

Impact 4: Internal Practice Communication

1. The best money you never spent

Internal communication may be a troublesome issue in organisations big or small, just about everywhere; including veterinary practices. Poor communication is often the primary reason both for disquiet and unhappiness amongst staff and for service failures; but internal “PR” may be the cheapest and quickest way to make improvements in practice, often using existing resources with just a little thought and planning.

So why are such problems commonplace? The reasons are manifold, but in the majority of situations, some or all of the following prevails:

- Veterinary practice is a busy enterprise involving long working hours, on-call activity and using a high proportion of part-time workers. Such situations can be a breeding ground for poor communication.
- Many practices have numerous departments, may work from more than one site, or in highly compartmentalised buildings: The fact that some members of staff rarely cross paths can easily lead to misunderstandings and communication breakdowns.
- The majority of practices grow organically over a period of time, yet structures often remain the same. Reporting structures that have served a small business well may no longer facilitate the transmission of information in a larger, more complex organisation.
- And finally, it is difficult for all of us to be good communicators all the time, especially if tired, stressed or busy. Left to guess what we are thinking, our colleagues can and do get it wrong.

2. Opportunity Knocks

Not addressing communication issues incurs both a people cost and a business cost. Misunderstandings are potentially damaging to team morale and in the worst cases can lead to unnecessary increases in staff turnover – people simply become frustrated, fed up and they leave. In addition, misunderstandings lead to a lowering of the perceived service level in the eyes of the client, sometimes the actual service level. This can lead to an increase in the number of complaints.

Communication problems indicate a missed opportunity. People who choose to work in practice usually do so as a result of their passion for working in a veterinary environment, and not just because it's 'a job'. Practice staff are often inherently highly motivated, hard working individuals, committed to giving clients and their pets the best possible service.

Imagine placing such a team, self-motivated and dedicated to duty, in a work environment where the misunderstandings and niggles caused by poor communication have been eliminated. Consider the greater output as the team works together more effectively. Imagine too the enhanced morale and the improved atmosphere created by a group of work colleagues, understanding and supporting one another in their roles and happier because they have fewer complaints and grumbles to deal with. What an opportunity! What a practice!

3. Planning for improvement

You may already be aware that you have a problem with internal communication. Staff may be repeatedly heard muttering about not being kept informed, there may be a generally negative atmosphere about the place or you may have seen a rise in the number of client complaints.

Any communication plan, internal or external, is only there to serve the vision and objectives of your business. If your vision for the future is not clearly stated then start to crystallise your thoughts now; better communication in the future hinges on everyone having a clear understanding of the direction and philosophy of the practice.

In seeking communication improvements, the first step is as for any plan: know where you are now and where you wish to be. This involves establishing how the individuals and the various teams and departments in your practice routinely communicate. Develop an understanding of:

- What methods are used
- The pros and cons of each
- Which methods are favoured and why this is the case.

Remember also that communication is a two-way process. The more filters a message goes through, the more likely it is to be distorted

4. Communication methods

In-practice communication methods include the following:

1. Face-to-face conversation

The most obvious way in which people communicate is talking face-to-face. So much of what we mean is expressed not through words, but through tone and body language. The likelihood of misunderstandings is greatly reduced if you can see and hear what a person is saying.

2. Telephone, voice-mail, text and pagers

Telephones, text messaging and voice-mail services are used a great deal in veterinary practice and have many benefits. They all fall into the category of being quick and easy methods of making contact with those not in the immediate locality. Their biggest disadvantage is their potential for misinterpretation given the absence of body language and the increased likelihood of distraction.

3. The written word

Distributing minutes after a meeting, taking down the details of a telephone message left for another person, the logging of a telephone complaint, recording the detail of an appraisal or review meeting with a member of staff: all are examples of using the written word to accurately record and transfer information.

4. Electronic communication

Electronic mail is here to stay and provides practices with an excellent means of communicating quickly and easily with one another or en masse. Used properly, e.g. not copying in every person in your address book every time you send an e-mail, it has great benefits. But do be aware of the potential for misunderstandings: E-mails do not communicate nuance or tone and there is considerable potential for notes sent in good humour to be misconstrued. E-mail conversations can also proliferate, becoming a time-wasting activity and making it harder to see the really important messages. For this reason many large companies have now moved to "intranets" or electronic notice boards to distribute the most important information.

Many other electronic communication tools are now available, notably the availability of synchronisable electronic diaries and contact lists on mobile phones or "personal digital assistants". However, it is important not to get carried away by technology just because it is new: In the context of the service or process you are looking at, check each tool against the following criteria:

- What information needs to be transmitted.
- Which users need to receive it.
- Where and when do they need the information, and will they actually see it.

So whilst in a given practice for example, computerised patient records may greatly facilitate the transfer of patient information between those responsible for their care, a notice board in the practice coffee lounge may work just as well for other forms of information.

6. Addressing problems and moving forward

Better communication will only come about as a result of the efforts of the whole team. In addition, any lowering of morale caused by communication problems will be improved when staff can see that something is being done to improve the situation.

To succeed, objectivity must be maintained throughout. Try not to focus on past problems in a way that places blame on individuals and instead focus on the communication processes and tools in your practice. With the appropriate structures and processes in place, communication will improve.

How the exercise is tackled will depend on the size and nature of the business, and of the time and expertise available. A Practice Manager with good people skills could obtain the information required through a series of meetings with the various departments and sites. Team leaders may be asked to canvass their teams on where they believe the communication problems lie. Staff may be issued with a confidential questionnaire and instructed to complete and return. You may even consider using the services of an external organisation to conduct an audit.

Whatever method you decide upon, the objectives should be the same:

- a) To assess whether staff understand the overall aims of the practice, their own roles and the roles of other team members.
- b) To find out which processes are working well in meeting the above aims.
- c) To identify where the problem processes are and agree measures by which their relative impact may be assessed in order that priority is first given to those areas with the greatest potential for negative impact on team morale and client service.

Step 2: Review reporting structures

Having completed the information gathering process with staff, a comprehensive review of current reporting structures may start to shed light on some of the difficulties highlighted. For example:

- A reception team comprised of numerous part-timers and with no designated overall leader might be expected to regularly experience difficulties in the transfer and dissemination of important information.
- A nursing team and reception team who rarely meet and have little opportunity to co-ordinate their activities when discharging patients might also find themselves at cross-purposes from time to time.

Draw an organogram of group structures in your practice and ask the following questions, in the context of the available tools currently available for communication:

- a) How is important information cascaded from above to the entire practice team? Who is responsible for telling whom?
- b) How are issues communicated upwards to management and across cross-functional teams?
- c) Who regularly attends meetings in the practice, how often do they occur and how is the outcome of these meetings communicated to others in the practice?

When asking such questions, think about how the current structure might be aiding communication or impeding it.

Step 3: Planning for change

Having identified where the communication blockages are, prioritised them according to importance and reviewed reporting structures and tools, it will be clear what needs to change. The next stage is to agree change and implement it.

This is best achieved by reporting back to the staff with your findings. Canvass their opinions on what processes, procedures and reporting structures may need to change in order for communication to improve. The team approach is essential in discussing what might be done to improve the current

situation, agreeing actions and drawing up a list of new protocols for improvement. You cannot do it all yourself; look for champions of key parts of the communication process to take on the responsibility of implementing agreed changes.

Step 4: Maintaining momentum

It may seem an obvious statement to make but focussing on practice communication should not be a one-off process. Progress will lead to tangible improvements in teamwork and morale but do stay on top of things. Consider a regular twenty-minute slot at practice meetings to discuss practice communication. Celebrate recent successes, continually look for better ways of doing things and be quick to nip issues in the bud before they become major problems.

7. Internal Marketing

'Marketing' has been a buzz word in recent years as; you would struggle to pick up any veterinary journal and not find this word appearing repeatedly as practices wrestle with declining client and pet numbers and increasing competition. That said, it is surprising and disappointing to find external marketing being given great focus whilst internal marketing is largely ignored.

All too often new services are advertised to clients without the full commitment, understanding and involvement of all the staff. Internal marketing is about communicating and showing staff how they benefit from changes. This may not be a direct financial gain but perhaps the increase in job satisfaction that arises from understanding how a client or patient benefits from a new service.

The final word then on practice communication has to be this: once the structures and processes are in place to ensure good internal communication, use them to consult, seek advice, share ideas and finally agree on every aspect of external practice marketing. Only then will you be best placed to harness the knowledge, expertise and enthusiasm of your practice in developing the business to the benefit of all of its stakeholders – and that includes staff and clients!

.....but hold on a minute! The starting point in any marketing activity is to have a comprehensive and detailed understanding of the needs of your clients; only then can you anticipate, meet and exceed their expectations, and therefore build a more successful business.

For a focus on clients, read the next issue of Impact when we shall be doing just that!



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