visiting the CP stand at their local show can expect good information about cats looking for homes, volunteering opportunities, local low-cost neutering initiatives or how to set up an education talk. They could also buy merchandise or a raffle ticket, have a go on the wind machine, pick up some CP literature and last, but by no means least, share their favourite cat story. We love to hear them!

show

Emma Osborne, Cats Protection's Shows & Exhibitions Manager is out and about promoting the charity...

Hopefully our stand visitors will leave feeling a little more acquainted with CP's work and therefore warmer to the idea of supporting us in some way. Our job is to welcome, answer queries and suggest ways in which we can help – and how people can help us. It's not a one size fits all approach and stand staff soon realise how important it is to respond appropriately to each person, some of whom have been loyal supporters for many years and are often thrilled to talk to their favourite charity.

In addition to the summer outdoor show season, we also attend a range of indoor shows during the year including Crufts, the London Pet Show and several veterinary trade shows. The idea is much the same as for the outdoor shows: to promote our many activities to new and existing supporters as effectively as possible. It's worth mentioning that our timetable is not fixed year on year. So while it's worthwhile for us to attend some shows regularly, such as Crufts and the Great Yorkshire Show, we also actively research new and different opportunities to promote our work in specific regions. The London Pet Show, The Big Cheese Festival in Caerphilly and the Anglesey Agricultural Show are just three examples of events that we'll be trialling this year.

Cats at a dog show?

We are often asked why, as a cat charity, we attend Crufts. Part of the answer is that many dog owners are also cat lovers and are delighted to see a strong feline presence at this predominantly canine event. As a leading dog show attracting worldwide visitors, Crufts' audience tends to be well informed and can certainly put us through our paces at times! But we welcome the opportunity to share our knowledge and discuss our work with visitors. This year for the first time we had specialist staff from the charity's Education, Veterinary and Fundraising Departments on hand to meet and greet stand visitors, as well as representatives from the network locally. It was great fun but it was also

satisfying for staff and volunteers to be a part of the show and to discuss after the event how we can continue to improve our presence at external events.

Given the current climate, a satisfying part of the shows experience is introducing those interested in rehoming a rescue cat to a local CP volunteer or staff member from an adoption centre. We are always keen to help find the right feline from the many in our care. Enabling the network to have greater ownership of regional shows can only assist in this regard as well as providing a platform for sharing information about CP's work around the country.

We always love to meet our supporters, so if you are visiting any of these events please drop by and say hello! ●



Photo: CP Library

See page 61 for a full list of shows we will be attending between now and September.