



Keeping Up with Today's Technology and Social Media

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This is the fourth article in Dr. Karen Felsted's *Growing Your Practice* series, which is based on results from the 2011 Bayer Veterinary Care Usage Study (bayer-ah.com/nr/45.pdf). This study investigated veterinary practice performance from both the veterinary professional and pet owner viewpoints.

The goal of this series is to identify what sets growing, successful veterinary practices apart from their competitors and how to implement their business models in your own practice.

The previous articles in this series are available at todaysveterinarypractice.com:

- *Practices That Continue to Grow: What Are They Doing Right?* (January/February 2012)
- *Building Strong Relationships Among the Veterinary Team, Clients, & Patients* (March/April 2012)
- *Veterinary Teams & Clients: Facing Financial Facts* (May/June 2012)

With the dizzying changes in digital communication and practice information management systems (PIMS), it's easy to conclude that technology is not our friend. And if a practice tries to implement many new technological advances at one time, it won't be—everyone will be frustrated. While every new idea isn't right for every practice, client expectations are changing and practice teams need to determine what technology benefits the team, patients, and clients.

CURRENT STATE OF AFFAIRS

Pet Owners Compared with Veterinarians

Pet owners can find all the information they want about pet health and veterinary care via websites, Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and many other sources. In fact, one study documented that pet owners are more likely to use social media and texting than the average consumer.¹

Veterinarians, on the other hand, use these tools less. According to the same study, 76% of veterinarians are not at all or only slightly familiar with social media sites and only 50% see social media as a marketing opportunity.

Use of digital communication has become more prevalent in the three years since that study was published, but more recent information from the Bayer Veterinary Care Usage Study indicates most practices continue to steer clear of these forms of communication. Most veterinary practices (77%) have a website; however, only 43% use Facebook and a very small percentage (4%) "tweet" or blog.²

Why Do Veterinarians Shy Away?

One of the reasons veterinarians have been reluctant to jump on the social media bandwagon has been lack of evidence that it works—that it brings in more clients. Anecdotally, practices say that it does but there is no hard evidence.

While the Bayer study doesn't clearly demonstrate that social media drives pet owners to practices, it did find a number of things that successful practices had in common:

- One common attribute was belief by the practice owner that marketing and advertising were critical to the practice's success.
- Another attribute was that the practice was an active user of social media, such as Facebook.

The study also demonstrated that a common factor among practices with declining visits was a belief by the owner that advertising undermines his/her credibility as a veterinarian.²

COMMUNICATION & EDUCATION

The most obvious change that technology has brought to veterinary practices (and the world at large) is the ability to communicate with more people, more quickly, and in more ways.

A wide variety of inexpensive client communication and education tools are available in the veterinary market that allow practices to easily improve their commu-

nications with clients (Visit the **Resources** page at todaysveterinarypractice.com for a list of these tools). Start with one new form of communication that interests you and go from there.

While technology makes communication and education easier, the human touch is still critical.



Websites

As noted earlier, 77% of practices have a website, but that doesn't mean they have a *good* one. For example, clients don't want to see websites that:

- Are slow to load and hard to navigate
- Don't contain basic contact, hours, and service information
- Have no photos or graphics
- Contain broken links

- Don't include a prominently displayed search function
- Lack user-friendly language.

Many veterinary sites exist with one or more of these problems; if your practice hasn't reviewed its website lately, do so! Make sure your team gets the training it needs to use this technology well and get help from a professional if needed. Certainly ask pet owners to give you their feedback as well.

Newsletters

That same human touch is necessary in other areas as well. I once took my cats to a *cats-only* practice and several months later received the inaugural version of the practice's newsletter—filled with *dog* stories! I like dogs but I have cats and went to a cats-only practice!

Just sending out a newsletter isn't enough; it has to contain information pertinent to your clients. Clients want to see newsletters that are personalized to their interests, touch their emotions, written well, include photos and graphics, and don't contain excessive advertising. Again, ask for help if this doesn't describe your newsletters.

Human Resources

Speaking of which, although the tools themselves may be inexpensive, digital communication isn't "free." A certain amount of staff time will be required as well as up-to-date technology and equipment to produce digital communication and the training to use it. In addition, a consultant with experience in marketing and digital communication can be employed to help develop a digital plan tailored to your practice's needs.

CONVENIENCE

Another of the findings from the 2011 Bayer Veterinary Care Usage Study demonstrated that convenience is important to clients, including the convenience offered by new technology.

For example:

- 26% of pet owners said they would visit a veterinary practice more often if they could make appointments online; however, only 18% of practices in the Bayer study offer online scheduling.
- 26% of pet owners said they would visit more often if they could access their pets' health records online, but only 20% of practices allow this access.

Again, there are number of companies that allow you to easily and inexpensively offer these conveniences to clients. They often offer other marketing services, in-house pharmacies, client survey tools, and more.

CLIENT SATISFACTION

Advances in technology have made knowing what our clients want and whether we are fulfilling those needs much easier. This is a critical step in growing and maintaining a practice.

Data from the Bayer Veterinary Care Usage Study showed the majority of practice owners were very willing to make changes to increase client satisfaction but only 6% said that they routinely measured client satisfaction through after-service surveys; another 14%

PRACTICE TECHNOLOGY RESOURCES

National Commission on Veterinary Economic Issues (NCVEI): ncvei.org

- Resource Library
- Specialized resources for general practice, specialist/referral practices, teaching hospitals, and students

Veterinary Business Management Association (VBMA): vbma.org

- Speaker database
- Business-related web links
- Practice tools & reading list
- National meeting

Veterinary Hospital Managers Association (VHMA): vhma.org

- Meetings, conferences, & webinars
- List serve (email) discussions
- Monthly newsletters

VetMedTeam: vetmedteam.com

- Online continuing education that provides RACE- and VHMA- approved CE
- Networking resources

VetPartners (veterinary practice development association):

VetPartners.org

- Meeting calendar & proceedings
- "Find a Consultant"
- Resources, including member articles about technology and social media
- Member forum

Conferences & Meetings Calendar: avma.org/meetings/calendar/default.asp

Put Your Plan into Action

Turn to page 63 and read Dr. Sheila Grosdidier's article, [Practice Step-by-Step: Leveraging Social Media Communication](#), to find additional advice on developing your plan for integrating today's technology into your practice.



somewhat agreed with that statement. You don't know how your clients feel about your practice and what they want if you don't ask.

Readily available web-based options make surveying much easier although the practice must be pro-active in collecting email addresses to get good results.

Another way of tracking client satisfaction is by monitoring what is said about the practice online. Google Alerts (googlealerts.com) is the most well-known tool but others exist as well. For example, TweetDeck (tweetdeck.com) let's you follow what is said about the practice on Twitter. Knowing what is said about your practice online lets you identify areas for improvement and better manage inaccurate reviews.

PRACTICE INFORMATION SOFTWARE

There are many choices in practice information management systems with a wide variety of capabilities. Almost everyone agrees that practices generally underutilize what they have.

As with websites and newsletters, it's not enough to just have a PIMS. The best practices have sophisticated systems that contribute to better patient care, client service, and client communication. And the best practices use their PIMS capabilities.

Key Metrics

The Bayer Veterinary Care Usage Study demonstrated that, in spite of the challenging economic times and decline in veterinary visits in many practices, practice owners aren't looking at key metrics on a regular basis.

- Only 60% of practices check new client figures at least quarterly.
- Only 47% check patient visits at least quarterly.

Realistically, these and other metrics should be reviewed at least monthly to identify trends in the practice.

Patient Visit Numbers

Revenue metrics are readily available in most PIMS. One exception is number of patient visits. A patient visit includes an examination, procedure, and/or surgery; it does not include a visit when an owner is only buying food or medications without accompanying veterinary services. However, some software systems' definition of visits includes the sale of food or medications and other systems don't readily show this information. If you're not sure about your own system, review the help information or talk to someone at the software company. Doctor transactions can be used as a reasonable estimate of patient visits.

Inventory Control

As practice profits narrow, controlling expenses becomes even more important. Effective inventory control isn't possible without the benefit of computerized PIMS modules. In addition to tracking order histories and quantities on hand, systems that allow a practice to set re-order points, track overstocked inventory, and calculate inventory turnover contribute to efficiency and higher profitability.

SUCCESSFUL STEPS

The tools and strategies discussed in this article are just a few of the many, many things a practice can do to take advantage of new advances in technology.

- Start small for the best results.
- Pick a strategy that fits your practice culture and appeals to the team.
- Assign tasks and put someone in charge.
- Ask for help if you need it.
- Finally, focus on doing one thing well before moving on to the next challenge. ■

PIMS = practice information management system

References

1. Nicholson Kovac, Inc. *Veterinarian New Media Usage Study*, 2009.
2. Bayer Animal Health, NCVEI, Brakke Consulting. *Bayer Veterinary Case Usage Study, 2011* (bayer-ah.com/nr/45.pdf).



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