

Impact 7: Practice Promotion and Client Bonding – Part 1

Introduction

The next two articles in this series cover the important areas of practice promotion and client bonding. They pull together threads from the material written by Caroline Johnson and presented in the preceding six editions of Impact. These articles cover various subjects such as motivation and client focus in greater depth, so you may find it useful to re-read the first six editions in conjunction with the following.

Presentation, Presentation, Presentation

Presentation is **so** important. We all judge the people we meet, the groups we interact with and the businesses we deal with very quickly indeed, and often without being conscious of the reasons for our impressions. The majority of those judgments take place within the first few seconds of the initial interface, they last a long time and can be difficult to subsequently change.

It is imperative therefore to present ourselves in a manner that is likely to help others make positive judgments about us. People prefer to deal with people they like; they feel most at ease with others who demonstrate a shared value system and whose behaviour they can relate to. Whilst we like to think that our buying decisions are based on logic and sound judgment, the fact is that most purchases involve factors embedded deep in emotion; we primarily buy things that make us feel good about ourselves; we like to buy from people we feel comfortable with and in whom we have trust.

It follows that the way in which a practice is presented to the public is extremely important in terms of the numbers and types of people who are attracted to using its range of services. The attention given to ensuring clients form a positive first impression of the building, the staff and the image projected by the practice, is paramount if you wish to build a strong business for the future. The opportunity to reinforce that first impression presents itself with every subsequent client interaction. Do it consistently well and you will bond clients for life; if they feel good about being your client, they trust you, like you and believe that you care, then your practice will be very well positioned to serve all their pet healthcare needs both now and in an increasingly competitive market in the future.

Time for a Reality Check...

So what actually goes on in the real world of veterinary business?

Looking around one finds a plethora of veterinary practice promotion directed at the public, aimed at attracting new and existing clients, advertising services, and designed to grab attention or create appeal. Local radio stations play practice jingles, website search engines list hundreds of veterinary practice websites and the Yellow Pages reveal dozens of local practices all shouting “me, me!” If you surveyed veterinary practices across the country you would see products being attractively merchandised, information leaflets by the score and numerous special offers – sometimes so many it can assault the senses! There can be no doubt; money is being spent in abundance on promotion. Ask yourself this though: How much of the money poured into promotion is being spent efficiently and effectively?

For example:

- ◆ What kind of response does your advertising generate, and from whom?

"Half of all advertising is wasted but the problem lies in knowing which half" - Lord Leverhulme

- ◆ Which promotional elements convey the image desired and can you identify any that are at odds with the practice vision, or convey mixed messages?
- ◆ What components specifically build on the good relationship already enjoyed with existing clients and which will attract new clients to the business?
- ◆ **Most importantly**, is time and resource being spent on various forms of advertising when the same investment would generate a better return if channelled into client care training for the staff?

People First!

Veterinary practice is a people business and therefore the people at "the coal face" are the single most important element in projecting the right image, promoting the practice and in generating future sales. Onswitch™ recently surveyed more than 550 practices in the UK and found that **74% of clients felt that, when telephoning the practice, interest shown in them/their pet was very poor.**

So what first impressions do your clients gain and how are they likely to respond? How likely is it that the person disappointed with the telephone response will be suddenly won over by an expensive glossy brochure or an all-singing, all-dancing website? The answer to the latter question is that it takes a very long time and a good deal of effort to win the hearts and minds of people who have formed a poor first impression let alone a badly handled query or complaint.

Veterinary practice is a people business with vets and veterinary staff enjoying a uniquely special relationship with their clients. When building a practice, the single most important element is the people; they are the foundations of the business. Invest in them, build a strong team and the practice will be well equipped not only to survive challenging business conditions, but to prosper in spite of them.

In previous editions of Impact the important areas of staff selection and retention, personal development and motivation have been covered in depth. Before increasing marketing spend in any way, first take a long, hard look at these areas and make sure you are doing all you can to get them right. There is no point in investing substantially in local press and radio advertising, if respondents are greeted by someone who they feel shows little interest in them or their pet. Or why promote a practice health plan if the receptionists at the front line do not fully understand how it works?

When asked, clients all over the UK reveal the same basic needs and wants and they value similar things. What *really* matters is feeling that the people in the practice care about them and their pets, that the phone is answered promptly by a friendly voice, and when they visit, that they and their pets are recognised by name.

A practice focused on the needs of its clients and understanding fully the importance of the interaction between staff and clients will always have an edge over one that does not. This is true regardless of facilities, expertise and glossy literature. Presentation is everything; that is, *the presentation of those factors which mean **most** to the clients.*

Staff and Clients as Ambassadors

Absolutely the best, most effective and cost-efficient form of advertising is personal recommendation. In an established veterinary practice the majority of new clients come from this source so it is not to be under-estimated. When considering the subjects of practice promotion and client bonding what people say about you to others has to be the single most important element, so consider it first.

Having enthusiastic, motivated staff is the most important element of any people-orientated business. If staff members feel valued, the practice vision is understood and shared by all, everyone feels part of the practice not merely an employee, then the workplace has a tangible buzz about it: Clients experience this when they pass through the doors and they become part of it. People happy in their work smile more and they give off a positive, infectious energy; they deal more effectively with stress or pressure; they handle their interactions with each other more positively. For them, it is a pleasure to be part of the team and that message is subliminally conveyed to clients during every single interaction.

The best ambassadors for your practice are your staff. Through their actions and demeanour they radiate positive messages when they are at work and they tend to say nice things about the practice when away from it. Likewise, clients who enjoy the contact they have with the practice also say good things about their experiences and when asked for a personal recommendation, they give it enthusiastically and unequivocally.

Many practices recognise the value of this by sending a thank-you card or a bunch of flowers where a personal recommendation is made. Reinforcing positive behaviour encourages more of it and will create deeper bonds with both clients and staff.

Sell The Difference

Before considering other forms of promotion, first pause to reflect on the proportion of the total interaction between you and your clients that this elective communication actually represents.

"In every contact between you and your customers, sell the difference between you and your competitors..." Anon.

Once the practice staff are motivated, "singing from the same hymn sheet" and therefore working effectively as a team, next think about the normal sorts of operational interactions that happen between you and your clients on a daily basis, and ask yourself what they communicate. You may have identified booster reminders as a promotional tool (and if so what do they say about you?) but consider others, for example:

- ◆ What impression do clients gain from the invoices you send?
- ◆ How do the receptacles and labels provided by you when dispensing compare with those provided by the local pharmacy? Is there a legible phone number and/or web address on the label?
- ◆ If third parties such as kennels, catteries, or even retail or pharmacy outlets occasionally refer clients to you, do you provide them with suitable communication materials to make this process easier?
- ◆ What do your employees wear to work?

And so on. The devil is in the detail when it comes to reviewing how your practice is perceived by the public; their impressions are formed with every single communication and interaction, right down to the quality of the label on the pot of pills.

More Operational Issues

And yes, there's even more to consider....

- ◆ Do clients find it an uncomfortable experience to complain, or at least give you feedback when something is not quite right? Or do you make it easy for them, listen carefully to their concerns and resolve them to your mutual satisfaction?
- ◆ What other feedback mechanisms do you provide for clients to positively influence your service to them?
- ◆ Follow up – for example, if clients miss appointments, who telephones to make sure that all is well? If there is a particular procedure or service that would be appropriate for the client or patient six months after the last visit, who sends a polite reminder to let the client know the service is available?

Now, and only now, with "all the practice ducks in a row", it is time to move to the next stage and consider the other methods for marketing and promoting the practice.

Summary

In Part 2 of this article (see next edition of Impact) some of the most popular and effective platforms for practice promotion will be explored.

Remember first that most of the communication between you and your clients happens through personal interaction and if you do advertise a level of service that is not perceived by the clients to have been delivered, they will actually gain a negative impression of your practice from the advertisement.

Veterinary practice is a people business with clients and would-be clients basing their choices and decisions largely on emotion. People rarely choose a practice on the basis of a logical, informed assessment of the facilities and expertise available; instead their choices are driven by criteria such as the warmth of the welcome and their impressions of how much your staff care.

This means that when considering promotional developments, it is imperative to first look at the day-to-day interactions that form the bulk of the exchange between you and your clients. Recent research based on the experiences of mystery shoppers reveals that veterinary practices are failing to create a good impression when clients ring the practice. Make an effort to measure and monitor at least a proportion of these interactions, and make it easy for clients to give you feedback. Then, act on it.

Once this is done and you are confident that all transactions are being dealt with in a friendly, professional manner then it is time to consider how best to promote the full range of services to clients and the outside world. For more on this, please await the next issue of www.merial.com/impact!



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