

A CRITICAL COMMITMENT:
CONVINCING FAMILIES TO ADOPT



In 1989, three Bay Area adoption agencies applied to the Packard Foundation for funds to hire a consultant to help them with a shared challenge. Like many foster care and adoption organizations, the three groups were struggling to respond to the burgeoning number of out-of-home children needing families. Especially critical was finding homes for those children considered “difficult to place:” older children, those of mixed or minority ethnicity, children with disabilities or histories of abuse, and groups of siblings. Among the consultants interviewed, the agencies invited Fern Tiger Associates, in spite of the fact that, until that time, the firm had never provided “pure consulting” without the development of communications products. While the grant contained no budget for development of materials, FTA was moved by the magnitude of the need: 90,000 children were without stable homes.

The agencies were impressed by the firm’s proposal to increase adoptions, not through a traditional campaign aimed at the general public (as many other consultants had proposed), but instead through strategies identifying and targeting those audiences most likely to accept children into their homes. Statistics show that, while more than 10 million families nationwide consider adoption, fewer than 5% actually follow through. Thus, the communications challenge was clear: to move families beyond weighing choices to enter the long-term commitment of adoption.

The three agencies who came together to hire Fern Tiger Associates to determine how to employ marketing skills in the search for potential foster and adoptive families set a meeting with the firm for October 18, 1989. One of the agencies was located in Oakland, one in Santa Cruz, and one in Pacific Grove. The Loma Prieta Earthquake changed the plans for the meeting which had to be postponed for several weeks.

To examine the issue, FTA conducted a broad series of interviews and focus groups with successful adoptive and foster parents; with families considering adopting; with those who had never thought about it but who fit the “profile” of a good adoptive family; and with children who could articulate what it meant to be adopted – or left without a permanent home. An unscientific clipboard survey in shopping centers further confirmed perceptions of foster care and adoption. This research informed a multi-level strategic plan to influence families on the cusp of adoption and lead to permanent homes for children. FTA also drafted plans for each agency, capitalizing on the strengths and opportunities of each. Agency staff were trained to understand the power of communications and messaging as tools for effective marketing.

The plan marked a turning point for the agencies and garnered funding for FTA to develop materials, including *Marketing Strategies*, which was distributed nationally; a policy brochure, *Adoption in California*; and a 30-minute video distributed free at video stores – *Stories of Adoption* which portrayed successful adoptive families and the significance of effective placements.

The project proved a milestone for FTA, too – opening doors to other clients, launching integrated, issue-oriented campaigns and creating a new path for FTA as a leader in nonprofit strategic planning.

Three adoption agencies – FUTURE FAMILIES (Santa Cruz), FAMILY BUILDERS BY ADOPTION (Oakland), and KINSHIP CENTER (Monterey) – came together to improve their ability to place “out-of-home” children in permanent and long-term homes.

In identifying an adoptive parent profile, FTA discovered that many of the most successful families were often homebodies. These families enjoyed barbecuing in the backyard and watching videos with the kids. So FTA produced a professional 30-minute video that could be given out for free at local video stores. It profiled five successful adoptive families and one young woman who had been trapped in the foster care system without finding a permanent home. The film packed the emotional punch to convince target families to take the plunge and adopt.

