

# Marketing the Foster Care Adoption Message

To be agents of change in the lives of children, who through no fault of their own are left without a family, we must do more than say, "Consider adoption."

By Rita L. Soronen

**“IF WE CAN GET JUST ONE CHILD** adopted,” Dave Thomas noted, in creating the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, “then it will have been worth the effort.” Of course, Mr. Thomas was right—each and every waiting child must be valued. But with more than 100,000 children waiting in transient care to be adopted, we have to do more, not only at a policy level where we have invested great time and treasure, but in elevating awareness for the cause. That means we need to understand and address American’s attitudes toward foster care adoption.

To effectively heighten awareness and drive substantially more adoptions, there are lessons to be learned from Dave Thomas and the business that effectively made quality fast food a part of the American landscape. Believe passionately in your product. Understand your audience. Value and be responsive to the consumer.

There are no more passionate believers in the cause of foster care adoption than those already involved, from foster parents and social workers to therapists and administrators. Yet even with groundbreaking federal and state legislation intended to move more children from care, the numbers of children waiting not only continues to rise, but the age of the average child waiting to be adopted continues to increase.

Clearly, understanding, valuing and respecting the consumer, in this case, the potential adoptive parent, is key to helping agencies reduce the number of children waiting and their length of time in care.

In 2002, the Foundation, in collaboration with the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, released groundbreaking research on adoption attitudes conducted through Harris Interactive. In updating the research in 2007, the Foundation again commissioned Harris Interactive to understand Americans’ attitudes about foster care adoption specifically, their beliefs about the children waiting to be adopted, their perceptions of the system caring for these children and their attitudes toward what a healthy living environment is for a child.

So what has our consumer research found? Three core areas of misunderstanding about foster care adoption emerged and may often deter potential parents from engaging in the system, including:

1. An unclear picture of the children in the U.S. foster care system waiting for adoption, including the number of waiting children, reasons for entry, age and background.
2. Underestimates of the diversity of individuals who are qualified to adopt from foster care.
3. Lack of understanding of the U.S. foster care adoption process, including the cost and the finality of foster care adoption.

## Addressing Myths And Misperceptions

As the national voice for children waiting in foster care for adoption, the Foundation’s response to this “customer” understanding remains steadfast: to strategically address their myths and misperceptions. Carefully crafted messages educate potential adoptive parents in all of the Foundation’s media relations, communications vehicles and products. We target major misconceptions, such as beliefs that children enter the foster care system because of juvenile delinquency, fears that birth parents can return to claim the child, myths that foster care adoption is expensive, and self-imposed limitations on who is qualified to adopt. We also incorporate consistent messages about the need for foster care adoption; the number of children available for adoption

each year; and the number who turn 18 and leave the system without a family. Strategically chosen images accompany these messages, consistently representing older children, sibling groups, and the racial and ethnic diversity of waiting children.

These strategies are used in each Foundation communication and marketing effort, including: news releases, media interviews and tours, social media, printed newsletters, electronic newsletters, website, Foster Care Adoption Awareness Toolkit, Foundation information packet, A Step-by-Step Guide to Adoption, speeches/presentations, Wendy's Wonderful Kids program communications, Adoption-Friendly Workplace program materials, National Adoption Day messages, A Home for the Holidays television special content, Foundation posters, videos, and public service announcements.

Further, the Harris survey indicated that Americans believe, correctly, that the foster care adoption process may be difficult and that the children may have special needs.

The Foundation uses communications strategies to tell the truth about the foster care adoption process, acknowledging that it can be challenging, but is well worth the effort. While our signature programs work to make foster care adoption more streamlined, effective and affordable, we give our customers realistic expectations about the level of responsiveness and support of the child welfare workers they may encounter. We also communicate the reality that many children adopted from foster care have special needs, but that they can thrive with stability and support.

Real stories of families formed through foster care adoption, which highlight both the wonderful result of providing a loving, permanent family for a child and the real-world challenges of the process, are woven throughout all of the Foundation's communications efforts.

### **Incorporating A Call To Action**

To be agents of change in the lives of children, who through no fault of their own are left without a family, we must do more than say, "Consider adoption." We must use every method available to us to increase Americans' understanding and awareness of the number of children who wait in U.S. foster care, how they got there, who they are, what they need and how to find for them the family they deserve. We must go beyond awareness and education to offer the reader, viewer or listener a way to help. For every audience and every communication opportunity, the Foundation includes a specific call to action. Adopt. Advocate. Donate. Support policy change. Offer adoption benefits. Educate your community. We make a strong case telling our customer why to act, then showing them how.

As Dave Thomas said, "If we can get just one child adopted, then it will have been worth the effort." If we are successful, many more than one child will have a safe, permanent, loving home.

**Rita Soronen** is executive director for the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, a national nonprofit public charity. For more than 25 years, Rita has worked on behalf of abused, neglected and vulnerable children. She has provided leadership for local, state and national efforts working to improve the juvenile justice and child welfare systems, while striving to assure safe, nurturing and permanent homes for North America's children. Rita also serves on the Board of Directors of the Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute, the Awareness and Education Committee of the Board of the National CASA Association, the Ohio Attorney General Charitable Advisory Committee.