An SFSPCA survey last year found that more than half of the people who had purchased a dog online said they would never deal with a puppy mill, but many had unwittingly done exactly that. In a piece she penned for SFGate.com (the San Francisco Chronicle’s website) to coincide with the campaign hopes to spread the truth about puppy mills by having people share the link through social media sites like Facebook and Twitter. The SFSPCA aims to garner a quarter million views, and by late May it had already reached about 100,000, along with more than 200 comments.
Campaign's start, Scarlett notes that people now grasp that most pet store dogs come from puppy mills, but that's not a big issue in the San Francisco area. The Internet, however, has added "a whole new dimension to this cycle of misery," she writes. "... If San Franciscans only knew the sad truth about puppy mills, I know they'd refuse to buy from them."

The campaign—which has also included a TV commercial and guerilla marketing—aims to educate local residents in hopes of increasing adoptions from shelters and rescue groups.

In the edited interview that follows, Scarlett, who last year received the Association of Shelter Veterinarians' Meritorious Achievement Award for contributions to the veterinary field, discusses the campaign with Animal Sheltering associate editor James Hettinger.

Animal Sheltering: How did your SFGate.com piece advocating against puppy mills come about?
Jennifer Scarlett: Through our spay/neuter clinic, we were checking in animals, and we kept asking where people were getting their dogs, and over and over again we heard people say, "I got it online from a farm in Missouri" [or] "from a breeder in Idaho." We heard it enough that we decided to investigate it more, so we did a survey to see where people were getting their pets. In San Francisco, the issue isn't pet shops. There's only one store that sells a few dogs a month. The online acquisition of pets, anecdotally, seemed to be a problem, so we followed up with a survey last fall and found that about 30 percent of San Franciscans are acquiring their pet online. And that's highly associated with supporting puppy mills.

Did that number surprise you?
It did. I didn't expect it to be that high. San Francisco is a place of a lot of activism. People know where their chicken comes from, and they know where their carrot was grown, but people were completely duped in believing that they were buying [dogs] from this beautiful farm in Missouri. ... And it's not surprising. When you look at the websites, everything looks beautiful. You want to believe that this is where they're coming from, and we're so used to purchasing things online. In addition, these brokers are co-opting our language. They're using "adopt" instead of "purchase," and there are some places that are hiding behind a rescue name.

And there are several elements to your campaign?
There are. We just finished our second phase, which was a guerrilla marketing campaign where we had a flat video screen on a newspaper bin. Newspaper bins turn out to be about the size of many of these cages where puppies and dogs are kept for their lifetime. We set it downtown. It had an auditory component to it, so it looks like there's a bunch of puppies stuffed into this newspaper bin, and then inside the bin we had something called the Canine Tribune, which talked all about puppy mills. We put that in a very high-traffic area downtown, and got some buzz that way. ...
Isn’t local, and I think that’s also perhaps playing into this. We’re not deep in the territory where you hear about puppy mill busts, or that the local shelter is dealing with a puppy mill, so it’s a little bit out of our consciousness here. …

The main thing that I want to get across to a sheltering community is that this [campaign] is an example of trying to see what we’re affected by locally. There are so many great anti-puppy mill campaigns going on nationally, but I think we were unique in that we weren’t affected by most of the things that we see nationally—the pet stores, and the local puppy mill that we have to go in and raid.

Generally, why is it bad to buy from a puppy mill?
We know that breeders who put the commercial interest above the welfare interest of their animals make decisions not in [the animals’] best welfare. When you don’t go and see what you’re supporting, you have the great possibility of supporting something that you would never want to participate in. We know from all kinds of raids that these animals live in misery. We know from the research that coming out of puppy mills, they’re highly undersocialized and live a lifetime with various forms of fear and behavioral problems, never mind the suffering that goes on in living in a small cage without the ability to exercise or express normal behaviors.

Is there any other message you’d like to give to our audience of shelters and rescue groups?
I love these national campaigns and awareness, and I think that we’re all trying to add to that collective knowledge and education of our clients and our community. It’s worth a step back and taking a look at your immediate community and seeing, “Is there a way that I can focus this message to my particular constituents?” And maybe it is what we’re seeing nationally, and maybe it is something very particular to your community, and hopefully the two combined can be twice as powerful. AS

To view a video about the San Francisco SPCA’s guerilla marketing campaign using a newspaper bin, go to bit.ly/Md0B83. To view its ad about buying puppies online, go to bit.ly/Kd2q3a.