

IMPROVING RESPONSES TO INITIAL ADOPTION ENQUIRIES

The aim of this paper is to consider existing good practice and make suggestions for improvements in adoption agency responses to initial adoption enquiries. This paper demonstrates and supports agencies in basic aspects of customer service that are the bedrock of any effective recruitment or marketing activity or campaign, it supports the need for agencies to improve their basic customer care to prospective adopters before encouraging more adopters to maximise conversion. Figures from AdoptionUK research showed that up to a third of approved adopters experienced what they considered to be difficulty in entering the 'system' and were turned away at their first call/contact. This paper is informed by recent research by the University of East Anglia, commissioned by BAAF *Success factors in adopter recruitment: Insights from adoption agency social worker managers and marketing officers and experience of First4Adoption - National Adoption Gateway* gained through feedback from enquirers to the service's information line, and as a result of 'mystery shopping' exercises.

First4Adoption has set out five practice points, with a tight focus on the customer experience on first contact, rather than on wider marketing messages and recruitment practice. However, it is important to note that handling initial enquiries is just one aspect of adoption agencies' overall marketing and recruitment processes and should not be considered completely in isolation.

We would recommend reading the University of East Anglia's research report (mentioned above) to put these practice points in context, while bearing in mind that there is limited feedback from potential adopters within it. A key message from the research is that marketing is not a 'bolt-on' function; recognise that the way initial enquiries are handled is an integral part of the overall marketing of an organisation.

While marketing activity is needed to highlight the need for adopters and encourage enquiries from potential adopters, the response they receive when they first make contact with an agency can also be influential in determining whether the potential adopter will feel encouraged, or discouraged, from pursuing their interest.

First4Adoption has gained experience of this from direct communication with potential adopters who contact our information service, and through our mystery shopping exercises. Mystery shopping is carried out at the request of adoption agencies, and involves different individuals ('mystery shoppers') contacting adoption agencies to make enquiries as potential adopters. The mystery shoppers then provide feedback to First4Adoption which is shared with the agency that has requested the service.

Practice point 1: Focus on customer care - recognise the enquirer's needs

'I thought long and hard before calling them, but they just seemed so uninterested and I didn't know whether it was worth making another call. You've been friendly and encouraging, I feel so much better now' (caller to F4A October 2013)

It seems obvious, that an initial enquiry should receive a polite and courteous response, and it is unlikely that any adoption agency would fail completely on this. However, adoption enquiries may need more than a standard courteous response. Making an initial enquiry, whether by phone, email or web, is a very big deal for the enquirer who is dealing with their own uncertainties and insecurities. They need an empathetic response that recognises this.

Through mystery shopping carried out at agencies' request, First4Adoption has recognised how intrusive it feels to be asked for name, address, date of birth, ethnicity, sexual orientation and more, when wanting to find out about adoption.

An empathetic response is particularly necessary where enquirers raise issues that place doubt on their readiness to proceed to assessment. Progress towards adoption may be a lengthy journey, and the enquirer's 'potential' as an adopter may initially be very uncertain. However the deeply personal and significant nature of the enquiry needs a careful response, and well-handled may result in an individual returning at some future point with better prospects of adoption, or pursuing adoption with a different agency, or in any case feeling less negative about adoption in general.

Enquirers should never be 'put off' without offering alternative support and a listening ear – e.g. signposting to First4Adoption.

Key points from the recent research:

1. The agency needs to 'cherish the enquiry'.
2. The person responding to an initial enquiry should understand the significance of this for the enquirer, who may be on a 'gradual journey' towards adoption. Enquirers will typically have done much research and soul searching before approaching an agency. They often approach an agency with a sense of excitement and anxiety.
3. Listen first. Welcome enquirers warmly and answer their questions and concerns before questioning them or imparting information.
4. Consider training in customer care to help first line staff to understand and empathise with enquirer perspectives.

To which we would add:

5. Choose carefully the point at which you seek personal information, as this can feel very intrusive. If you must seek personal data during an initial enquiry, it is better to request this at the end.

6. Respond warmly and with empathy to all enquiries, regardless of whether the enquirer is likely to be ready to proceed to assessment. An 'unlikely' candidate may be approved by a different agency, may return in future better prepared, or if not, may need support to come to terms with the reasons – and can be signposted to First4Adoption.

'I spoke to someone at ...(adoption agency)... they were very nice but they said they don't cover my area, and they suggested I give you a call... I'm glad they did' (caller to F4A October 2013)

All enquiries are unique they have different motivators and different emotional drivers, for example someone approaching adoption after failed fertility treatment will be in a different position than someone who is approaching adoption for the second time – it is imperative we recognise this at their initial contact. Equally, those who are single or gay may approach adoption with some intrepidation because of their own circumstances. First4Adoption can conduct customer service training for your agency upon your request, this can be tailored to your specific agency and or needs.

Practice point 2: Accessibility – make access points clear and easy for potential adopters to contact you, and keep them up-to-date

Marketing, advertising and recruitment activity may be wasted if it is not clear to potential enquirers how to make contact with an adoption agency or they have difficulty getting in touch. Many agencies encourage enquiries via their website and there are good examples of engaging and informative web pages.

'Nice clear presentation of adoption information with good use of brand colours for navigation purposes.' (Mystery shopper assessment, adoption agency website)

A range of access channels (website, phone, email) helps make the service accessible to a wide range of people whatever their preferred contact method. However, feedback from First4Adoption's mystery shopping highlights that some websites are confusing, with an array of different possible entry points to the adoption service, choice of telephone numbers and sometimes broken website links.

Key suggestions:

1. Recognise that potential adopters may attempt to make contact in a variety of ways. Check that websites have consistent contact details and that links to webpages and enquiry forms are working and connect to the correct web page. If email is a difficult channel for you to manage do not advertise an email address as a method of communication.
2. Try a variety of search terms, from the home page of your main 'corporate' website as well as internet search engines such as Google.
3. Offer clear information about options to make contact by phone, or via website or email. Include opening times and what to expect if making contact 'out of hours'.
4. Some agencies invite potential adopters to visit in person, if so be clear about when/where this is available.
5. Keep web enquiry forms simple, asking for the minimum of personal information necessary. Avoid multiple page forms.
6. Check that third parties who may circulate your details at events or support groups, have your correct details. In particular check that your listing with First4Adoption is correct and up-to-date at <http://www.first4adoption.org.uk/find-an-adoption-agency/>
7. Include a link to First4Adoption as an external source of information for potential adopters who may leave your site still uncertain whether to make contact with you.
8. Add a link to your site which directs prospective adopters to take the check if they are eligible at <http://www.first4adoption.org.uk/first-steps-intro/>

There are a couple of issues around navigation, there is a little inconsistency in how the pages are presented in the left hand navigation in terms of knowing where you are on the site which in turn helps you find information again on revisiting the site. (Mystery shopper assessment, adoption agency)

First4Adoption understands and appreciates the constraints that some adoption agencies face when amending, changing and updating their websites. First4Adoption would encourage you to include the following as a minimum; details of your information events, case studies from your adopters and contact details. In terms of general information about adoption you can always link to First4Adoption especially for information about the adoption process, busting myths, who can adopt and about being an adoptive parent. First4Adoption are happy to assist and or comment on any website reviews agencies are undertaking and happy to offer free mystery shopping service for adoption agencies – if you need assistance do contact gemma@first4adoption.org.uk

Practice point 3: Responsiveness – ensure that each enquiry receives a timely response

'I fired off several emails last week – I've heard nothing back from any of the agencies I contacted' (caller to F4A Information Line, November 2013).

This will seem an obvious point. However it is worth considering how responsive your service really is. If a call is made out of hours, at the evening or weekend, what response is provided? If an email is received, who responds to it and how long does this take? Mystery shopping feedback has shown a wide variation. These include emails that receive no response, telephone calls that are not returned, and voicemail recorded messages that appear to indicate that the enquirer has called the wrong number.

Following on from practice point 2, if an enquiry can reach the service at a number of potential access points, then each access point needs to provide a clear and consistent response. If there is a preferred method to access the service, then enquiries can be steered towards this, however if a range of enquiry channels is offered (phone, web, email) then each needs to be responded to.

Key suggestions:

1. Set up auto-responses, clear messages on telephone voicemails, emails and web forms, letting enquirers know that they have reached the service, whether they need to contact again during set times or, if a call back/response is offered, the timescales to expect a response.
2. Provide signposting on voicemail and auto-responses, to other relevant sources of information eg your website and First4Adoption, so that enquirers with general questions can get a response regardless of your capacity.
3. It may also be relevant to inform enquirers of alternative ways to reach the service and whether you have a preferred method or these would receive a quicker response (eg auto-replies can direct to website information, or a voicemail message can include 'if you would like to attend our information event this is on...'). However not all enquirers will be able to access every method, and any channel offered must be responded to.
4. If the front line call handlers pass information to social workers to request a call back, ensure your processes are efficient and that the call is returned.

It is imperative that adoption agencies offer responsive services; we all have a collective responsibility to ensure we are available to deal with all enquiries that are received. When we are unavailable an enquirer knows where they can go for information and when you will be able to handle the enquiry. First4Adoption received a call and the caller said 'I waited 6 months for a call back, they never called, I felt I was left in limbo with nowhere to go'. We must ensure our the initial enquiry is cherished and guided through the process.

Practice point 4: Informative – provide clear information that enables the enquirer to understand the process, their readiness to proceed and what the next steps are.

It is important to recognise that enquirers will have different needs at initial enquiry stage, some want to ask a specific question, some are generally researching about adoption, some are ready to proceed and want to access the process as quickly as possible. Relevant information at an early stage can help enquirers to self-select their route to access the service, to judge whether they are able to apply to adopt, to better understand the process and know how to take the next steps.

Websites are important sources of information for initial enquirers, for general information about adoption and for an understanding of the local picture and process as well as links to national organisations and information.

Feedback from mystery shopping indicates that callers want a warm and empathetic response generally, and also want to reach knowledgeable staff who can respond to their questions with authority and professionalism. Lack of consistency and lack of accuracy of information was another issue highlighted.

There is a real art to providing information to prospective adopters that is realistic, for example about the needs and background of children, while remaining positive and encouraging. The best telephone responses in our mystery shopping exercises were from staff who were sensitive to the caller's needs, knowledgeable and honest in their replies and who also reinforced positive messages about adoption throughout the call.

This does not mean that all enquirers need to reach a social work 'expert' immediately, but that enquiry handlers are confident and familiar with processes, customer care and core information and able to recognise and arrange for a more expert response when needed. Being able to signpost enquirers to other sources of information is also invaluable – particularly First4Adoption who can answer all general initial enquiries.

Key suggestions:

1. Ensure that front line enquiry handlers can provide clear, accurate information and are knowledgeable about their service, the adoption process and timescales.
2. Know what your 'frequently asked questions' are and provide consistent responses - check that your website and information pack is consistent with current best practice and with the answers given to enquirers who contact your service by phone or email.
3. Avoid 'blanket bans' and ensure that your criteria for issues such as housing/bedroom space, age of children, length of time after fertility treatment, are consistent with best practice nationally to avoid creating new 'myths'.

4. Remember to include the adoption passport (available from First4Adoption's website) and local sources of help and support for adopters in information packs.
5. Consider training frontline staff in delivering information, focusing on customer care, clarity, and checking understanding. First4Adoption is happy to provide training on this.
6. Alternatively, signpost all enquirers to First4Adoption at an early stage so that initial questions, worries and any issues that may impact on their readiness to proceed can be discussed.
7. Recognise the value that a knowledgeable, sensitive and consistent expert response can provide and encourage social workers to devote time and skill to initial enquiries when needed.
8. Ensure that if you are not recruiting or the enquirer is outside your catchment area or doesn't meet your criteria, that they are signposted to First4Adoption.

Providing information to prospective adopters at the initial stage is fundamental, firstly to ensure they have the correct factual information about adoption but also to enable them to decide if adoption is right for them and when the right time is to proceed with their adoption journey. For example, during one mystery shopping call First4Adoption was informed the adoption process took 6 weeks, we need to ensure we are managing expectations of prospective adopters and giving clear, concise and realistic information.

Practice point 5: follow-up

'We thought we'd started a process with them, but then it all went quiet and nothing happened... now we're not sure where we stand' (caller to F4A Information Line, November 2013)

It is important to recognise that enquirers may contact several adoption agencies, and in fact are encouraged to do so, at First4Adoption we ensure callers are given a number of agencies details, as part of their research into adoption and to find an agency that they are happy to apply to and that is ready to take their application. The disadvantage of this is that time and resources may be put into initial enquiries that don't result in applications to adopt. This is not a wasted effort, if it results in better informed prospective adopters and improves the national recruitment picture. However agencies will want to consider how to balance their resources including following-up initial enquiries.

For some adopters, their journey towards adoption is a gradual one and they may seek information and choose not to proceed, and make a decision about adoption months or even years later. What matters to enquirers is that they receive the service promised and that if they are offered a follow-up, this happens; otherwise their confidence in the service can be damaged.

Feedback from First4Adoption's enquiry line and mystery shopping indicates that enquirers don't necessarily need to be proactively followed up, so long as the information provided to them is clear and spells out how to proceed to the next step and what is expected of them.

In practice, agencies generally make at least one follow-up contact after sending an information pack or attendance at information event. Agencies also make choices about whether to follow up 'dormant' enquiries, perhaps after several weeks or months.

Key suggestions:

1. Ensure that potential adopters, who have made contact with you, understand the next steps in the process and whose responsibility it is to initiate the next contact.
2. It is also OK not to follow-up proactively – as long as enquirers know that the next stage is in their hands, this part of the process is led by them. It is lack of clarity, or promised follow-up that doesn't happen, that causes uncertainty and confusion.
3. Consider whether to follow up 'dormant' enquiries. If these are followed up, ensure that this is done sensitively and with respect for enquirers' privacy, recognising that they may have decided against adoption for various reasons.

First4Adoption stress the importance of following up calls, we all know how frustrating it is when someone says they will call and they do not, this is an important part of providing customer service to anyone making an initial enquiry.

In conclusion, it is worth stating that efficient responses to initial enquiries should go hand in hand with the human element. The adoption agencies that have performed best to date in First4Adoption's mystery shopping exercises were easy to contact, responsive and informative – but this alone was not enough to generate the highest praise, which invariably went to agencies where individual members of staff had shown empathy and genuine efforts to respond to the needs of the enquirer.

'I felt as if I was being processed. Adoption's not a product – it's about human beings' (F4A mystery shopper, December 2013)

'The whole call was an extremely 'positive experience', the information I was given was clear and informative, but with a sensitive delivery – the person I spoke with had a real sense of how I was feeling and my concerns. They provided me with lots of information that did not seem overwhelming; and there was no pressure to provide personal information – a really professional and informative conversation' (F4A mystery shopper, January 2014)

First4Adoption would encourage agencies to ensure that they examine their services from a customer's perspective particularly at initial enquiry stage. If your calls are handled by duty, contact centre or individual social workers within adoption agencies – it is vital you know whether individuals get a good service when they first contact you. Some callers to First4Adoption comment on 'well I ended up going with the agency that picked up the phone and sent me the information I needed to further my enquiry', some also comment that they have waited considerable lengths of time for agencies to come back to them, this leads them to go elsewhere. If you do not have capacity to handle new enquiries then forward them to First4Adoption so they are not lost in the system – the adoption sector needs to ensure customer service is embedded into practice at initial enquiry stage.

First4Adoption is happy to review your initial enquiry process via mystery shopping to help improve and remove blockages for prospective adopters. First4Adoption can provide customer service training and guidance for your adoption agency – do get in touch we are here to help.