Leveraging Communication, Marketing, & Organization Through Technology

How Practices Can Thrive in an Online Environment

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s it possible to have a hardware headache? To breakout in social media hives every time someone says Facebook? Or get a paralyzing vision of Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds* when the word Twitter is spoken?

The realm of what is available on the Internet and through technology can be overwhelming. Successful practices know that today's business environment calls for utilizing every expense dollar for maximum return and growing revenue with limited budgets. The approach of increasing practice development while decreasing the marketing budget has become the norm. However, when practices hesitate to purchase technology to integrate into their businesses or embrace the latest in social media, it ultimately affects both the value and development of the business.

Here are 12 ways to leverage each aspect of technology available in today's world. Identify which ones you are currently utilizing and those you should be integrating into your practice.

1. Website

Most practices have a website, but the questions are:

- Does it reflect who you are?
- Is it updated?
- Do you create a reason for clients and potential clients to return?

Chances are you spent a significant amount of effort and funds designing the sign in front of your practice. Now, consider the possibility that more potential clients "surf" your website than drive by your practice each day. The Bayer/Brakke Study identified that over 37% of owners use the Internet to evaluate veterinarians prior to their visit.[1] Remember, keeping your website information current (**Table 1**) is one of the ways that search engines rank websites (see **Google Analytics** and **Hootsuite**, page 85).

2. Email

While many marketing budgets have been drastically cut in small businesses, email marketing is one area that has actually increased from 2009 to date.[2] The reason is obvious: because it works. Clients want to hear from you; they seek information to make decisions about the needs of their pets.

Most veterinary software programs have email address fields. What percentage of your active client base has an email address entered? Set a goal with the practice team to begin collecting client email addresses when clients come in for an appointment. Your goal should be to exceed email 80%. When asking for an email address, remind clients that you want to save paper as well as send them important information quickly (**Table 2**).

TABLE 1. SIX WAYS TO IMPROVE YOUR WEBSITE NOW

1. Do the clutter test.	Can you navigate easily through your website? Your user must be able to find what they need easily and quickly or they will give up.
2. Position yourself as a credible resource.	Provide you and your team's credentials, training and education, and other achievements/experience in order to assure potential clients that pets receive the best possible care at your practice.
3. Make it personal.	Add client testimonials as well as comments from your team about why clients come to your practice.
4. Go visual.	Include video clips on pet care, and a personal invitation from the owner to visit the practice.
5. Tell your story	Tell your clients why you decided to become a veterinarian. Share stories about pets living better lives due to the treatment they received at your practice. Making a personal connection with clients helps them trust you, and more important, trust you with their pets.
6. Go virtual	Have a virtual tour of your practice, as well as virtual tours detailing dental procedures and other types of surgeries/treatments performed at the practice.

TABLE 2. IMPROVE YOUR EMAIL CONTACT WITH CLIENTS

Have a clever and personalized subject line.	This encourages clients to open your emails instead of just deleting them.
Make reading an email feel like time well spent.	Email isn't free—it costs your clients time to read it. Make it valuable by focusing on educating clients about pet health issues in a brief, bulleted format that provides links to further information. Use this educational information to "sell" them on pursuing wellness programs and proper therapy.
Allow clients to opt out of receiving emails.	They may love you, but may not have the time right now to receive additional email.
Keep emails short and to the point.	Provide key points and concise details with links to your website or Facebook page for further information.
Don't be afraid to try something fun.	How about a pet picture or story contest? Or a charity fundraiser at the clinic. These activities encourage interaction and build relationships.
Utilize surveys and offer a prize, such as a discount on a veterinary service, to a winning respondent.	Online surveys are readily available and make it easy to obtain essential feedback: Ask clients their likes and dislikes about your services. Find out if you are exceeding their expectations or have some work to do in that area.

3. Facebook

"Small businesses that use online technology grow twice as quickly, bring in twice the revenue, and hire twice the employees as those small businesses that do not," according to David Fischer, vice president of Facebook.[3] While small businesses have not engaged in social media as fervently as large companies, more emphasis is being placed on helping small businesses take advantage of getting their message out to potential clients.

Facebook enables you to create a community of clients and potential clients, to impart information, and to open up a dialogue with pet owners. In January 2012, Facebook will launch a program that provides up to 10 million dollars in free advertising online to small businesses (go to facebook.com/marketing?sk=app_244881505558365).[4] See **Table 3** to view the benefits of Facebook according to other businesses and **Table 4** for 3 critcal points regarding your Facebook page.

4. LinkedIn

Seventy million users know that LinkedIn is more than just a site to post a resume and look for a job. It is an ideal site to make contacts with experts in a variety of fields. Looking for information on a marketing consultant? Need to know more about a public official? Want to know if there's a potential new associate looking for work in your area? Use this tool to emphasize your experience, knowledge, and education. Your clients are checking for you there.

5. Twitter

Is it possible to build your business 140 characters at a time? Twitter gives you the opportunity to create interest, supply information, and implement an effective marketing strategy. Want to share pet information, remind users about a pet charity event coming up, or impart your thoughts on that latest animal issue in your area? This is the tool to get you out there.

Many clinics retweet (take information that they have received from other tweeters) and send it to their user list. Sending these ultra short messages takes some creativity and needs some thought, but it's worth it. Make a list of tweets you want to send in a month as you find them from other sources, such as websites, blogs, books, or other tweeters. Then, when you want to send one out, you have it ready. Check out twitter.com/#!/FindAVet or wefollow.com/twitter/veterinary.

TABLE 3. WHY BUSINESSES HAVE A FACEBOOK PRESENCE

85%	Share basic information about the business
62.4%	Share content, such as videos and pictures
46%	Have conversations with customers
27.2%	Customer support
23%	Contests

Results from Buzzom.com's survey, Infographic: Why Small Businesses Should Have a Facebook Page[3]

TABLE 4. YOUR FACEBOOK PAGE: THREE CRITICAL POINTS

Have it everywhere: Include the link to your Facebook page on all electronic and hard copy communication.

Consider a unique name: Naming your page Your Pets Vet is easier to remember than Binder River Valley Veterinary Center and Boarding.

Consistency is key: Develop a plan of what information you want to post and how often you would like to do so—don't let it stagnate!

6. Google Analytics and Hootsuite

Each day, we are committed to documenting and evaluating the progression of health issues and successful treatment of pets. Google Analytics (google.com/analytics) is a free program that assesses the metrics of your web presence. It will provide information about your social presence, such as the amount of website traffic, who is returning, and whether you are bringing in potential clients. Hootsuite is a social media dashboard that tracks all social media sites (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, blogs, etc) from one program.

7. Texting

Eighty-seven percent of texts are read within 30 minutes of delivery.[5] It's never been so easy to maintain close contact with clients.
- Ask clients for permission to text them, as some plans

charge extra for texting.

- Designate a cell phone for the practice that allows clients with patients in the hospital to directly call or text that hotline with questions about their pets.
- A veterinary technician on your team can cover the calls to provide expedited service to clients with the most medically fragile pets.
- You can text your clients pictures of their pets in recovery or when they are ready to go home, reinforcing to clients how much you care about their pets and peace of mind.

In addition, many veterinary software programs can verify approval for texting with a client and several companies can set up texting for appointment reminders and other pertinent information.

8. Blogs

Blogs provide information and content that is updated on a fairly regular (sometimes daily) basis. It gives you the ability to keep your name at the forefront with both clients and potential clients, share a more intimate view of the practice, discuss issues in veterinary medicine, and build a relationship with your clients (**Table 5**). Blogs are also an excellent tool to introduce new diagnostics and procedures, reassuring clients that their pets are receiving state-of-the-art care.

9. iPad

The iPad has rocketed up the "must have" list of technology items, not only for leisure time but for savvy, fast moving businesses as well. Why should you consider it for your practice? Its mobility, depth of applications, and ease of use combined easily provide the needed return on investment.[6]

The less than 2-pound iPad has 10 hours of battery life and thousands of applications, including the ability to calculate blood transfusion rates and volumes, let you know a client just sent an email, and type while you talk.

TABLE 5. EIGHT WAYS TO MAKE YOUR BLOG GREAT

1. Determine your goal.	Your blog should have a focus that is easily recognized by the reader.
2. Make it visually appealing.	You only have once chance at a first impression. Present a professional, attractive blog that encourages users to return often.
3. Make it easy to read.	Write in a way that is easy to follow and use a font that is easy to read.
4. Make it interesting.	Use pictures coupled with good pet care information and fun/inspiring stories.
5. Make it searchable.	Decide upon a meta title to make it easy for a user to easily find your blog.
6. Tag it.	Another way to find your blog is through index words. Be sure to identify them so users can find you.
7. Attract traffic.	Include the URL as part of the practice's website to allow both websites to come up when the practice name is searched.
8. Don't go it alone.	A team of people can rotate updating the blog to keep it fresh and take the pressure off a single person.

GO ONLINE FOR MORE RESOURCES

For additional tables about improving your practice's Internet presence, go to **todaysveterinarypractice.com** and select Resources from the top navigation bar.

You can also keep up with latest news about practice development by following Ms. Grosdidier's blog, **VMCNotes.net**, whose tagline is "Veterinary practice management—the adventure of practice to perfect."
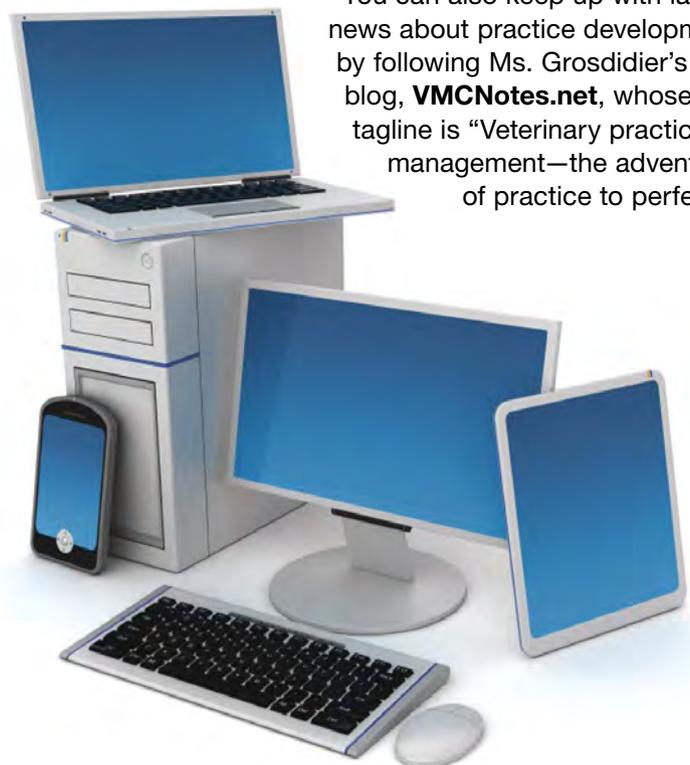
10. Veterinary Management Software

Ask any of the major software creators and they will tell you the biggest challenge they face is that their software features are underused. Having a veterinary software program and merely using it for invoicing and basic inventory function is like having a Ferrari and never going over 30 MPH. Review the list of amazing things your veterinary management software should do for your practice in **Table 6**.

11. Online Reputation

Like the majority of Internet users, you most likely peruse business or product reviews to determine who receives your business.[7] The question is—who is writing these reviews? For decades, veterinary practices have based client growth on personal recommendation and many of those recommendations have migrated to the Internet. It is essential to track reviews of your practice quickly and efficiently to ensure your good reputation does not suffer. Internet companies have now begun to offer services to monitor your online reputation.

12. Mobile devices

Humans have become super computer beings with the power of their smartphones. At the simplest, smartphones combine your phone, voicemail, email, address book, appointment calendar, and web browser into one device; however, you can also access information from a veterinary database, calculate a drug dose, send a radiograph for review, instantly know what's happening on your social media sites, or receive a reminder that an airline ticket has been reduced in price. There are literally 1000s of applications available to you.

TABLE 6. MANAGEMENT SOFTWARE: WHAT ELSE IT SHOULD DO FOR YOU

- Provide valuable data to make solid business decisions.
- Target specific groups of clients for marketing, updates on medications, and changes in medical management communication.
- Capture pictures to track medical cases, add personal touches to communication, and document progression of disease (such as a picture of the mouth that shows how dental disease has progressed over time).
- Provide access to training that is timely, cost effective, and meets the needs of all team members.
- Have an online community that allows you to easily interact with other users to ask questions, get ideas, and share files.
- Enable technology to work in harmony (laboratory equipment, online test results, accounting database) and provide access for clients to check on their pets' preventive health care services and products.

Now that we've reviewed the various aspects that make up modern day technology for small businesses, in a future article we'll explore how to prepare a plan that engages technology in your practice. This plan will focus on making good financial decisions; getting the best returns on your technology investments; and harnessing the potential of what the future holds with regard to communication, organization, and business development. ■

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