

## **Impact 8: Practice Promotion and Client Bonding – Part 2**

### Introduction

Articles 1 and 2 of “Practice Promotion and Client Bonding” pull together threads from the material written by Caroline Johnson and presented in the preceding six editions of impact.

### Back to Basics

During this article a number of vehicles for practice promotion will be explored. Before looking at these, there is value in re-visiting some basic principles:

#### 1. Personal Development and Teamwork

Do remember that every project tackled at work represents an opportunity to develop individual members of the practice and to promote teamwork - this applies particularly to practice promotion since you are, in essence, saying positive things about yourselves! Inclusion in the process will develop skills and present obvious opportunities for peer recognition – both of which are highly motivational factors, ensuring also that the team develops, strengthens and matures.

#### 2. Client Bonding

A brand new practice, or branch will primarily focus on the sorts of promotion designed to attract new clients, in order for it to build a viable client base. As pet numbers are declining, for the majority of established practices client bonding, and therefore communication with existing clients, must be the priority. When constructing your promotions focus on ways of increasing the annual spend of existing clients, by helping them to increase the frequency of their visits, develop stronger purchasing habits with your practice and reinforce the positive reasons for their loyalty.

### 3. Communication Plan

In far too many cases hard-earned money is thrown at promotional activities in a seemingly random, ad-hoc way. Whilst good results may happen by chance, better results happen through planning.

Promotional activity should form part of an overall communication plan. This should consist of a planned series of communications, delivering consistent and complementary messages from your practice to the animal owners it wishes to attract. Remember also that communication is a two-way process, so your plan should involve feedback mechanisms, both to help clients respond and for you to directly evaluate the response of your promotional effort.

The plan should be appropriate to the activity being considered, and can be very simple, perhaps as little as one page put together with a clean white sheet of A4 and a pencil. But it should be written down in order that all those involved understand what has to be achieved and how, and should cover:

1. The Background: what is the service or product that we are trying to promote?
2. The How: with whom will we need to communicate (our target audiences).
3. What are our S.M.A.R.T. objectives; in particular, what do you wish your audience to do?
4. What short-term tactics should be deployed?
5. What are the resource requirements in terms of numbers of people, time, cost, and capital equipment requirements?
6. How will we monitor the effects of the promotion?
7. How will each element of the communication programme be integrated for the whole to fit together in a synergistic way?

S – Specific M – Measurable A – Achievable R – Realistic T – Time-bounded
---

Writing your plan in a simple structured way facilitates discussion of the options available with those involved in order to reach consensus, understanding and adoption of the process. A planned approach is necessary for all the following reasons:

- In order to be effective, the chosen media need to be appropriate to promote the planned service: If you propose to offer an expensive referral service in dog behaviour or breeding, sponsoring an event at Crufts might be worth evaluating...but perhaps not if you need to promote a bitch spay clinic in an area of urban regeneration.
- Look for measurable evidence that the medium you choose is both received, and read or listened to by your target audience before spending money on external media such as advertising.
- If clear objectives are not established at the start success cannot be measured and it is easy to fool yourself into believing all has gone well; mistakes rather than successes are then replicated.
- The messages must be integrated across the chosen media in order that positive messages are reinforced across the various channels, including face-to-face contact and other verbal messages. So, in a well-planned campaign, if the jingle and the message in your advertisement on local radio reinforce the messages in your recent newsletter or worming reminder, then you get more for your money.

## Promotional Tools

The following is not a definitive list of promotional vehicles for practice development – the scope of this article does not permit it. However it does highlight some of those most commonly used and underlines the importance of a well-planned approach whichever medium is chosen.

### 1. Public Relations and sponsorship

Since most P.R. input results in positive exposure to an audience wider than just your established pool of clients, then it can yield results in terms of attracting new clients whilst further strengthening bonds with existing ones. Be clear at the outset, as to whom you are trying to communicate with. Such mechanisms as feedback literature at meetings, or dedicated e-mail addresses in articles will allow you to monitor effectiveness. Opportunities include: -

- Community visits, including talks given to schools, local animal groups and charities and women's groups (women are most likely to take a companion animal to the vet). So carry a digital camera with you to record those interesting situations.
- Involvement with wildlife or other animal charity groups. Many practices offer free or discounted services with local groups and it is done out of pure kindness. However, they should result in free promotion, perhaps through the charities themselves, since the costs of doing the work may well be significant!
- Information slots on local radio, T.V. or articles in the press. The media have a considerable appetite for animal stories particularly those associated with acts of bravery, humour and unusual situations. Giving a member of staff responsibility for developing links with journalists and generating copy can create considerable interest from local media in the work of the practice and will ultimately result in increased exposure to a wider public.
- In an earlier edition of impact, "Focus On Clients", the merits of focus groups were discussed. Clients who become part of such discussions take a very real interest in the work and development of the practice and become great ambassadors for it.

Sponsorship opportunities might be as simple as staff members offering to bake cakes for a local pet event, sponsoring a town-centre poop-scoop bin, or a public information board in a local area favoured by dog-walkers.

### 2. Practice Literature

Literature should be expensive to produce, if you are promoting a quality service to caring clients. A cheap photocopy might be appropriate if you are promoting a cheap, no-frills service to a cost-conscious group of clients; but they will then expect you to be very cheap, so take care. Also: -

- Attractive brochures sat on a reception desk do very little, but mailed out to prospective new clients, those ringing in with price enquiries, and personally handed to people visiting the premises for the first time, they achieve more. So think about how to use the literature you produce to best effect.
- Information sheets should be concise, easy to read, with the minimum of technical or scientific jargon if clients are to read and understand them. They must also reassure; what is commonplace and routine for a veterinary team may be a major, anxious event for the owner of a new puppy.
- Should your literature project technical expertise, state-of-the art facilities, the newest equipment and cutting-edge science? Or should it say "welcome, we care and we'll help your pet have a happier, healthier and longer life"?
- Is all of your literature consistent in the messages they carry, the quality of production and branding of the practice? If you are inserting manufacturer's material in puppy packs, is that saying the same things as your own information handouts?

### 3. Special Offers

Special offers normally take one of two forms: Either, the one-off with a start and an end date; for example, buy 2 packs between 1<sup>st</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup> August and get 1 free; or the ongoing promotion, such as a healthcare plan where 12 months of preventative healthcare is purchased, renewable each year.

Whilst such offers usually attract take-up (we all like something for nothing!), care needs to be taken when introducing them. Key points for consideration include the following:

- Too many promotions at one time can confuse and may transmit the message “bargain basement”. The latter may be inconsistent with your practice image and ideals.
- All promotions require careful management. The reception team in particular, needs to fully understand the promotion and be armed to deal with any likely enquiries.
- Costs associated with the implementation of the promotion should be recorded and compared both with the end result and the original objectives. Some promotions are fantastically popular with clients, but potentially damaging to the bottom line of the business.

### 4. Advertising

Advertising in the press, Yellow Pages or on local radio can be expensive and requires careful monitoring. The majority of new clients arrive through personal recommendation, so be clear about what you are trying to achieve with your advertising in order to be able to make appropriate adjustments, or negotiate better rates. Be careful not to advertise more than you can deliver.

### 5. Open Days

Open Days require a special mention due to their popularity with veterinary practices. Planned and executed well, a practice Open Day can achieve a huge amount. For more information on how to run a successful Open Day see the practice toolkit on issue 7 of impact.

### 6. The Website

I was recently pointed in the direction of a practice website by a Principal who didn't know what was on it because he had not yet seen it. When designing your website you should be involved in every stage of the design, not leaving it up to “the experts” – it is your practice after all!

A growing proportion of British consumers now look for service or product information on the net, but the following require consideration:

- Most consumers will only spend a few seconds trying to reach on-line information: Your site should run quickly on a fairly basic computer and not be overloaded with graphics.
- Prospective clients may not know the practice name. Even if they have driven past the practice they may not get the postal town correct when searching on-line. So is the web address or practice name well branded and obvious on the sign outside the practice?
- Having used an on-line search engine, most consumers will not trawl through many pages of results to find what they want. You can improve your chances of being found by a process known as “search engine optimisation”. For more information on this subject ... look on the web!

Having decided which group of clients you wish to engage with, also consider: -

- Is the website simply going to be an electronic form of a practice brochure or do we want it to do more than this?
- If we wish to engage in dialogue with our clients and prospective clients through the website this facility needs to be built in and manpower made available to deal with incoming enquiries.
- Do we want to develop links with other sites and organisations?
- Who is going to be charged with the responsibility of keeping the website up-to-date, informative and interesting? An out-of-date site can be a negative for the practice with the potential to blight its otherwise good image.
- As always, be clear about whom you are targeting and their information needs. For example, if you wish to attract new clients or holiday visitors, a location map may be advantageous. Likewise, you could include a document on your website for prospective and existing clients to download and bring as an invitation to a practice Open Day.

Some say that you cannot measure the effectiveness of a website, but in most cases this is untrue. For example, if you are trying to attract new clients you might have a standard protocol at reception for use when registering new clients that includes something like:

How did you hear about us?	Personal recommendation	Local radio advertisement	Drove by practice	Website	Other
If website, how did you find it? (Search engine)					
How could our website have been more helpful to you?					

A final word..

When it comes to promotion there are a wide variety of options available, but the real key to success lies not with creativity, the range of media employed nor the level of investment, but with planning. If vets introduce new products or clinical procedures to the practice, would they not have specific objectives in mind? Would they choose their patients carefully? And would they want to monitor the new tools to see how effective they were? The same is true of a website, practice advertising or any other communication medium that you choose. So be structured in your approach, keep it simple and involve all the staff from planning through to implementation.

And remember always that whilst computers and the media may have evolved hugely over the last ten years and will continue to do so, we humans have not evolved much over the last ten thousand years. Most of your clients will come to you because they like you and they believe that you care about their animals. So read part 1 of this article, make the best promotional investment that you can ever make, and invest it in a smile.



Merial Animal Health, PO Box 327, Harlow, Essex, CM19 5TG