



Leveraging Social Media Communication

By Sheila Grosdidier, RVT, PHR

In the November/December 2011 issue of *Today's Veterinary Practice*, the article *How Practices Can Thrive in an Online Environment* provided a fundamental review of the online resources available to create and enhance your ability to connect with clients, potential clients, team members, and business alliances.

This article will address how to establish an online presence, resulting in positive outcomes for your practice. Each step in this plan requires that you identify what you want to accomplish and set goals.

Follow these steps for success:

Resources on TodaysVeterinaryPractice.com

Visit our [Resources](#) page to view the benefits of adding Facebook and Twitter to your social media toolkit, find ideas for online videos, and implement other social network marketing ideas.



Courtesy Jim Ladd

1 YOUR FIRST IMPRESSION

Take time to review your current online presence (eg, website, Facebook). Look at it from the perspective of a client and consider what initially brings them to your site and what would encourage them to continue returning.

Alex Todorov and Janine Willis, researchers from Princeton University, had students view a brief (microsecond) video clip of a political candidate. Respondents predicted, with 70% accuracy, who would win the election, merely from this tiny clip of video.¹

Our clients also make quick decisions based on interactions; therefore, develop a social site that encourages interaction and invites return visits:

- **Be real:** Use language that is conversational. Avoid long, technical words unless you provide a definition. Include accu-

rate spelling and grammar. Having a conversation with a viewer means making the discussion user friendly. Simple concept? Yes—but one that is often forgotten.

- **Determine who you are:** Your online presence gives you a voice. Now let it embrace your personality. A well-quoted practice management consultant reminds clinic owners to decide who they are in comparison to a hotel chain: Is your practice the Marriott, Ritz Carlton, or Holiday Inn? Make sure your sites reflect your brand personality (see **Brand It**).
- **Commit to updates:** Information should be updated regularly and someone should be responding to questions and comments from visitors.
- **Add photos:** Personalized pictures tell a story better than

Table 1. Five Benefits of Social Media Marketing

1. **Social media allows you to build a network of core supporters.** This loyal group of followers will keep bringing your practice business and referring it to others if they are pleased with their pets' care and the quality of information provided through your practice and social media.
2. **The more traffic your website continually receives, the higher ranking it gains among search engines.** This ranking gives your website better visibility and online exposure, and keeps new customers coming.
3. **Marketing via social media is the most cost efficient and ecofriendly method of advertising.**
4. **Creating exclusive, interesting content on a social media site attracts more attention than the often used banner ads that are all over the Internet.** Banner ads are not nearly as effective as social media marketing.
5. **Once you have established, well-reputed social media, you can use it for launching campaigns that will build interest and bring you business,** such as announcing new products, promotions, sales, and contests. However, campaign with caution because people can become immune to this marketing technique.

lengthy text. Change/add pictures often; you will be surprised at how much this simple step affects the impact of your online presence. However, make sure you receive owner permission prior to using pictures of (or stories about) their pets.

- **Check out the competition:** Spend some time looking at other websites; evaluate what you like versus what you want to avoid. Use your “first impression” instinct to build your list of dos and don'ts. Ask five trusted clients to provide their impressions of your online sites.
- **Manage your sites:** Decide if you want to handle site maintenance in-house or hire outside help.

Assess your team and see if this is a project that can be divided among them. If site management is not appealing to you or your team due to lack of time or experience, outside sourcing should be a consideration. Visit todaysveterinarypractice.com (**Resources**) for an example *social media coordinator* job description.



2 BRAND IT

Branding is the way you communicate your services, ideas, and products in a consistent manner. Your brand is your promise to your customer—it is what the customer can expect from you as well as your products and services.

Over the years, it's likely your brand has been defined by others if you have not clearly defined your business personality.

Your logo, tagline, and motto need (see **Branding Defined**) to prominently appear on all of your social websites. Review all your sites and, while you are at it, look at your handouts, brochures, products, and communication tools.

Write a description that outlines what your brand should achieve online. Make sure this description is shared with the team; then follow up regularly to assure compliance. An example of branding statements is Zappo's “Core Values” webpage: about.zappos.com/our-unique-culture/zappos-core-values.

You must be consistently committed to communicating your brand and unmistakably know who your audience is in your community and online.

BRANDING DEFINED

Logo: Symbol used to identify a company and that appears on its products

Motto: Short sentence or phrase that expresses a rule guiding the behavior of a person or group

Tagline: Memorable phrase or sentence that is closely associated with a person, product, etc

3 MARKETING

Your online strategy (**Tables 1 and 2**) determines how you will engage online users. Do you know what pet owners are doing online? Shopping, gaining education, interacting with other pet owners, and looking for answers to their questions are among the list.

Do some research and check out pet-oriented sites. This site will give you some ideas: vetlearn.com/practice-management/its-the-webdo-you-know-where-your-clients-are.

Here are ten proven ways to market your practice online:

1. **Update your Google Maps listing** (tinyurl.com/GooglePlacesforBusiness); make sure it's accurate and that they verify ownership. Mobile technology is a primary way potential clients search for veterinary care, and Google Maps (as well as Bing Local) is the common search tool.
2. **Share local business links** on your sites, and ask that they return the favor by sharing your link(s) on their sites.
3. **Collect and update client email addresses;** this is mission critical to your success. Encourage clients to

provide email addresses in order to receive newsletters/practice updates and offer free resources, which are the currency of the Internet, in exchange. For example, create and offer a downloadable PDF on Making the Most of Your Pet's Veterinary Visit as an incentive to "sign up."

4. **Ask for permission to text** your clients. While you may not start immediately, getting clients' permission will allow you to be ready when you implement texting as part of your social media marketing plan.
5. **Commit to quality content.** Users want practical, up-to-date information they can use and that compels them to return for more. Position yourself as the expert in your field by sharing links to online sources or your own information, such as brief articles, videos, or podcasts.
6. **Advertise your online sites** in the reception area and examination rooms. Have a computer in your reception area where clients can review your sites while they wait. Include site links on your invoices, emails, and other client communication.
7. **Put information about visits/follow-up care** on your website, which allows clients to review it prior to their visit or afterward. New client/pet forms can also be added to help expedite the first visit and familiarize new clients with your website.
8. **Pay close attention to key word searches**—optimum search engine ranking can come down to key words. Check out how to get the most out of searches by using the Google keyword tool (tinyurl.com/GoogleAdWords-Keywords).

Table 2. How to Improve Website Traffic

Search engine optimization (SEO) is the process of ensuring your website has what it takes to make its way to the top of searches. Check out this starter guide: tinyurl.com/GoogleSEOSTarterGuidePDF.

Post a video about pets or animals and watch it attract attention.

Have inbound and outbound (other sites') links. This improves your position in searches.

Make sure you are listed in business and professional directories and sites.

Ask for recommendations to your site. Remind clients, business colleagues, employees, and others that love your practice that you need their recommendations.

Talk about local issues to garner community interest in your opinions and practice.

Hand out business cards and make sure they have your website address on them.

Set up a QR code (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/QR_code) and post it in your reception area and examination rooms.

9. **Implement social media sharing tools.** These tools provide the option to Tweet, Facebook, or blog about something you have just read. Tools to set this up are plentiful; one of them is sharethis.com.
10. **Claim everything**—your name is your brand. Make sure to claim domain (website), Facebook, and other online names that you would like to use for your practice.



4 SOCIAL MEDIA OPTIONS

How Practices Can Thrive in an Online Environment reviewed the different types of social media available. In order to integrate the social media you've chosen into your practice, develop a schedule to make sure it is updated on a regular basis. Do it yourself or delegate it to a trusted team member.

- Start with upgrading your current websites.
- Then launch your Facebook page and Twitter account.
- Round out the schedule by launching your blog. Feel free to set your goals according to what you want to achieve.

You'll also have to decide how to handle issues that will arise.

- If a client complains on your Facebook page, how will you respond?
- How will you share this information with your team?
- Do you want your team interacting with clients on your social media sites?

These are just a few examples, but they underscore the fact that you need to set up a social media policy with team members. Different policy examples can be found at davefleet.com/2010/07/57-social-media-policy-examples-resources.

5 MEASURE IT

All goals must have a clear objective and an instrument of measurement. In social media this can be as simple as tracking the number of new clients who saw your Facebook page or tracking the number of email addresses obtained. However, here are five tools that provide better measurement results. Practices may use any combination or all of them.

1. **Alerts** identify if your business or name is mentioned online. Google Alerts (alerts.google.com) is a useful tool; Collecta (collecta.com) and Social Mention (socialmention.com) monitor social media sites for keywords, businesses, or individuals.

2. Monitoring tools, such as Hootsuite, Tweetdeck, and Cotweet, allow you to update multiple sites from the same computer, often at the same time. Keep these in mind when you need to update Facebook, Twitter, and your blog collectively.

3. Searches identify when your business name is used in an online conversation. Facebook Search and Openbook do an excellent job in this regard; Tweetbeep will do the same service for Twitter searches.

4. Activity trackers allow you to monitor activity on your websites and social media sites. Google (google.com/analytics) has a suite of tools that perform these functions and the information is essential to determine the traffic, success, and return on your resources online.

5. Overall searches, such as monitorthis.com, allows you to set up searches through the top 26 engines to identify any mention of your business name, personal name, or keywords of interest.

Establish a list of key indicators that will identify whether your social media is working for you. A list of common key indicators can be found in **Table 3**.

6 FACEBOOK

If you haven't set up a Facebook page yet, now is the time to do so. Over 80% of Americans access a social network page and chances are good that they are visiting those pages more often than websites.² Facebook is the number one visited site, with 40% of these individuals accessing their Facebook page through their mobile device. Your business can't afford to NOT have this exposure.² If you don't have a presence on Facebook, get one.



7 TWITTER

Twitter allows users to send small messages of 140 characters or less, which is called a tweet. This tool provides the ability to connect directly with your clients. Plus, it's a friendly way to keep clients informed about changes and can position you as a resource for valuable information. Many tweets include links to additional information that can source back to your website or those of others.

Twitter can also provide feedback, similar to your own focus group. Going to change your hours, offer a new service, or add a new veterinarian? This is a great tool to garner quick responses, and connecting with clients has been cited as one of Twitter's benefits.²

8 SHOULD YOU ADVERTISE?

Google and Facebook advertisements both post ads according to your specific information. Google Adwords posts your ad when the information on the user matches your specifications.

- Set a budget; then choose who your ads will tar-

get, such as pet owners within 20 miles of your practice who are looking for pet services.

- When these pet owners click on your ad, it links them to your website, allowing potential clients to learn more about why you are the business of choice.

This process has become a very popular and cost effective way to advertise on the Internet. It is simple to set up and easy to monitor because Google and Facebook do it for you. As of 2012, emphasis on small business advertising has led both companies to offer special pricing and, in Facebook's case, free advertising to get you started.³

Set a budget and try this type of advertising for 60 to 90 days. Evaluate your response by tracking new clients, traffic to your website, and return visits. Small businesses have been particularly pleased with the response in the last 6 months—62% of businesses say they will continue using the service.⁴

9 VIDEO SETUP

Video may have killed the radio star, but it hasn't been too bad for small businesses. As the third most visited site on the Internet, YouTube touts the average user's time on the site exceeds 20 minutes/day.⁵ Users have a greater tendency to watch videos than to read through long, written discussions.

How-to videos, personal tips, and techniques for quality pet care already exist on the Internet. Share them,



Table 3. Key Indicators for Evaluating Marketing Effectiveness

ADVERTISING RETURN ON INVESTMENT:

Measure the success of your display, search, new media, and offline advertising efforts.

CROSS CHANNEL & MULTIMEDIA TRACKING:

Compare your site usage metrics with industry averages and track Flash, video, and social networking sites and applications.

VISUALIZING DATA:

Uncover trends, patterns, and key comparisons with funnel visualization, motion charts, mapping, and more.

CUSTOMIZED REPORTING:

Create reports, dashboards, and segments that make the most sense for your business.

SHARING & COMMUNICATING:

Administration controls and email reports allow you to share data across your organization.

GOOGLE INTEGRATION & RELIABILITY:

Google Analytics complements a suite of related products, all running on the same world renowned infrastructure that powers Google.

discuss them, and create your own. You could go “viral” and be watched thousands of times. That’s advertising you can’t buy.

10 BLOG YOUR WORLD Blogs are sweeping the profession as one of the best ways to share information. The ability to attract new clients and increase interaction with current clients makes it an excellent tool, especially since you can update blogs frequently. Get started now by checking out wordpress.org or blogger.com for user-friendly blog templates.

Blogging is inexpensive, easy to start doing, and surprisingly fun once you get going. For ideas on topics and ways to enhance your blog, check out social-savvy-pets.com or petblogs.com.

IN SUMMARY

You now have the tools to create and leverage social media and maximize client communication. Step by step you will grow in confidence, strengthen your plan and message, and take advantage of the opportunity the future holds with regard to social media resources. ■

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