



It's Eleven O'clock: Do You Know What Your Clients Are Googling?

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For this issue, *Straight Talk* was charged with the task of determining what topics are driving pet owners online and how this information affects the day-to-day practice of veterinary medicine. To gain perspective on pet owners' Internet activity, we reached out to experts, researched online analytical tools, and learned quite a bit along the way about what our clients are looking for online.

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

Like it or not, the Internet has a powerful influence on every client that walks into your practice. It's where they go to find news and information, research, shop, and entertain themselves, such as when sitting in our examination rooms.

Many veterinary teams, either on their own or with the help of a vendor, have constructed their online presence to be a virtual encyclopedia of pet owner information filled with pages of technical procedures, diagnostic tests, services, and disease descriptions. But is all of that content creating the right message communicated in the right way?

Andy Burstein is CEO of VetJump (vetjump.com), a marketing firm that specializes in online marketing strategies and social media/web services for veterinary practices. According to Andy, understanding what issues and topics our clients are researching online is critical for two reasons:

1. It Changes How We Communicate in Person

Staying current on issues important to our clients makes us:

- Better advocates for our patients
- More effective at communicating recommendations
- Better at answering questions and alleviating concerns in the examination room and over the phone.

"We use online search behaviors to help our practices decide what client communication tools to have in exam and waiting rooms, what content to publish in client newsletters, and what issues we need to keep staff current on. By monitoring what pet owners are looking for, we can evolve our marketing efforts from reactive to proactive. All the information is there for us to use, we just need to know how to put it to work for us."

2. It Increases Our Online Visibility for Clients

Understanding what pet owners are looking for online enables a hospital to improve its online message and claim a position as a "first page" source of clinical information. The more we, as veterinarians, remain central to pet owners as information sources, the better educated current and potential clients will be, which results in better care for their pets.

Andy has seen this philosophy work first hand: "We recently conducted an experiment with a practice whose veterinarian had a special interest in clinical nutrition and pet obesity. Through the practice's blog page and social media outlets, and in partnership with the veterinarian, we created enough content related to pet obesity to impact search engine listings. Now, when a pet owner in that local area searches online for terms related to overweight and/or obese pets, 75% of the findings on the first search page come from this practice's website."

WHAT ARE CLIENTS SEARCHING?

Consider the following: According to Wordtracker, the fourth most common keyword used on common search engines in the past 12 months is *dogs*.

The team at VetJump shared some of the most frequently utilized search terms related to pets. The following topics and related terms represent what many clients are actively researching on their computers, tablets, and smartphones.

New Pets—dog adoption, dog rescue, dog breeds, humane society, breeds associated with the term rescue:

Search terms related to new pets are very popular. It is important to be responsive to this segment of the population because these are people that could be bringing new pets into your practice. At a time in our industry where many practices are seeing a decline in new patients and annual visits, it is imperative that hospitals find a way to connect with this group.

Andy described it this way: “If I told you I could provide a “room” full of new pet owners, would you be interested in going to meet them? Of course you would. This “room” exists online, and your practice can connect with them; it just requires communicating in a new way.”

Dog Food—natural dog food, dog food recall, natural pet foods, pet food stores, pet stores:

Issues associated with dog food rank high in search term analytics, indicating that fear and anxiety related to pet food recalls are prominent in many pet owners’ minds. This is a great illustration of the latent effects of recalls and how consumer concerns last for much longer than the actual risk period of the recall itself.

Searches related to natural and holistic pet diets have increased this past year, suggesting that many pet owners are looking for options other than traditional pet food. Today’s practitioner should expect that these questions will come up during annual examinations and phone conversations.



Read **How to Handle the Headaches of Recalls** in the May/June 2012 issue of *Today’s Veterinary Practice*, available at todaysveterinarypractice.com.

Dog & Cat Diseases—tick diseases, dog tick diseases, skin disease, cat eye diseases, cat skin diseases:

Dog and cat diseases (individually) represent one of the broadest pet related search term categories, with first-page search results including a mix of third party educational sites (Wikipedia, PetMD) and corporate sites of manufacturers and pet pharmacies.

The variation between dog and cat search terms is even more interesting:

- The most common search terms for dog diseases include common clinical conditions, such as tick disease, distemper, parvovirus, Lyme disease, and leptospirosis.
- The more common search terms associated with cats often include those related to zoonosis, cat scratch related illness, and toxoplasmosis.

Many practice websites establish content related to specific disease topics, but it’s important to remember that most searches are broad rather than specific to a given disease. Pet owners typically begin a search with a broad topic (eg, coughing dog); then progressively narrow down the search to a specific topic (eg, congestive heart failure). Your practice needs to be visible in all stages of the search.

Pet Insurance:

Pet insurance is one of the fastest growing topics in veterinary medicine; first-page search results yield websites and resource pages for major providers of pet insurance. It is also a topic that is gaining exposure in consumer circles.

When researching the geographic distribution of insurance related search keywords, the highest frequency of searches was focused in the Northeast and West Coast of the United States.

Related searches included inquiries associated with customer experience, including reviews, recommendations, ratings, and comparisons.

Lost Pets & Prevention—lost pet, lost dog, lost cat, microchip, animal shelter:

Depending on your location, keyword searches associated with lost pets can return a mixed bag of restaurant names and retail locations intermingled with actual online resources dedicated to locating lost pets: not exactly the best resource for a concerned pet owner.

In many cases, a pet owner needs to know specific search terms related to local humane associations and animal shelters to locate the resources they need. This conflated search environment provides the opportunity for practices to provide a service to the pet owning public—generating content, resource links, and recommendations for locating lost pets specific to your geographic area can become a highly sought resource for those in your local community.

Keyword searches associated with microchips in pets yields names of major suppliers of microchips in the U.S., including Avid (avidid.com), Home Again (public.homeagain.com), and 24PetWatch (24petwatch.com). In addition to major suppliers and their associated consumer support sites, these searches often produce stories and links associated with pet identification events held by veterinary hospitals, rescue organizations, and humane societies.

Integrating microchip and pet recovery content into your online presence not only increases traffic, but also plays a meaningful role in reuniting pet owners with lost and loved pets.

YOUR CLINIC CONVERSATIONS: CASE STUDY

When we understand what issues concern pet owners in our community, we can be proactive in how we interact with them on topics related to medicine, products, or public concern.

Firsthand Experience

As the pet food recall gained momentum earlier this year, we had the opportunity to work with a hospital team and see this firsthand. Recognizing an increase in the number of clients calling and coming into the practice with mis-information related to the pet food recall, the practice owner decided the hospital would take a leadership position on this important issue.

To successfully do so, they integrated pet food recall education into almost every channel of client communication.

The Communication Process

- **Staff education:** The first, and most important step, was to bring the entire veterinary team up to date on the pet food recall issue. Through lunchtime training sessions, the owner ensured the entire team was aware of, not just the facts, but also the incorrect perceptions circulating online.
- **Phone messaging:** The front desk and support staff were provided with a “talking points” notecard that included key messages to relay to clients over the phone. Although just a simple index card, it ensured the practice’s message was consistent and accurate.



Read **Pet Insurance Primer** in the September/October 2012 issue of *Today’s Veterinary Practice*, available at todaysveterinarypractice.com.

AN ONLINE PRESENCE IS VITAL TO PRACTICE HEALTH

Read these articles published in *Today's Veterinary Practice* to learn more about improving your practice's website and social media pursuits, available at todaysveterinarypractice.com:

- **How Practices Can Thrive in an Online Environment**, November/December 2011
- **Practices That Grow: What Are They Doing Right?** January/February 2012
- **Today's Technology & Social Media**, July/August 2012
- **Leveraging Social Media Communication**, July/August 2012

- **Waiting room handout:** The staff developed a one-page handout, which was provided to clients as they checked into the hospital and included the most current news on the recalls from accurate sources.
- **Examination room dialogue:** As part of history taking, technical staff asked every client if they had any questions or concerns for the veterinarian about ongoing pet food recalls. This greatly impacted visit time as it allowed staff to answer basic questions before the examination and enabled the veterinarian to better budget his or her time in the room.
- **Links on the hospital website:** The website's home page content was updated to include links to the FDA, product recall lists, messages from the hospital, and other recall resources recommended by the veterinary team.
- **Blog content (website):** Two staff veterinarians each authored a blog entry for the clinic's website that addressed the recall and answered commonly asked questions.

In constructing a messaging strategy, this entire hospital team proactively conveyed an accurate message to their client base and efficiently re-educated clients who had received incorrect information from sources outside of the hospital.

CLAIMING YOUR ONLINE COMMUNITY SPOT

As veterinary medicine continues to evolve, online behaviors, communication strategies, and social interaction will influence how we communicate with our clients, both in and outside the clinic.

Pet owners are active online, and if we don't choose to interact with them through this media, they will create relationships with others who will. So with all of the other requirements in my day as a clinician, how can I do it right?

The short answer is: you can't, at least not effectively. After considering the complexity and time required for a practice to maintain a competitive online presence, we both feel passionately that, if you are going to communicate and compete online effectively, you need professional help.

Calling in the Pros

Small business owners (veterinarians included) often put the responsibility of online and social media marketing in the hands of the youngest staff member because this person is typically the most active user. However, we wouldn't ask

our receptionist to do our taxes or ask our technicians to represent us legally. But we often ask our team members to take ownership of our most powerful communication pipeline for interacting with current and new clients.

Just like anything else, to effectively create an online presence takes significant time, resources, and an understanding of what actions truly influence client behaviors. If you take away one piece of advice from this article, it should be to find a professional who will:

- Examine the online analytics for your specific hospital
- Determine what content is most effective
- Understand what online efforts result in new clients coming in the door.

Your bottom line will thank you.

The Veterinarian as the First Line Resource

We agree—we didn't go to veterinary school to become marketers either. But we have come to understand and appreciate that clients use online resources when searching for medical information related to their pets...and the best source for that information is their own veterinarians.

To be successful as both veterinarians and small business owners, we need to:

- Maintain a strong online presence
- Become the first online resource our clients visit
- Speak in a language that addresses what our clients are looking for, not just what we want to tell them.

Ask yourself: if a pet owner in my area goes online with a pet health question, what is the likelihood (or probability) that they will find my practice? The answer may give you reason to pause and rethink your approach to online and social media marketing. ■



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