Is Telehealth the Wave of the Future?

The industry perspective on this growing field — and what it means for veterinarians and pet owners

PLUS

Practice Finance
HOT HUMAN RESOURCES TRENDS
Managing Your Practice
PET INSURANCE: GET CLIENTS ON BOARD
Your Online Toolbox
SOCIAL MEDIA AND YOUR MARKETING PLAN
The Scoop
NAVTA INITIATES CHANGE IN TECHNICIAN CREDENTIAL
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For Clients Today, Convenience Is King
Consumers today demand convenience, and your veterinary clients are no exception. Here are a few ideas for increasing client convenience in your practice.

The Secrets to Career and Personal Happiness
Career happiness, work–life balance and personal equity are achievable when you think of your career as a marathon, not a sprint.

Rising Pet Health Market Worth an Investment Look
Thinking about investing? Look no further than the pet health care industry. We highlight some public companies that are doing great things for animals and may bring success to stock portfolios as well.

The Perks of Pinterest for Veterinary Practices
Are you using Pinterest to promote your practice? If you think this popular social media platform can’t help grow your business, think again.

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PRACTICE FINANCE

8 Surviving (and Thriving in) Economic Downturns
Lack of preparation is a huge financial challenge for veterinarians.

Also in This Issue:

4 From the Chairman
Take It from Dale Carnegie

5 The Scoop
NAVTA initiates veterinary technician credential change; Vetsource wins legal battle in Nevada

6 Advice Unleashed
Tips and insight from business, financial and practice management experts

10 Personal Finance
Financial mistakes that could hurt your credit score; repaying student loans the smart way

16 Leadership Lessons
Are you making these leadership mistakes?

18 Managing Your Practice
Cost-effective ways to win new clients; workplace bullying; the rewards of Fear Free certification; appeasing angry clients; educating clients about pet health insurance

30 Your Online Toolbox
The digital path to client education; using social media to increase your client base
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Take It from Dale Carnegie

Studies continue to confirm what Dale Carnegie (1888-1955) promoted decades ago: Happy workers are more productive. Carnegie was a sought-after lecturer, a counselor to world leaders, and an author of best sellers such as “How to Win Friends and Influence People.” And his principles are still readily applicable to achieving personal and professional success.

Workers’ happiness can be measured by their level of engagement. Engaged workers perform better and are more motivated, putting in extra effort when their organization needs it most. These workers stay with their organization, reducing turnover, and serve as brand ambassadors. Worker engagement is the foundation for productivity and, in turn, profitability.

“Happiness and Productivity: Understanding the Happy-Productive Worker” by Dr. Daniel Sgroi summarizes a 700-person study in which researchers randomly chose individuals and either showed them a 10-minute comedy clip (test group) or gave them snacks and drinks (control group). This was followed by a series of questions to ensure that the “happiness shocks,” as they are called in the report, had unexpectedly great effects on employee engagement (page 24).

On the positive side, leadership errors can undermine engagement in a number of ways (page 16), and bullying destroys productivity to the tune of $200 billion per year throughout America (page 20). On the positive side, an effective mentorship program can have long-lasting effects on both the technical abilities and cohesiveness of your team (page 22), and one veterinarian shares how her insistence that her team become Fear Free certified had unexpectedly great effects on employee engagement (page 24).

Don’t underestimate how much your compassion for your patients, clients and coworkers can influence success—and actually lead to better pet health.

Thank you for reading!

Mike Hennessy, Sr.
Chairman and CEO

From the Chairman

Veterinarian’s Money Digest

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Vetsource Settles Suit Against Nevada Pharmacy Board

By Kerry Lengyel

Vetsource, the Oregon-based online veterinary pharmacy, recently settled a federal antitrust suit against the Nevada State Board of Pharmacy in which Vetsource accused the board of misusing its position to exclude the company as a competitor. “A lot of time, money and effort was spent to ensure that veterinary practices can continue to provide a higher level of service to their clients,” said Vetsource’s Chief Operating Officer Andy Bane.

According to federal court documents, the issue began in February 2015 when a pharmacist on the board “tried to intimidate Vetsource into ceasing operations in Nevada,” saying the corporation’s business model “violates Nevada’s anti-kickback statute.” Anti-kickback statutes prohibit health care providers and suppliers from giving or receiving remuneration for the referral of patients or services covered by most federal health programs.

Vetsource attempted to explain its business model to the board, but to no avail. On February 27, 2015, the Nevada Pharmacy Board sent a letter to Vetsource demanding that the company discontinue services in the state. But Vetsource argued that the company was not violating any Nevada laws.

According to Vetsource, Nevada has allowed “licensed pharmacies to ship medications prescribed by offsite veterinarians directly to farms and ranches” and that Vetsource’s model was simply adapted for domestic pet medication. Vetsource is licensed to operate in Nevada under Nevada State Board of Pharmacy retail and wholesale licenses and currently operates in all 50 states as a Veterinary-Verified Internet Pharmacy Practice Site accredited pharmacy. Even so, the pharmacy board sent another cease-and-desist letter in May 2015 and told Nevada veterinarians they would be in violation of state law if they used Vetsource services.

With a hearing scheduled for March 2016, Vetsource took a leap of faith and brought its own complaints to the forefront. Vetsource’s federal antitrust complaint stated pharmacy board members were trying to “stifle innovative competition,” that the allegations were unfounded and that the board was trying to protect its “illegal monopoly on pet medication.”

According to Vetsource, its business model results in competitive pricing, greater efficiency in pet medication delivery and increased quality for purchasers — all of which were threats to pharmacists. Vetsource does not receive any remuneration for patient referrals as the pharmacy board claimed.

In the end, Vetsource won the legal battle. Although the terms of the federal lawsuit settlement were not disclosed, Vetsource continues to operate in the state and the complaint from the Nevada Board of Pharmacy was rescinded.

“At the core of this lawsuit was the ability of veterinarians to operate their businesses competitively and efficiently,” Bane said. “This was a fight we were willing to take on for the industry.”

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NAVTA INITIATES CHANGE IN VETERINARY TECHNICIAN CREDENTIAL

By Maureen McKinney

In its ongoing efforts to unite and advance the veterinary technician profession, the National Association of Veterinary Technicians in America (NAVTA) Board of Directors has announced the formation of the Veterinary Nurse Initiative Coalition. This coalition was formed to pursue legislative amendments in all 50 states that will establish the universal credential of registered veterinary nurse (RVN) — replacing the current credentials registered veterinary technician (RVT), licensed veterinary technician (LVT), certified veterinary technician (CVT) and licensed veterinary medical technician (LVMT).

“Through the standardization and public awareness of the registered veterinary nurse credential, the entire profession will make significant strides toward better recognition, mobility and elevated practice standards,” said NAVTA president-elect Kara M. Burns, MS, MED, LVT, VTNS (Nutrition).

Veterinary technicians have witnessed many changes in the profession over the past 50 years. Today, credentialing requirements, titles and scope of practice vary across states. This can cause confusion for the pet-owning public and diminish the perceived value of the role technicians play in the veterinary hospital.

NAVTA believes that a single, unified title and a standardized national credential is the next step in improving the level of patient care, aligning public perceptions of the veterinary nurse and bringing clarity to the field of veterinary medicine. The coalition will work closely with the American Veterinary Medical Association, American Association of Veterinary State Boards, other professional veterinary organizations, industry and legislators to create common terminology, practice acts, policies and procedures that aim to ease the burden on individual states and associations in governing credentials. The initiative will start with a handful of states in 2018 and then work with any state interested in these reforms.

To learn more about the Veterinary Nurse Initiative, email vetnurse@navta.net.
Advice Unleashed

Tips and insight from business, financial and practice management experts.

The Key to Your Financial Plan
DARBY AFFELDT, DVM, A FINANCIAL ADVISER at Northstar Resource Group in Seattle, Washington, says the most important step in creating your financial plan is picking the right adviser. Beyond ensuring that he or she is knowledgeable and reputable, you want to find someone with whom you can build a good long-term relationship. "Ultimately, you need to like your adviser. Do you have a good rapport with that person? Does he or she educate you? Does he or she call you regularly? If you trust and have a good personal relationship with your adviser, then you can stay focused on the medicine and science you’re so passionate about and let the adviser handle the financial side of your life."

Get the Most Out of Your Financial Statements
LESLIE MAMALIS, MBA, MSIT, CVA, owner of Summit Veterinary Advisors in Littleton, Colorado, talks to many veterinarians who want to get more information out of their financial statements. One of the biggest problems, she says, is when accountants don’t use a veterinary-specific chart of accounts. "The veterinary-specific chart of accounts is really the skeleton, if you will, of your financial statements. Having the correct expenses for your practice and breaking out payroll into doctors versus technicians versus the rest of your support staff really allows you to make better business decisions."

What does she tell veterinarians who want to better understand their financial statements and be able to quickly know if something is amiss? "Be sure to work with an accountant or adviser who works specifically with veterinarians so that you have someone who can advise you more on what you can do to help improve your practice."

Go overboard to make your clients, your patients and everybody else happy with you.
The Benefits of Forward Scheduling

"FORWARD SCHEDULING IS ALL THE RAGE right now," says Amanda Landis-Hanna, DVM, senior manager of veterinary outreach at PetSmart Charities. "Forward scheduling is the concept of scheduling examinations pretty far out in advance. Essentially, we’re taking a page from what dentists and ophthalmologists have done for years. Rather than wait and call somebody a couple weeks before their annual physical exam, let’s get that appointment on the books now. That way it’s already documented and we can always follow up and adjust the time for the appointment later. Forward scheduling also gives the client a sense of a bond or an obligation to the practice that they return for that physical exam because it is as important as yours.”

Litigation Notice? Be Proactive

ACCORDING TO DEBRA HAMILTON, JD, principal attorney at Hamilton Law and Mediation in Armonk, New York, one of the biggest mistakes veterinarians make when they are given notice of litigation is not talking to their client. You should always ask your client if you can speak confidentially, she says. “You don’t want to say something that’s going to be used against you if in fact they sue later,” she says. “Talking in mediation lets you hear what the client is upset about and what the staff member is upset about, and it gives you the opportunity to save that relationship.

This way, you’re proactive, not reactive. “You’re really getting in there and helping your client understand why you acted the way you did and understanding better why they acted the way they did,” she says. “If you feel like you’re going to be sued, don’t wait until it happens. Ask your insurance company to mediate early so that you can possibly save the relationship with your client. And if you can’t save the relationship, don’t send the client away mad. Send her away with the feeling that, ‘Well, I don’t want to ever use Dr. Smith again, but at least he listened to me.'”

Protect Your Practice Assets

THERE ARE TWO IMPORTANT STRATEGIES veterinarians can use to protect their assets, says Larry Oxenham, senior adviser at the American Society for Asset Protection. First, make sure all your legal documents are current and up-to-date, and make sure those documents do what they are designed to do. In other words, he says, veterinarians “need to understand what they’ve got.” And second, “pay really close attention to customer service. Go overboard to make your clients, your patients and everybody else happy with you. Make people think you really value their pets. If there is one thing in America that would eliminate lawsuits, it’s great customer service — people don’t sue who they like.”

Communication 101: Respect the Client’s Perspective

“WHEN YOU ARE COMMUNICATING with your clients, it is of utmost importance that you understand and respect their point of view in the conversation,” advises Sarah Wooten, DVM, associate veterinarian at Sheep Draw Veterinary Hospital in Greely, Colorado, and a member of the American Society of Veterinary Journalists. “If you don’t know what that point of view is, ask questions to find out. One of the best questions I learned to ask my clients is, ‘What have you researched about your animal’s condition?’ Because a lot of the time they have already looked on the internet, they have an idea of what is wrong and you just need to get out of the way because they’re already sold and they want you to do something. Do anything you can to attain your client’s point of view and respect that point of view because it is as important as yours.”

Selling Your Practice: Think of the Buyer

JOSEPH HRUBAN, TRANSITION BROKER at Omni Practice Group, says veterinarians who are preparing to sell their practice need to look at things from the perspective of the individual who will be acquiring the practice. The buyer, he says, is going to want to see systems and a team in place. “They are really acquiring at goodwill, so you want to have things dialed in so that the new owner is off and running when he or she steps in.” Hruban also says it can help if you stick around for a period of time during the transition, whether that’s three months or nine months or some other amount of time. “At the end of the day, the team is so important because they interface with the clients and the patients, and that is the goodwill that the individual is acquiring.”
Surviving (and Thriving in) Economic Downturns

The secrets to riding out the storm? Preparation, preparation and preparation.

A Q&A with Financial Adviser Darby Affeldt, DVM

The veterinary profession is often hit hard during a tough economy. It's not uncommon for pet owners who are struggling financially to delay wellness care for their pets. When the financial belt loosens a bit, the demand for veterinary services increases. How should practices prepare for down economic times? And how can you gauge the economy?

We spoke with Darby Affeldt, DVM, a financial adviser to veterinarians and other medical professionals at North Star Resource Group in Seattle, Washington, to get her advice on dealing with turbulent financial times.

**Are we in a turbulent financial time right now or are we going into one?**

**Affeldt:** When the economy is really turbulent, we feel it acutely – like the years around 2008. Other times it's not so easy to tell until we head into a shift, whether up or down, then reflect back to gain more perspective. Right now, it doesn't seem like it's turbulent. The economy is fairly stable, jobs are stable, Wall Street is bullish and my clients tell me they're all busy and hiring. One thing is for sure, though: Nothing stays the same! History tells us that fluctuations are coming. Whether we'll have a huge swing or a softer “correction” nobody knows, but we can prepare ourselves financially for those days yet to come.

The evidence of whether we are in turbulent times is, of course, based on economics, and there are many indicators. Real estate is a great example. Historically, it typically runs in 7- to 10-year cycles, so if 2008 was the bottom, then we're potentially nearing the upper end of that historical cycle now. And this is regional. Some areas in the United States haven't fully recovered to pre-2008 real estate highs, whereas other areas are booming. Seattle is a great example – the real estate market is nuts here.

Wall Street is another great indicator. Since the capital markets began, there has always been volatility. The companies that are traded on Wall Street experience expansion and contraction just like our practices do, and investors respond to news. Investors don’t like bad news, so we do see the capital markets moving...
in response to news. Remember Brexit? The markets plummeted. Then, when folks realized the sky wasn’t falling, it recovered. This volatility is expected. Times are good, companies flourish, then times are bad and they struggle; repeat. Nobody can know what will happen tomorrow, but we can use historical patterns to guide us and help us make wise investment decisions.

**What challenges do practices face during turbulent times?**
Veterinary practices are always facing some sort of headwind – from a tight economy, when patient visits or client compliance is down, to a booming economy, when it's hard to find employees. The key is being prepared to pivot. I don’t necessarily think turbulence always equals financial struggle; veterinarians can be more creative in how they approach fluctuations.

The pet industry is alive and well, and people love their furry family members no matter whether the economy is up or down. If we’re practicing good medicine and making strong recommendations, people will largely do what it takes to care for their pets, even if money is tighter. Sometimes being laid off or not working as many hours means that folks have time to realize that Fifi’s breath is horrid or Ginger seems lethargic.

When patient visits are down, we should look for opportunities to learn to run our practices more efficiently – like the businesses that they are. For example, bringing in an excellent consultant to find areas of opportunities or challenges is smart. Examine your average client transaction amounts, client compliance, retention numbers and costs of goods sold.

**Great suggestion. What else can practice leaders do during slower times?**
There is embezzlement going on out there – I’ve seen it! Learn and know thy numbers; it’s not that hard. Learning to read a profit and loss statement and a balance sheet takes two days, and they’ll tell the story about what is going on inside the practice. It’s just like a chem panel and a urinalysis, which of course took a lot longer to learn. There are so many metrics and data to benchmark practice profitability against these days, and it’s important to do it.

I also see all kinds of practices that struggle with human dynamics: leadership, communication and culture challenges. We don’t automatically know how to do all of this; few of us are taught in school how to be leaders or understand how to juggle emotions. Practicing great medicine is not enough. It can be during the slower economy that a veterinarian can invest in his or her team, examine efficiencies (or lack thereof) and square away undone or languishing needs.

**How do you advise veterinarians to prepare for turbulent financial times?**
Turbulent times will come around again; they always have and always will. Right now, the market seems to be doing well and our investments are doing well. It’s during times like these, when the economy is somewhat stable, that veterinarians should prepare for the next turbulent period. Veterinarians should consider seeking professional help to get a financial check-up. It is critical to ensure that all the appropriate insurances are in place, they’re saving enough, their portfolios and assets match their personal profile, and more. Sadly, ours is a society that likes us to spend money and often people forget to save or put it off because something shiny is more interesting.

**What tips do you have for veterinarians for navigating turbulent times?**
The biggest tip I have is to stop putting off preparing for those turbulent times. Preparation is a multifaceted approach, a holistic plan. For example, when we treat a dog, we don’t just treat the back left leg of the dog. We look at the pet holistically. We recommend that our clients come seek our professional help when it comes to the health of their animals rather than relying on what their neighbor or Dr. Google said. Veterinarians could heed their own advice and find a professional, credible and educated adviser to help. A good adviser should be a fiduciary and available to work with his or her clients even if they move. For example, while I live in Seattle, I have clients from San Diego to Maine and from Florida to Seattle; folks move and they want to maintain that long-term relationship we’ve been building. Continuity is important to building trust.

Which leads us to my final tip: Consider getting a professional team together to determine if a formal financial plan is necessary. Sometimes people are not ready for a financial plan, particularly when just starting out. Maybe it is as simple as putting the first few pieces into place, like exploring risk management (insurances), building emergency reserves, managing debt and perhaps starting to put even a small amount away into retirement savings. As income goes up, financial lives get more complex and then a plan may be a fit. The financial plan is very comprehensive. It’s far more than asset management, or insurances. It’s a holistic approach.

**THE DANGERS OF FINANCIAL PROCRASTINATION**
Even in a good economy, many veterinarians struggle with money matters because they were never taught good financial practices. The secret? Preparation! For more from Dr. Affeldt on what can happen if you put off preparing for your financial future, visit vmdtoday.com/link/6
6 Financial Mistakes That Could Hurt Your Credit Score

Your career in veterinary medicine shows a high level of commitment and achievement. Don’t you think you deserve a high credit score as well?

By Tyler Crawford

You’ll likely need funding or credit at some point during your career for any number of reasons: to cover payroll, purchase new technology or equipment, acquire a practice, attend industry conferences or earn continuing education credits. Your credit score determines how much funding you’ll be approved for and affects the contract terms.

The bottom line is this: The higher your credit score, the better. A score of 700 or higher gives you the ability to borrow more money and the power to negotiate interest rates and fees. A score of 800 or above puts you in a position to potentially take advantage of special loan categories or terms.

Earning and maintaining a good credit score requires responsibility and deliberation. If you’re looking to boost your score, there are several things you can do — and many things you shouldn’t do. Here are six financial mistakes that could have a negative impact on your credit score.

**MISTAKE #1: PAYING YOUR BILLS LATE**

The timeliness of your payments is one of the biggest factors in determining your credit score, comprising about one-third of the overall score. Although it can be a hassle to track multiple bills each month, even missing occasional deadlines can hurt. Enrolling in automatic payments for all recurring debt can make bill management easier. Ultimately, paying bills on time can put you in good standing and increase your credit limits over time.

**MISTAKE #2: NEVER CHECKING YOUR CREDIT REPORT**

Getting regular updates on your credit report helps you stay informed about inquiries, payment history and new account activity. In addition to knowing what your score is, reviewing your credit report is an easy way to identify any inaccurate items and fight identity theft. You can sign up through a free service such as AnnualCreditReport.com or check your credit card provider’s website or mobile app to see if you can check your score there.

**MISTAKE #3: MAXING OUT YOUR CREDIT LIMIT**

Before you max out your credit card, be aware that the best practice is to keep 50 percent to 70 percent of your limit available. Maxing out your credit card can hurt your score. Revolving credit availability (comparing loan balances and debt level to your overall credit limit) makes up about 30 percent of your overall credit score. Making small payments throughout the month helps you to maximize your cash flow.

**MISTAKE #4: CLOSING CARDS YOU DON’T USE**

Don’t close that old credit card just yet — having 100 percent available on a card that you aren’t using can actually help improve your credit score. When you close a credit card account, it affects the age of your account, which contributes 15 percent to your overall credit score. So even if you don’t really need it, keep that card in your wallet, use it annually and pay it off when it’s due to continue aging your account.

**MISTAKE #5: APPLYING FOR EVERY CARD OUT THERE**

Be thoughtful before you apply for any new credit card. The rewards might be appealing, but opening a new account or even making
HOW veterinarians KEEP CREDIT SCORE HIGH

1. PAY YOUR BILLS ON TIME

2. USE A SERVICE THAT MONITORS YOUR CREDIT REPORT
   Always be informed of inquiries, payment history or new activity. Prevent identity theft and monitor credit pulls.
   TIP: AnnualCreditReport.com gives you a truly free credit report once per year, with no recurring fees or costs.

3. KEEP 50% TO 70% OF YOUR CREDIT LIMITS AVAILABLE
   Loan balances and level of debt make up 30 percent of your credit score.
   TIP: Make small payments throughout the month to maximize cash flow.

4. KEEP OLD CREDIT CARDS OPEN
   Having 100 percent available on a card that you aren’t using helps improve your credit score.
   TIP: Use the card once a year and pay it off when due, so it’s not closed by the credit grantor.

5. LIMIT OPENING NEW ACCOUNTS

6. THINK TWICE BEFORE CO-SIGNING
   MISTAKE #6: AGREEING TO BE A CO-SIGNER
   Think twice before you co-sign a loan or credit card for someone. If the main guarantor fails to make the payments on time, it will affect your credit score, too. If you do agree to co-sign, it’s a good idea to monitor the account and be prepared to make any stopped or missed payments. You should also ask to see the credit report of the person for whom you’re considering co-signing – this could affect your decision before you decide to put yourself at risk.

IT’S NEVER TOO LATE
   If you’re making any of these financial mistakes, it’s never too late to work toward correcting them. A good credit score has many benefits, from helping you advance your career or business to helping you realize personal goals and investments, such as purchasing a home or car. The loan amount and credit limit for which you’re approved will be tied to your credit score, so keeping it intact will serve you well in the long run.

Tyler Crawford is chief of business development at Bankers Healthcare Group, the leading provider of financial solutions for health care professionals.

VMDToday.com
Got Debt? Repay the Smart Way

Remove the worry from repaying your student loan debt: Be defensive, plan wisely, allocate accordingly and pay attention.

By VMD Staff

Paying off hefty student loans can be a struggle for any new grad. For newly minted veterinarians, the struggle can be monumental. According to the most recent data available from the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), the average student loan debt for veterinarians who graduated with debt in 2016 was over $167,000. Nearly 20 percent of graduates had debt in excess of $200,000. Ouch. And that’s on top of the debt that many veterinarians accrued while in undergraduate school. Double ouch. The following tips will help you repay your loans with as few hiccups as possible.

KNOW YOUR LOANS
How much do you owe? To whom do you owe it? If you can’t answer these two questions, you’re letting your lender take advantage of you. These questions may be confusing because the servicer of the loan is often not the original lender.

Federal and private student loans each have their own quirks. For federal loans from the Department of Education, you need to set up an online account through the Student Loan Data System to figure out how much you owe and to whom you owe it.

For private loans through a bank or other entity, you’ll need to figure out the institution’s system of reporting loans. If you can’t figure out where your loan information is, you can always check your credit report because lenders almost always report loans to the credit bureaus.

INCOME-DRIVEN PAYMENTS
Income-based payment programs are usually the way to go when paying off loans, but some grads don’t know these programs even exist. With federal loans, you may be eligible for a reduced (or even eliminated) monthly payment based on your income and family size. The big lenders don’t want you to know this, so you need to educate yourself.

In order to continue paying off loans at the reduced rate, you need to requalify every year, and this needs to be done manually. Don’t count on your lender to remind you of the deadline – do it yourself.

办法

LOAN FORGIVENESS OPTIONS
The U.S. Department of Agriculture offers a Veterinary Medical Loan Repayment Program that will pay up to $25,000 each year toward qualified student loans for eligible veterinarians who serve for three years in designated areas where veterinarians are in short supply. Other state-specific options exist as well. To find out if your state offers a program like this, visit vmdtoday.com/link/4.

NO FORBEARANCE (IF POSSIBLE)
If you can’t make your loan payment but don’t qualify for a deferment, your loan servicer will try to offer you something called a forbearance. This is the absolute last thing you want to do with your student loan. A forbearance allows you to reduce or eliminate your payments for a period of time while your interest continues to pile up.

Instead, ask your lender about income-driven programs. If you’re dealing with a private lender, the payment plan is unlikely, but you can still ask for an extension of the term of a loan or for lower payments.

SET UP AUTO-PAYMENTS
Whether your loans are federal or private, you should be able to set up auto-payments. When you instruct the servicer’s online interface to take the loan amount from your bank account on the same date each month, you won’t have to worry about late payments. Some borrowers even offer interest rate discounts if you enroll in an auto-payment plan.

Enrolling in auto-pay also ensures that your bank or servicer is using your payments exactly as you intended. You’re in control and can track what happens with each monthly payment. Don’t use your bank’s bill-pay system because your service may ignore your instructions if you either write on the check or attach a memo. Likewise, sending checks through the mail could result in lost, late, or misplaced payments.

Always stay on top of your credit report, which can help you figure out what your servicer is up to. Your credit report will alert you to any late payments or other potential problems. You can access a free copy of your credit report every year from the three major credit bureaus – Equifax, Experian and TransUnion.

BE THE WATCHDOG
When it comes to your student loans, you need to know what you owe and have a plan to repay the debt. Don’t be afraid to question your loan servicer, and always be sure to double-check their work. You need to be the watchdog of your own student loans to set yourself up for success.
Telehealth is certainly a hot topic these days, but what exactly is it and what companies are actively working in this space? We spoke with Deb Leon, founder and CEO of whiskerDocs, the largest veterinary telehealth provider in today’s market, to discover the industry perspective on this growing field and what it may mean for veterinarians and pet owners in the future.

What is telehealth, and does it differ from telemedicine?

Leon: Although telehealth and telemedicine are often used synonymously, most of us find it useful to distinguish the two, with telehealth being a bit broader. Telehealth is commonly defined as any health or wellness exchange that takes place through an electronic or telephonic medium. In human medicine, services like wellness coaching, health information websites and nurse triage fall under telehealth because they serve no diagnostic function.

The first modern-day applications of telehealth were pushed forward by NASA in the 1960s to monitor the cardiac health of astronauts in space. In 1967, in-house medical stations, linked to Massachusetts General Hospital, were installed at Boston’s Logan International Airport.

It really wasn’t until technological developments created a fertile environment for improving the delivery of care that telehealth began to expand. The 1990s and beyond saw a huge uptick in companies providing remote services.

Included in the broad category of telehealth are telemonitoring devices, health and wellness websites (e.g., WebMD), telephonic chronic condition management, online and telephonic health coaching and more.

Is the use of telemedicine growing in human health care?

Many services are available today in human health. Teladoc is the most successful and popular, with more than 20 million members as of March 2017. Dozens of companies offer online physician consults, with more emerging each year. Teladoc was started in 2002 by a NASA physician and went public in 2015. It operates in 48 states, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

Why only 48 states?

Medicaid programs in 48 states have some type of coverage for telemedicine. The trends in general are to ensure parity coverage in states with very little or no restrictions. This means that many are moving toward equivalent reimbursement for in-person and virtual physician visits. The Affordable Care Act helped to encourage telehealth as a means to provide more affordable access to physicians; however, it is still a state-by-state process.

The fact that there is no uniform, legal approach to telehealth has been one of the biggest barriers on the human side, and that same issue will likely play out in animal health.
**Why do you think telehealth is increasing in popularity?**

According to the 2016 Connected Patient Report released by Salesforce Research, 60 percent of millennials are interested in using telehealth options for themselves so they don’t have to come into the office for an appointment. Likewise, 51 percent of baby boomers say they “would choose a primary care doctor who offers a patient app over one that does not.”

Considering that Generation Z (born between 1996 and 2005) is larger and even more digitally oriented than millennials, this trend isn’t going away. In fact, Generation Z users don’t even consider computers and smartphones “technology” and flock to Instagram and Snapchat as well as video games for a more instant experience. These are the pet owners of today and tomorrow, and we need to be ready for them.

**Why start whiskerDocs?**

My previous company was a 24/7 nurse line, so we understood the technology and service levels needed to meet consumer needs while providing clinical and operational quality. As pet owners, my family and I could not believe that a similar service was not available to us for our pets. And, just like in human health, I felt we could make a strong impact by empowering pet owners to make good health decisions on behalf of their pets. Those good decisions are supported by knowledge and the accessibility of expert advice.

**What type of pets do your clients own?**

Our mix is impacted by the fact that several of our clients are pet insurance companies. We handle interactions for both dogs and cats (exotics in the future), with the majority being dogs. I believe this is because dogs are outside more often and thus sustain more injuries. Also, ingestion of toxins or foreign objects is a major contributor, and dogs are more prone to that. We are focusing a great deal of our efforts on awareness for cat owners, as they are often underserved due to stress and some subtleties in clinical signs.

**Is there a profile of the “average” whiskerDocs client?**

We are noticing a slightly greater acceptance of telehealth in general in younger populations – which makes sense in light of the Salesforce Research data. That can be overridden by geography and accessibility to emergency care in more rural communities. I think the jury is still out on this one; however, if it follows along the same path as human telehealth, the adoption rate of services like whiskerDocs will move very quickly among all age groups.

**What are the most and least common reasons your clients call?**

The topics we are asked about most often are (in order) clinical signs, medications, injuries and potential toxin/poison exposure. We receive the fewest calls about puppy care, behavior, general health and health and wellness.

**So, it seems that pet owners have a need for education regarding potential emergency situations. Would you agree?**

I think it's more a factor of access. General health and behavior questions can be answered at the next visit or, frankly, with online and other resources that are available to pet owners. Most people trust their primary veterinarian and aren’t looking to us to give another opinion. What they are most concerned with are decisions they need to make when something's happening that isn't normal or there is an injury. The pet owner's level of panic is often part of the problem. Do they need to take off work? Does the situation warrant an expensive trip to an emergency clinic, or can it wait until their primary veterinarian's office is open? What we can do, though, once we have their attention, is encourage and educate them about general health and wellness and build their belief in the importance of regular veterinary visits.

**Do calls often involve sending visual or even auditory files electronically?**

Yes, pet owners can send photos or videos via email and text. Our team can be reached via phone, live chat, and email. The most important feature of our service is instant access. Over 70 percent of our calls and chats are perceived by the pet owner as urgent. That's why our average speed to answer stays under 45 seconds.

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**TELEHEALTH: THE AVMA POSITION**

Earlier this year, the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) Practice Advisory Panel released a report on telemedicine and telehealth in veterinary medicine that offered recommendations and guidelines on telemedicine issues. According to the report’s executive summary, “...telemedicine shall only be conducted within an existing VCPR [veterinarian–client–patient relationship], with the exception for advice given in an emergency care situation until that patient(s) can be seen by or transported to a veterinarian. Without a VCPR, telemedicine should not be practiced, and any advice given should remain in general terms, not specific to an individual animal, diagnosis, treatment, etc. Thus, nonclient electronic communications should be in the nonclinical realms of mHealth, web content and other messaging.”

Veterinary practice acts and the laws governing veterinary medicine vary by state, with standards ranging from very lax to very restrictive. The AVMA’s Model Practice Act mandates that the VCPR must be established in person.
I felt we could make a strong impact by empowering pet owners to make good health decisions on behalf of their pets.

Do you see different questions/problems being addressed in the future?
Financial resources continue to be an issue for pet owners, so technology-driven solutions that are lower in cost will continue to be important. However, just like the journey in human health care, the solutions for access and affordability must include trust and safety. I do think we will see more pet owners looking for second opinions and alternatives to costly procedures.

What kind of interventions do the whisker-Docs veterinarians and veterinary technicians perform?
Because of current veterinary practice acts, our team cannot diagnose or prescribe. However, we can educate and inform, present options and help with resource issues. Our team of veterinarians and technicians is essentially acting in the same manner as 24/7 nurse lines do. We help establish trust in the veterinary profession by guiding pet owners toward appropriate intervention levels. It’s not a clinical assessment as much as resource management. In more than 70 percent of our interactions, the pet owner feels that his or her only option is an emergency clinic (typically because their regular veterinary hospital is closed) resulting in a lower cost action. Conversely, about about half the people who don’t think they need to see a veterinarian are recommended to do so.

Do businesses offer telemedicine or telehealth services to their employees?
Yes. Offering services like nurse triage lines is now standard practice. Every major health plan [insurance company] offers 24/7 nurse triage. Most large employers and insurers now offer services like Teladoc to their employees/members. whiskerDocs has several business clients who add our 24/7 pet help line as a benefit or component of their service offering.

Do you offer subscription services for veterinary hospitals?
We have launched 24/7 decision support for a major veterinary aggregator and will soon be able to schedule appointments right into their system when indicated. The systems that we employ at whiskerDocs are built for enterprise-level groups, so we see the best fit for aggregators with 30 or more clinics. Long term, we feel there is a good chance for integration into some of the practice software solutions that have broad usage.

And, to your point, we’ve already seen incredible value in studying our interactions – over 12,000 of them to date – to find information on pet owner knowledge and decision making. We continue to learn more and more about why pet owners interact with us (and also with their veterinarian), including barriers and gaps in care and understanding.

Is there a certain type of veterinary practice that may benefit more than another from a telehealth service?
Access to care is a huge issue. The birth of telemedicine was really about providing access to rural and underserved communities. Another way to think about it is to look at gaps in care. What factors are creating these gaps? Some of the biggest contributors are finances, geography (access to nearby clinics), cultural norms, lack of education about clinical signs, and lack of time.

I think practices that offer telehealth solutions, thereby broadening their reach, will see some good results.

Can you sum up your view of telemedicine/telehealth?
I think we should view telemedicine/telehealth as one way to reduce gaps in care. To be truly effective, it needs to be a collaboration between veterinarians, institutions and industry. Ultimately, telehealth can become yet another component in the continuum of care for our pets, providing real-time information to providers and the ability to coordinate care efficiently. Done right, this addition to the system of care creates higher levels of pet owner awareness and personal responsibility, which will have a profoundly positive impact on the health and well-being of their pets.

IS TELEHEALTH THE WAVE OF THE FUTURE?
We’ve presented the current state of telehealth from the perspective of a company that provides the service. But we want to hear from you:
- Do you think the use of veterinary telehealth will increase or decrease in the future?
- Do you see telehealth as a positive or negative for the profession?
- Where does the veterinarian–client–patient relationship come into play?

YOU TELL US!
Email your comments to us at info@VMDtoday.com.
Attention, Managers: Are You Making These Leadership Errors?

Managers can develop team members’ skills, knowledge and self-esteem, or they can create animosity, mistrust and doubt.

By Louise S. Dunn

More than two decades ago, business trainer W. Steven Brown published a book about serious errors managers make that affect their ability to manage and lead their teams. Over time, the way we do business has evolved, but the fundamentals of those errors remain the same – and a few more have been added to the list.

If you’re a floor manager, shift manager, lead technician, head of surgery or chief medical officer, you are in charge of critical services that have a direct impact on patient care, client service, team performance and business success. It also means that you’re at risk for failure, especially if you haven’t been prepared properly to tackle a supervisory role. Take the time to develop your leadership skills by educating yourself about these 14 common management errors.

ERROR #1: REFUSING TO ACCEPT PERSONAL ACCOUNTABILITY
This error is all about blaming – blame the employees, blame the clients...blame anything and anybody while never accepting responsibility for the role they played in the situation. When a manager blames others, he or she loses credibility. The team begins to lose trust in the manager’s ability to lead, and the ripple effect soon takes over and everyone else starts playing the blame game as well.

A good manager admits his or her mistakes, makes the effort to rectify the situation, learns from it and takes steps to prevent a recurrence.

ERROR #2: FAILING TO DEVELOP PEOPLE
This error can involve failing to train the team or failing to take advantage of “learning situations.” At worst, it is the manager deliberately making people dependent on him or her by preventing employees from becoming independent thinkers.

Failing to develop others gives the manager more work to do – but it is not productive work. Team members don’t develop skills that would aid in growing the business; and, as the saying goes, the test for a manager is not what the manager can do, but what others can do without the manager.

ERROR #3: TRYING TO CONTROL RESULTS INSTEAD OF INFLUENCING THINKING
This error is a failure both to explain the value of an activity and to provide tools and training that can enhance performance. Instead, the manager just “barks” about activities.

Influencing how team members think about their job responsibilities requires information from the manager about the level of their performance and the effects of their performance on patient care and client service. A manager who presents facts, works with others to involve them in a process, gains support and builds relationships encourages thinking by everyone on the team.

ERROR #4: JOINING THE WRONG CROWD
By using labels to identify certain cliques – Us versus Them, The Front versus The Back, Management versus Team – the manager is referring derisively to others on the team. In some cases, the manager may be setting up battling factions.

A manager should not align with any group. It’s the manager’s role to maintain ethical standards, build loyalty over common goals and make every effort to move the team toward productive outcomes.

ERROR #5: MANAGING EVERYONE THE SAME WAY
The error of micromanaging or not managing at all results in the manager being viewed as lacking credibility, knowledge, or leadership capability. Managers who never change their leadership style can appear to be either avoiders or bullies.

Managers need to educate themselves on the appropriate uses for different leadership and communication styles. Knowing when to direct, coach, support or delegate is important when dealing with a diverse group of people with varying knowledge and skill levels.

ERROR #6: FORGETTING THE IMPORTANCE OF PROFIT
Managers who don’t link their decisions to practice finances risk failure. Decisions such as permitting overtime hours every payroll, letting inefficiencies continue to grow, authorizing expenses without analyzing the request or not following the budget can hurt the practice financially.

Managers need to work on the business rather than simply working in the business. They must sit down with practice owners and...
take part in monitoring expenses, planning budgets and understanding the relationship between expenses and income.

**ERROR #7: CONCENTRATING ON PROBLEMS RATHER THAN OBJECTIVES**
Much of a manager's time is spent dealing with problems, many of which fall under the category of not important and not urgent. When a manager does not have time to focus on staff creativity and efficiency.

Instead of always focusing on what is broken, look at what is working well. Appreciative inquiry is a management tool for looking at what works and how it can be applied to other procedures and processes.

**ERROR #8: BEING A BUDDY, NOT A BOSS**
When a manager develops a “buddy” relationship with one employee, other team members often see the relationship as being too social. Managers may also put themselves into a situation in which decisions benefit an individual but not the entire organization. The dynamics of the work relationship change and make it more difficult for a manager to conduct performance reviews, discipline or even mediate workplace conflict. This error is especially common when someone is promoted from within the ranks to a management position.

**ERROR #9: FAILING TO SET STANDARDS**
Lack of compliance, lack of consistency, lack of authority – all of these affect a manager's ability to do his or her job. The manager must establish and enforce compliance with practice policies and procedures, holding people accountable when standards are not followed.

**ERROR #10: FAILING TO TRAIN YOUR TEAM**
It's hard to hold people accountable if they are not trained properly in how to perform their jobs. Failure to train the team inhibits advancement of the practice, prevents initiation of new programs, and permits ongoing low standards of care.

Empower the team to perform at their best level by giving them the tools and knowledge they need to perform their jobs. Establish a budget (typically 0.5 to 3 percent of payroll) for training and continuing education needs.

**ERROR #11: CONDONING INCOMPETENCE**
Trying to be a buddy, avoiding difficult decisions and not holding others accountable all give the impression that the manager condones incompetence and is unable or unwilling to lead. Managers need to use effective confrontation techniques when a team member is not performing well. Point out what behavior is being observed, how it makes others feel and how it affects the team's overall performance. Then, get the individual's input and agreement on what will be done, and follow up using a performance improvement plan.

**ERROR #12: RECOGNIZING ONLY THE TOP PERFORMERS**
Recognizing only top performers creates a barrier for effectively improving the performance of the entire team. Staff members who are not given recognition because they are not top performers may perceive that they will never achieve top performer status and thus never be recognized for goals they achieve.

Managers can recognize every team member by using the leadership styles of directing, coaching, supporting and delegating. Acknowledging small “wins” as a person progresses through the different phases of developing competencies will encourage those team members to keep striving.

**ERROR #13: MANIPULATING PEOPLE**
Manipulation can include coercion, attacking the self-esteem of others, creating fear within the team, pitting individuals against each other, intimidation and even threats. Any time a manager resorts to manipulative tactics to motivate people, failure will result eventually. Instead, encourage the right behaviors for achieving goals, build trust and learn how to motivate people the ethical way.

**ERROR #14: FORGETTING THE POWER OF COMMUNICATION**
Leaders who don't ensure the flow of information from all areas of the business and those who lack emotional intelligence are unable to motivate the team to action. These leaders break down trust within the team and hinder the team's productivity. Skillful interpersonal communication means that the manager not only speaks but also listens with full attention.

**CONCLUSION**
Management is a skill that must be developed in order to provide for successful business results. Managers who make these errors deconstruct the work environment to a point where the team cannot function at their highest potential.

Louise S. Dunn is an award-winning speaker, writer and consultant who brings over 40 years of in-the-trenches experience and business education to veterinary management. She is founder and CEO of Snowgoose Veterinary Management Consulting, which helps veterinarians develop strategic plans that consistently produce results.
How many residences are located within driving distance of your veterinary practice? The fact is that you’re surrounded by potential clients. Your practice’s growth is limited only by your ability to entice those people, with their furry companions, through your door. Here are five great ways to bring them in — and bring them back.

**STRATEGY #1: ENGAGE IN SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING**

Pet owners love to talk about their pets and share animal-related content on social media. Because every share is like a free advertisement, the marketing potential for your practice is almost limitless.

According to Pew Research, social network participation has increased tenfold in the past decade. With 69 percent of American adults active on at least one network, social media marketing is beneficial to any business. With 65 percent of pet owners posting about their animals at least twice a week, social media is a virtual gold mine for veterinarians.

Mars Petcare conducted an extensive survey last year that revealed some interesting information about the social media habits of pet owners:

- One in three pet owners posts as much about their pets as they do about their human family members.
- One in 10 owners posts more often about pets than about people.
- One in six creates a social media profile for their pet.

Not only is your target market on social media, they are eager to engage. Pets get more attention than their owners, according to half of the Mars survey respondents. Apparently the owners don’t mind, because 55 percent said that reactions to their pet-related content are more important than reactions to their personal posts.

**STRATEGY #2: SHOWCASE YOUR COMPASSIONATE SIDE**

Caring and commitment are the driving forces for many veterinarians. Those qualities can also be your best selling points when marketing your veterinary practice. A study published in the *Australian Veterinary Journal* found that more than 60 percent of pet owners ranked compassion for animals as a major quality when choosing a veterinarian. Likewise, the American Veterinary Medical Association states that many people consider commitment and friendliness to be the most important factors in making their choice.

Every time your clients visit your office, they see evidence of your passion for helping animals. How can you showcase that passion to prospective clients? One of the best ways is to engage in charitable giving or community involvement – and get the word out.

Examples include volunteering your time to a program for feral cat management, sponsoring a fundraiser for the local animal shelter or even simply promoting a local animal-related charitable organization. You may already be doing these things simply because you care. If so, it’s time to brag a little.

- Post announcements and photos on social media showcasing your contributions.
- If you participate in, organize or sponsor an event, send out a press release.
- If you sponsor an event or organization, be sure your sponsorship includes media acknowledgement.

**STRATEGY #3: LET YOUR CLIENTS BE YOUR BRAND AMBASSADORS**

If you don’t have a referral program in place, your client base is an untapped resource with tremendous potential to grow your veterinary practice. Word of mouth has always been one of the best ways to attract new clients. People tend to trust the advice of friends and family, especially those speaking from experience, more than any form of advertisement. The problem is, current clients might not mention your services to other people.

Here are some surefire ways to increase referrals:

- Implement an ongoing program offering incentives, such as a discounted appointment for every new client referred.
Your practice’s growth is limited only by your ability to entice those people, with their furry companions, through your door.

• Run periodic promotions offering referral incentives for a limited time.
• Post a sign or other notice in your office asking for referrals and detailing any rewards you are offering.
• Offer double incentives, with discounts for both the referring party and the new client’s first appointment.
• Provide business cards or promotional materials that clients can distribute when they recommend your practice to someone. Be sure your phone number and website are displayed prominently.
• If you have a client feedback form, add questions about how likely they are to refer you and why. This information can help fine-tune your program.

STRATEGY #4: PROVIDE CLIENTS WITH SOME FINANCIAL FLEXIBILITY
Cost is one of the top reasons people fail to take their pets to a veterinarian. And while lowering your fees may not be practical, you can make it easier for clients to pay for your services.

In many cases the problem is not the client’s unwillingness to spend money on veterinary care. Rather, it is the lack of available funds at any given time. An informal survey by VetBilling.com indicated that two-thirds of pet owners would take their animals to the veterinarian more often if a payment plan were available. There are many ways to help clients reduce their out-of-pocket expenses or divide large expenses into more manageable payments over a period of time:
• Offer an in-house credit or financing plan.
• Create a preventive care program offering a limited number of specific services for a predetermined annual fee.
• Work with third-party financers such as CareCredit.
• Recommend pet insurance to clients.
• Offer discounts or installment payment plans for bundled services, such as a series of immunizations for new puppies and kittens.

STRATEGY #5: MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR WEBSITE
For today’s veterinary practice, a website is nearly as necessary as a physical office. You are already paying for hosting and taking time to keep your website updated; why not put your site to work for you?

A decade ago, you were ahead of the game if you had a one-page website that included a brief advertisement and an email address. Today, you are behind the times if your website isn’t an effective marketing tool for you and a valuable source of information for your clients. An effective practice website includes:
• Contact forms, payment policies, and other information for client convenience
• Information about pet health and about your services
• Educational or promotional videos, or both—many people will watch videos but not read text
• Links to all your social media profiles and subscription options for your newsletter

You want to establish familiarity and credibility by incuding information such as your biography, credentials, awards and the practice history. If your office staff is answering the same questions over and over, consider adding an FAQ page to your site.

Design is important, so make your site aesthetically pleasing and user friendly. And don’t forget search engine optimization (SEO) so that prospective clients will find you.

CONCLUSION
Enhancing your online presence and public relations are keys to getting your message out. Quality service, affordability, and convenience will enable you to convert leads into new clients and new clients into repeat clients. When you optimize both your office and your marketing, you unleash the true potential of your veterinary practice.

Naren Arulrajah is president and CEO of Ekwa Marketing, a full-service Internet marketing company that focuses on SEO, social media, marketing education, and the online reputations of veterinarians/practice owners. If you have questions about marketing your practice online, call 855-598-3320 to speak one-on-one with Naren.

Your marketing strategy should include enhancing your online presence and promoting your practice.
Exploring Workplace Bullying

Bullying — a common problem among health care workers — is detrimental to both employee morale and your bottom line. Here’s what you need to know.

By JoAnna Pendergrass, DVM

According to the Workplace Bullying Institute (WBI), workplace bullying is defined as the “repeated mistreatment of one or more employees with the intent of humiliation, intimidation and sabotage of performance.” Bullying is a productivity killer — costing an estimated $200 billion per year in decreased output, increased absenteeism and high turnover — according to recent research.

According to a 2014 WBI survey (the newest survey results will be published later this year), 65.6 million Americans have either been bullied at work or have witnessed someone being bullied at work. What’s more, survey respondents reported that health care was the most common industry in which bullying occurs.

Workplace bullying is usually deliberate and hurtful with the intent to control others. Managers and supervisors are often the perpetrators of workplace bullying, but this behavior can be found at any organizational level. Workplace bullying can include isolating employees from opportunities, information and social interaction; frequently reminding employees of their mistakes; not giving employees credit for their work; insulting and gossiping about employees; and setting up employees to fail (e.g., impossible deadlines). (See Recognizing Workplace Bullies.)

At the 2017 Western Veterinary Conference in Las Vegas, Charlotte Lacroix, DVM, JD, discussed workplace bullying, including how it pertains to employee motivation, with a focus on defining it, discussing its legal framework, and implementing strategies for defending against it in veterinary practices.

IDENTIFYING EMPLOYEE MOTIVATION

According to Dr. Lacroix, workplace bullying falls within a motivational context. Ideally, employees are motivated to work at their chosen workplace and actively pursue that workplace’s goals and objectives; they do not believe their workplace is “just a place to work and get a paycheck.”

Once basic work motivations (i.e., good base pay and benefits) are met, employees seek other motivations, including:

• Opportunities to achieve, improve skills and advance professionally
• Job fulfillment and intellectual stimulation
• Recognition for good work

Not all employees are motivated by the same things, though. Developing individualized motivation plans can help practice owners gain insight into the sources of each of their employees’ motivations. In addition to meeting general and specific employee motivations, it is important for a practice’s leadership to demon-
strate their own motivation by remaining positive and inspired by what they do.

RECOGNIZING A PROBLEM
Keeping a pulse on what’s really going on within a practice can help that practice’s leadership recognize problems such as bullying. Internal employee surveys are a great diagnostic tool for finding out what’s happening behind the scenes. On a humorous note, Dr. Lacroix likened these surveys to fecal samples: The fecal sample can detect a problem that may not be visible on the outside.

Workplace bullying is usually a sign of a larger problem and can be tied to the perpetrator’s lack of motivation to work. When the bullying becomes apparent, the practice’s leadership should consider these questions:
• Why is that employee not motivated to work?
• Is there anything about the practice or practice culture that fosters bullying?

MANAGING MOTIVATION KILLERS
Motivation killers – “bullies, negative Nancys, and poor performers,” according to Dr. Lacroix – are toxic employees who do not align themselves with the workplace culture, typically to the workplace’s detriment. It is important to talk with these employees to learn why they’re not happy at work and to see if anything can be done to improve their work experience. Asking them “why”-focused questions can reveal the source of unhappiness or possibly bring to light unsubstantiated complaints or accusations about other employees.

Dr. Lacroix advised being judicious when speaking to and managing motivation killers. If their behaviors are intolerable according to the practice’s culture, though, it may be best to let them go. Admittedly, she acknowledged, this can be easier said than done, especially if the employee has technical expertise that is vital to practice operations. However, firing a toxic employee may have to be the cost of doing business, maintaining a positive workplace culture, and keeping other employees motivated.

CREATING AN ANTI-BULLYING POLICY
According to Dr. Lacroix, the best defense against workplace bullying is a clearly worded policy that is part of the employee manual. A good anti-bullying policy should include:
• A clear definition of workplace bullying
• An outline of how to report bullying, particularly when the bully is the manager
• A detailed description of the investigation process

THE LEGALITIES OF WORKPLACE BULLYING
Legally speaking, workplace bullying is different from so-called schoolyard bullying. Whereas schoolyard bullying is illegal, workplace bullying actually is legal in the majority of circumstances. Workplace bullying only becomes illegal if the victim falls under a federally protected class (eg, women, African Americans) — in which case it can be considered harassment — or if state civil rights laws are violated. Dr. Lacroix advised veterinary practice owners to familiarize themselves with federal and state protective classes.

• A list of consequences for not following the policy
• A no-retaliation clause

DISCUSSING BULLYING BEHAVIOR
If an employee is accused of bullying, the practice owner or manager should speak with that employee. Dr. Lacroix emphasized that “every sit-down conversation must be documented in the employee’s file.” This document should follow a template:
• Date and time span of the conversation
• Full names and titles of meeting attendees
• Reason for meeting (e.g., discussion of how employee’s behavior was materially detrimental to practice operations)
• Memo section in “SOAP” format (subjective data, objective data, assessment and plan) about the bullying behavior

In addition to having individual meetings, Dr. Lacroix suggested having discussions about bullying with the entire staff. These discussions, which should also be documented, would help get all employees on the same page about bullying and sensitize them to that behavior.

Dr. JoAnna Pendergrass received her doctorate in veterinary medicine from the Virginia-Maryland College of Veterinary Medicine. Following veterinary school, she completed a postdoctoral fellowship at Emory University’s Yerkes National Primate Research Center. Dr. Pendergrass is the founder and owner of JPen Communications, LLC, a medical communications company.

Bullying costs an estimated $200 billion per year in decreased output, increased absenteeism and high turnover.
Hot Topics in Human Resources

Effective veterinary practice leaders stay up-to-date with evolving human resources issues, including millennials, mentorship and the employee handbook.

By Kerry Lengyel

The changing landscape of veterinary practice has led to the emergence of certain human resources trends that practices did not have to deal with yesterday – and cannot ignore today. Practitioners, hospital managers and practice owners need to stay updated on these trends in order to reduce absenteeism and turnover, improve productivity and increase practice profitability. Here's what you need to know.
MILLENNIALS
As more and more millennials enter the veterinary field, it’s important for practice owners and managers to understand the perspectives and needs of this generation. Rather than considering what they can bring to the workplace, many millennials want to know what the workplace can do for them.

Successful recruitment and retention of millennials, therefore, is dependent on meeting their need for workplace engagement. This group wants to find meaning in their jobs. So, get them involved with the practice, communicate openly, be flexible, offer ample training opportunities and provide access to the latest technology.

As a manager, it’s important to identify and break through the underlying assumptions and barriers about millennials and to note the benefits of having millennials in the workplace, advises Tracy Dowdy, CVPM, a practice management consultant based in San Diego, California. (See Myths About Millennials.) The average millennial receives more than 181 texts per day and consumes nine hours of data in only 6.5 hours. “When millennials are engaged in their job and empowered to bring new ideas to the practice, they can process information faster, multi-task and bring innovative ways to get the job done quicker and easier than previously,” Dowdy said.

Of course, compensation and benefits remain a priority as well. Millennial employees report that certain benefits would increase loyalty, including defined opportunities for career development and having an assigned mentor.

MENTORSHIP
Now a buzzword in many industries, mentorship programs have become much more involved than ever before. While mentorship once meant older employees training younger ones, today the focus has shifted to encompass not only training, but guidance and leadership as well.

It’s easy for employees to feel out of the loop, left behind or just not fully integrated with the practice. Mentorship programs can help engage disengaged employees by connecting them more deeply with others in the practice, which may encourage them to stay with the practice if they were having second thoughts.

Some practices are trying to increase stability among their workforce by “phasing out retirement.” Rather than an experienced older employee leaving outright, practices are instead designating a period of reduced workload or part-time employment. These retiring Baby Boomers may be open to mentorship or the creation of standard operating procedures to help ease transitions. Individuals who leave a facility then return later (“boomerangs”) are becoming increasingly common as well, with a jump in the past two years, but it’s important to provide consistency with mentorship throughout.

EMPLOYEE HANDBOOKS
Your veterinary practice should already have an employee handbook in place, but it’s important to make sure the handbook is updated – and reviewed by a lawyer – every two years.

The veterinary industry is ever-changing, and numerous new laws and legislative measures may directly impact your practice and your employees. To protect your organization and all those invested in it, the handbook needs to be current regarding any practice policies. Transparency is vital as well; all policies must be stated clearly in the handbook.

Examples of legal changes that could affect your practice and employees are:
• Leave benefits and attendance under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) and how those are to be assessed
• Revisions to reasonable accommodation guidelines and appropriate training for management to support these changes
• The increasing legality of marijuana and e-cigarettes

Besides legislative issues that could affect your handbook, employees are looking for specific language to be included regarding protection of their rights. Handbooks must discuss appropriate reporting and identification of discriminatory acts, as well as LGBTQ rights, including same-sex marriage and gender identification.

LEADERSHIP
The leadership at a veterinary practice is often the deciding factor in whether employees choose to remain with the practice. Transparency regarding the goals and motivations of any company builds trust and credibility, which lead to respect. Employees want to be treated with fairness and integrity, and they are more likely to stay with a company whose leaders demonstrate these traits on a daily basis. (See Myths About Managers.)

Human resources is one of the most challenging aspects of practice management. According to research from the Carnegie Institute of Technology, about 85 percent of financial success is due to skills in “human engineering” – your personality and ability to communicate, negotiate and lead. Only 15 percent of success is attributable to technical knowledge. “That’s why it’s so important to create alignment around shared goals and priorities for employee engagement as well as authentic, caring relationships with team members,” said Dowdy. FMGM

MYTHS ABOUT MILLENNIALS
• Don’t deal well with authority
• Sense of entitlement – they expect it now!
• Want everything digital
• Prefer work–life balance over hard work
• Will jump ship if not engaged or growing at all times
• Have different career goals

MYTHS ABOUT MANAGERS
• Inflexible, don’t like to change
• Afraid of nontraditional approaches
• Don’t care about their people
• Don’t recognize others
• Only in it for the money
• Golden Rule – I’ve got the gold, I make the rules!
• Willing to trade stability for pursuit of true passion
• Not tech savvy
Fear Free: More Rewards Than I Imagined

A practice owner calculates the return on her investment in Fear Free certification.

By Julie Reck, DVM

It’s the beginning of the month, and I am opening several days’ worth of mail for my veterinary practice. It’s a sizable stack of envelopes that represent a large variety of bills that need payment. As I open each envelope, I close my eyes tightly, take a deep breath, and brace myself for the number that appears before me. Sometimes I am relieved by a lower-than-expected number, but more often it feels like a gut punch that leaves a lasting nauseating feeling.

Operating a veterinary practice is expensive and comes with the added pressure of trying to keep costs attainable for pet parents. As a practice owner, I am all too familiar with the financial pressures and responsibilities that come along with this role. Last fall, I saw Fear Free mentioned in several publications, and I was intrigued by the potential for pets to experience a veterinary visit without physiologically damaging levels of fear, anxiety and stress. I purchased a package for Fear Free certification for up to 20 staff members. As I pressed the “complete purchase” button, I found myself asking, “Can my practice really afford to invest in so many staff members becoming Fear Free certified?”

Our staff had four months to complete their certification. Embracing Fear Free requires change, and organizational change in veterinary practices can often be overwhelming and aggravating for staff members. I was prepared to experience some resistance to this new method of patient handling, and I expected that a few team members would be reluctant to complete their certification by the deadline. Imagine my surprise when I found a Fear Free completion certificate along with a thank you card on my desk three weeks after enrolling my staff in the program. The card expressed genuine appreciation for the investment in her development and explained how much she enjoyed the modules.

I was so proud of our first Fear Free certified professional that I mounted her certificate on our treatment wall. Each week I received more and more certificates on my desk. It was so refreshing to overhear conversations about positive reinforcement, information learned in the modules, and stories about Fear Free victories already occurring in our practice. My Facebook feed was full of staff members posting about “loving their job” and sharing pictures and videos about their success with Fear Free. I received the final Fear Free completion certificate on my desk 6 weeks before the deadline, without any oversight or badgering needed from me or the practice managers. Fear Free has fueled our staff with purpose, reignited their passion for veterinary medicine, and left a resounding overall positive impact on our practice’s culture.

I recently attended a leadership development program with some of the country’s most progressive veterinary practice owners. During the first day of our program we spent several hours discussing the financial costs of a negative culture, disengaged staff, and high turnover. These problems increase costs and decrease potential revenue generation. All the practice owners in attendance had the opportunity to calculate the potential costs per day for their practice and share their reasoning with the group. Nearly every owner in the room calculated the potential costs and revenue loss to be several thousand dollars per day! This was a sobering realization, and we continued to discuss the topic throughout the week.

In a few months, it will be time to renew Fear Free certification for my large staff. My initial decision to invest in Fear Free for my staff stemmed from a desire to deliver better veterinary care for our patients, but my decision to invest in Fear Free renewal will be motivated also by the immense benefits the program offers our staff and organizational culture. When I click that “complete purchase” button this fall, I will be asking an entirely different question: “Can my practice afford not to invest in Fear Free renewal?”

Dr. Julie Reck is a 2007 graduate of Virginia-Maryland College of Veterinary Medicine. Her 2010 book, “Facing Farewell,” which guides pet parents through end-of-life decision making, was awarded the Maxwell Medallion of Excellence for the best book in animal health care. In 2011, Dr. Reck opened the Veterinary Medical Center of Fort Mill in Fort Mill, South Carolina, which is now a multi-doctor AAHA-accredited practice with a Fear Free certified staff.
From Mad to Glad: Appeasing Angry Clients

Unhappy customers are inevitable in any business. Here’s how to defuse the situation when one of your clients is seeing red.

By Kerry Lengyel

Your team’s clinical skills, bedside manner and customer service capabilities are impeccable, yet a client has just entered your practice fuming. The fact is that every business deals with unhappy customers at some point. It’s how you handle the situation that determines whether it will have a lasting effect on your practice’s overall success.

What you say and how you say it are the two most important things to consider when dealing with dissatisfied clients. While your first reaction may be defensiveness, it’s important to react proactively and professionally. After bringing the client to a quiet area out of the flow of practice traffic, follow these tips for defusing the situation and moving forward.

LISTEN
Allow the client to tell you everything he or she wants you to know about the issue. Don’t speak over the client, don’t let yourself get distracted and make sure you’re exhibiting the proper body language — don’t look angry, upset or standoffish. Consider the situation from the client’s point of view. You may not agree with the complaint, but empathy shows that you acknowledge and understand the client’s feelings.

ASK QUESTIONS
Once the client has finished speaking, summarize using a gentle tone of voice what he or she just told you. Knowing that his or her side of the story has been heard will set the tone for the rest of the conversation. Then, ask open-ended questions. “What do you think about that?” “Would it be possible for us to do this?”

questions do you have for me?” Try not to place blame on the client or ask any questions that could be misconstrued.

BE HONEST
There’s no way to get out of a sticky situation with an upset client unless you are completely honest and open. Even if your displeased client is the chronic complainer type, don’t disregard the possibility that he or she has a legitimate reason for complaining. If you know that you or another member of your team is at fault, take responsibility. By owning up to your mistakes, you can make amends and assure the client that the issue won’t happen again.

DON’T JUST APOLOGIZE
Although an apology can go a long way toward pacifying an angry client, it’s better to go above and beyond. Offer the client some type of compensation, such as a free medication sample or a discount on the next visit. Make sure the client understands what steps you and your practice will take to make sure the problem is resolved. At the end of the conversation, make sure both parties feel good about the solution.

IF ALL ELSE FAILS, CUT TIES
Some clients simply can’t be mollified. If a client is inherently wrong, won’t admit it and won’t budge, there may be no other solution but to cut ties. With some clients, if things are spiraling out of control, you may want to gently suggest they seek another practice to care for their pet. You might both be better off in the end.

REACTION TIME MATTERS
No one enjoys confrontation, being yelled at or admitting wrongdoing, but avoiding an angry client will only make the situation worse and the client even more furious.

Reaction time is especially important when it comes to online reviews about your practice. Some unhappy clients may go to social media sites like Yelp or Facebook to describe your practice and services in not-so-flattering (and not always entirely truthful) detail.

Regardless of the nature of the complaint, keep in mind that negative reviews can be a powerful way to sway other potential clients from coming to your practice. The keys to getting ahead of the situation are to apologize to your client in a timely manner and listen to what he or she to say.
According to research from the North American Pet Health Insurance Association (NAPHIA) — the association of pet health insurers in North America — the majority of veterinarians wish all their clients had pet health insurance. And it’s no wonder. Pet health insurance alleviates some of the burden of costly veterinary bills, so clients who have it are often more willing to comply with the preventive, diagnostic and treatment recommendations you make. So, not only do your patients remain as healthy as possible, but your practice revenue increases.

“The use of pet health insurance is on the rise, although only a small percentage of pets are currently insured,” said John Volk, a senior consultant at Brakke who was integral to conducting the NAPHIA research, which involved surveying more than 600 pet owners and about 500 veterinarians. “Pet owners are far more likely to insure their pets if their veterinarian is behind it.” In fact, NAPHIA reported that 50 percent more pet owners said they would purchase pet health insurance if their veterinarian actively recommended it.

So, how do veterinarians educate clients about this important service? To find out, Volk spoke with practices in which a disproportionate number of clients have pet health insurance to learn how they persuaded their clients to buy it. Here’s what he found.
CHOOSE ONE OR TWO PET INSURANCE COMPANIES, AND TALK TO YOUR CLIENTS
Narrowing down the pet health insurance options for your clients makes it easier for them to decide. “If they are overwhelmed with informational pamphlets from five or six companies, clients likely won’t choose any of them,” Volk said. “But clients will respond when given just one or two brochures from companies that the practice really recommends.”

One of the findings of the NAPHIA research was that veterinarians tend to be passive supporters of pet health insurance, said Volk. “They might place brochures in the exams rooms or include them in puppy and kitten kits, but they rarely discuss it with clients. The problem is that pet owners don’t perceive brochures as a recommendation.”

What pet owners want, Volk said, is to have a conversation about it with someone in the practice. “Brochures are great,” he said, “but talking face-to-face will give your clients a better understanding of what pet insurance is all about before they do their own research.”

ASK ALL YOUR CLIENTS IF THEY HAVE PET HEALTH INSURANCE
Pet owners purchase pet health insurance directly from the insurance companies, so veterinary practices don’t necessarily know which clients have it. You need to ask them. “The people in your practice who are most likely to have a conversation about pet health insurance are those on the client service team – a receptionist or practice manager, for example,” Volk said. “So they should be the ones to ask clients if they have pet insurance when clients come in for a visit or schedule an appointment.” This will allow you to determine how many of your patients are insured and the effectiveness of your efforts.

SELECT ONE PERSON TO BE YOUR PRACTICE PET INSURANCE SPECIALIST, BUT INVOLVE THE ENTIRE TEAM
Designate a full-time receptionist, hospital administrator or practice manager to be the pet health insurance advocate in your practice, recommended Volk. “It just takes one person who is interested in it.” That team member can research some insurance companies and choose one or two for the practice to endorse. He or she can also explain the insurance options to clients and answer basic questions.

It’s well known that recommendations must often be made multiple times before they are followed, and it helps if the recommendations come from multiple people in the practice. So, make sure everyone on your team knows which companies your practice recommends and why.

It’s important for the veterinarian and other members of the team to reinforce that the practice believes in pet insurance. “That doesn’t mean everyone needs to know every detail about pet health insurance,” Volk said. “It doesn’t need to be a sales pitch.” If the pet owner hears about pet health insurance from a client service team member as well as the veterinarian, the client is much more likely to act.

FACILITATE THE CLAIMS PROCESS FOR CLIENTS
It’s common practice in human medicine to record a patient’s health insurance information and submit claims to the insurance companies. Doing so in veterinary medicine is a great idea as well. “Note in the medical record when a pet is insured, and include the patient’s policy number,” Volk advised. “That way, everyone on staff will recognize that this pet is covered and that the client is likely to be receptive to optimal care recommendations.”

It’s also good to include some claim forms from the insurance company in the patient record. “We’ve found that pet owners are more likely to purchase insurance if the practice is willing to submit the claims for them,” Volk said. “This value-added service is really meaningful and makes clients more likely to purchase pet insurance.”

Submitting the claims for your clients not only makes it much more likely that the claims will be paid in a timely manner – which makes your clients happy – but it also saves your team time because they’ll have fewer phone calls to field from insurance companies.

OTHER TIPS FOR GETTING CLIENT BUY-IN
► Give your employees pet insurance as a benefit
According to the NAPHIA research, 71 percent of pet owners would be more likely to purchase pet insurance if their veterinary practice staff insured their own pets. There are a number of models you can use:
» Offer insurance for one pet per employee.
» Provide a specific monetary amount toward monthly premiums.
» Pay an escalating amount based on how long the employee has been with your practice.

► Add a link on your website to your recommended pet insurers
This makes it simple for clients to learn more about your preferred company or companies and gives them easier access to sign up for a plan. Plus, clients will see your practice as helpful and knowledgeable.

► Offer clients 30-day, no-cost trial policies
Some pet health insurance companies offer 30-day, no-cost introductory policies so pet owners can try out plans without having to make a commitment. Let your clients know about these options if they are available from your chosen insurers.
The word “confidence” is an ambiguous term. It often acts as a catch-all for many types of “can-do” and positive emotions. While it may seem counter-intuitive to view any form of positive emotion as unconstructive, not all types of confidence deliver that genuine, deep-down sense of fulfillment. Indeed, some forms of so-called self-confidence actually undermine our longer-term sense of fulfillment. We want a sense of ourselves that is authentic, purposeful, sustainable and determined, yet grounded and humble (what I call “24-karat confidence”) as opposed to a “fool’s gold” inflated sense of ourselves that is fleeting, fickle and fake.

All forms of confidence are the product of beliefs. Beliefs can be thought of as psychological DNA. Whereas biological DNA programs our physical form, our beliefs program our interpretations of the world and how we feel and behave in relation to it. What follows are three beliefs that limit our attainment of that genuine, 24-karat confidence.

THE NATURE OF OUR ABILITIES

Confidence-limiting belief #1: “My talents and abilities are more or less fixed and ultimately determine my potential.”

Most of the research into this belief has been done by renowned psychologist Carol S. Dweck, PhD, and her team at Stanford University. Dweck calls this belief the fixed mindset, and she calls the opposite belief – that talents and abilities are not fixed – the growth mindset. The fixed mindset exerts one of the most powerful undermining effects on our resilience, motivation and integrity in the face of uncertainty and failure. This is because people with a fixed mindset worry whether their (presumed) finite abilities are enough and whether sooner or later they will be found wanting. The fixed mindset also assumes that a person’s long-term potential can be determined simply by measuring his or her “real” level of intelligence, talent and ability using an externally applied performance test, such as an IQ test.

Dr. Dweck and her colleagues have shown that performance test results that apparently measure “latent talent” are, in fact, poor indicators of how likely some people are to live up to those expectations when real-world confounding variables such as challenge, adversity and failure come into play. Instead, she found that our
beliefs about whether our abilities are fixed are more predictive of how we respond to challenge, adversity and failure than any externally measured performance or ability score. Dr. Dweck found that people with fixed mindsets tend to panic, give up, avoid or fib about how well they did when faced with adversity, challenge and failure because they interpret a suboptimal performance as revealing some sort of personal inadequacy as opposed to an opportunity to learn.

By contrast, people with growth mindsets are better at persisting, learning and adapting amid challenging and uncertain situations because they don't allow their doubt and uncertainty to turn into paralyzing self-doubt. They don't see not being able to do something immediately or perfectly as indicative of some form of personal inadequacy. In short, a belief in our ability to acquire the skills, knowledge and motivation we need to succeed at a task is more predictive of long-term success than a belief that we already possess the skills, knowledge and motivation needed to succeed at that task.

PESSIMISM
Confidence-limiting belief #2: “When a bad outcome occurs, I tend to think and act like things will always turn out badly and that it will affect everything forever.”

This belief is like ending a story with “and they all lived miserably ever after.” Pessimism (and optimism) is best explained using the learned explanatory styles model of psychologist and educator Martin Seligman, PhD. He referred to pessimism as a learned process that results from acquired beliefs as opposed to an innate personality trait. He noticed that people learn to interpret life's challenges in certain ways and found that those who exhibit a more pessimistic thinking style tend to talk about causes and consequences of problems in a way that implies that these causes and consequences will be permanent as opposed to the not necessarily permanent mindset of an optimistic style.

Optimists view a problem as a specific event, and they dispute the assumption that they might not have any control over the cause of the problem. Pessimists also tend to believe that challenges, adversity and failure have more pervasive or far-reaching consequences than optimists think they do. People with a pervasive mindset believe that individual failures determine their feelings about themselves, their abilities and their lives as opposed to seeing a problem as a specific event that occurred amid a specific set of circumstances that can be learned from and moved past.

Here's what Dr. Seligman found when he combined these various beliefs and explanatory styles: People end up with a much more resilient, optimistic response to challenge, adversity and failure if they adopt a not necessarily permanent and specific explanation of an issue. By contrast, people end up with a much less resilient, more pessimistic and helpless response to challenge, adversity and failure if they adopt a permanent and pervasive explanation of the issue.

Beliefs can be thought of as psychological DNA.

In practical terms, optimists learn to dispute the inevitability of everlasting and all-encompassing doom and gloom, whereas pessimists don't learn to dispute the likelihood of everlasting and all-encompassing doom and gloom. This makes pessimists more pessimistic and thus less willing to face adversity head on, move on and try again. Dr. Seligman's point is this: If you can learn to become something, you can unlearn it and learn the opposite. Optimists learn to dispute the inevitability or the permanency of everlasting and all-encompassing trouble.

WINNING AND STATUS
Confidence-limiting belief #3: “My self-worth is defined by how I rank and compare against other people.”

Beliefs relating to competing and winning are linked intricately to self-confidence. The confidence-limiting belief here is, “I’m worthy when I’m winning,” which drives what I call the “status” motive. No one likes to lose, and there are times and situations when we are competing explicitly to win, such as when playing sports. However, if our self-worth is dependent primarily on whether we win or lose a contest, this ultimately will undermine our self-confidence and long-term fulfilment. Furthermore, if someone becomes obsessed with winning and being better than other people, that person may consider subversive tactics such as cheating or undermining others who are threatening their status. They are also more likely to see every challenge or difference of opinion as a “contest” that they must not lose. People who are “never wrong” tend to have less sustainable and/or fulfilling relationships.

A more positive version of competition and winning is this: “I believe that my success is determined by how well my competencies enable me to perform the tasks I need to do to perform well.” I call this the mastery motive. Mastery always begins with mastering the basics by applying effort, dedication and coaching. While it is entirely possible for someone with a status motive to dominate his or her area, that individual is more likely to overreact or threaten to quit if or when “beaten.” By contrast, people with a mastery motive recover from disappointment more quickly as they tend to retain a sense of hope because they believe they can always improve by working on strategies, tactics and technique.

CONCLUSION
All forms of confidence are the product of beliefs. This short article highlights only three of many beliefs that combine to either undermine or build genuine confidence. Some beliefs manifest as a fake or arrogant form of confidence, which we know doesn't build long-term satisfying or fulfilling relationships. This article has tried to highlight the subtle but incredibly significant effects of holding alternative beliefs that help us attain that genuine, 24-karat confidence for life.

Dr. Faulkner currently divides his time between working in his own small animal practice in Suffolk, England, and coaching practice owners and managers. His consulting business, The Colourful Consultation, helps veterinarians proactively pursue the four essential outcomes of veterinary practice: clinical resolution, client satisfaction, financial resolution and colleague satisfaction. For more information, visit colourfulconsultation.com.
The Digital Path to Client Education and Compliance

Social media is a great tool to reach pet owners and ensure they follow recommendations.

By Shannon Pecora

Practice success relies on having a well-informed clientele. Marketing is most effective when pet owners see your staff as authorities on pet health. Plus, clients are more likely to follow your recommendations when they understand the benefits to their pet’s health.

The trouble is that you typically have face-to-face contact with your clients only a handful of times throughout the year. Between semi-annual exams and occasional diagnostic visits, you can’t be entirely sure which of your pet care tips your clients are following.

Or can you? Thankfully, digital marketing can help drive compliance when it’s done effectively and leveraged correctly.

GO BEYOND THE BASICS
You’ve probably already plastered your contact information on the basic online platforms with which your clients are likely to engage: your website, Facebook page and Google Plus account. Beyond that, you probably want your clients (and potential clients) to call or visit your practice to ensure the quality and consistency of your educational messaging.

Yet those online channels can do much more than provide your phone number in search results. Social media can complement your in-house efforts, maintain the consistency of your practice philosophy and reach pet owners 24/7.

Through these online channels, you can recommend specific products, provide examples of true emergencies and offer nail trim demonstrations. In short, you can make direct statements about what you consider high-quality pet care and what may be ineffective or dangerous practices.

This is where education and marketing intersect. Websites and social media channels are extremely popular and easily accessible, meaning they can help you reach a large and receptive audience.

If your online pet care content is clear, reliable and branded with your practice name and/or logo, your clinic becomes a trusted and shareable authority. Shared online material is the new word-of-mouth, and Facebook, Instagram and other social media platforms can help boost your chances of reaching the right newsfeeds.

A SPOONFUL OF SUGAR
Don’t forget to include some fun content online, such as practice photos, cute memes and fun videos. After all, educational content goes down better with a spoonful of sugar! Ultimately, every social media follower you gain can become an informed, empowered pet owner, and the pets you care for would thank you if they could.

Shannon Pecora earned her master’s degree in English from George Mason University while also working in a veterinary hospital. As a social media marketing analyst at Beyond Indigo, she writes and educates about pets.

CASE IN POINT: PARASITE PREVENTION
Consider one of the toughest client compliance issues: parasite prevention. When Mrs. Smith visits your office for her dog Buffy’s annual wellness exam, you remind her about the importance of regular flea and tick prevention, and offer a refill of Buffy’s prescription for preventives. Mrs. Smith declines because she has a month left of the medication, so your receptionist sets an email reminder for three weeks from now.

Later that night, Mrs. Smith opens her Pinterest account and sees that her friend pinned a garlic-based recipe for DIY tick prevention. She sees how cheap and easy it is to make, and she shares the pin on Facebook. The more likes she gets on that pin, the easier it is for her to decide to pick up garlic on her next grocery run rather than return to your office for that more expensive “chemical” product.

But what if Mrs. Smith had encountered new pins on Pinterest from your practice that day, explaining garlic toxicity and the true safety and efficacy of commercial flea and tick preventives? Then, she found a link on Facebook to your latest blog post about the need for year-round prevention and the true cost of parasite infestation and zoonotic illness. While on your website, she came across your YouTube button. She clicked and watched your video demonstrating how to apply topical products.

These are two very different digital scenarios for Mrs. Smith’s evening. That second path, though, not only leads to a much more positive outcome for Buffy, it also builds credibility for your business.
Gain Social Leverage to Increase Your Client Base

Thriving veterinary practices today make great use of social media. Here’s how to engage with new and prospective clients online.

By Naren Arulrajah

Social platforms have become so deeply integrated into the digital marketing mix that today they are the primary source for brand discovery. It doesn’t matter if you are a small-time veterinarian or a global brand like Amazon or Starbucks, if you don’t get your social media right, then you are going to miss out on a lot of brand marketing dividends.

The big draw of social marketing is that social media is vibrant and has very diverse audience segments. For the same reason, social marketing is also one of the toughest marketing strategies to master. The big question for your veterinary brand is this: How can you leverage social media in a way that will make you stand apart from the competition?

UNDERSTAND YOUR SOCIAL AUDIENCE

The first and most important rule in social media marketing is to understand your audience. When you really know your social audience, engaging with them and meeting their expectations becomes much easier. Be sure you can answer these questions:

• What are their backgrounds?
• On what social platforms are they active?
• What are their likes, preferences and pain points?
• How can your brand address their expectations and alleviate their pain points?
• What kind of content are they interested in, and where and how do they consume social content?
• What kind of brand interactions interest them?
• To what kind of messaging do they respond?

This kind of detailed intelligence is crucial to engaging with and converting potential clients. If you can meet their expectations with each post, your audience can become your strongest brand ambassadors. Each of the social media platforms offers insight you can use to answer these important questions. (See Identifying and Understanding Your Target Audience.)

PLAN AND IMPLEMENT SOCIAL STRATEGIES

To reap the maximum benefits of your social media strategies, you need to carefully craft campaigns to evoke engaged responses. Here’s how:

• Research what topics interest pet owners the most, and develop content around those topics.
• Ensure that your content is customized to your target audience’s preferences.
• Use different content formats to give your content a more universal appeal as well as higher consumption and share potential.
• Tailor content to align with the social platform. On visual social sites such as Instagram, YouTube, Pinterest and Snapchat, it’s better to opt for a content style that is light and fun, whereas more in-depth content – such as long-form educational articles – is more appropriate on text-heavy sites such as LinkedIn.

CREATE A UNIQUE BRAND VOICE

Build a social veterinary brand with a unique voice that aligns with your core practice values. That means making sure you cater your >>
content based on how you want your audience to perceive your practice brand. Keep in mind that yours is a veterinary brand; obviously, you cannot imitate the voice of a fashion or travel brand.

Every piece of content you put out there is a channel for communication. The way you interact with your social audience is a big part of your unique brand voice. So, listen hard and listen well. Most importantly, remember that social media is a place for you to build relationships with your audience – not to give a sales pitch.

FUTURE-PROOF YOUR SOCIAL MARKETING
Learn and Evolve with Your Audience
Excellent customer service is not an add-on; it should be the norm. But it takes a deep understanding of your audience to establish clear excellence in service. Social media can play a big role in helping you establish a reputation as a best-in-class client service brand. Build practice credibility by constantly engaging with your clients. For example, acknowledge and appreciate any communication from clients. Respond to any complaints you receive and provide quick resolutions. Listen to what is being said about your service or products and use it to improve your brand.

Most social users expect quick response rates and real-time issue resolution. In fact, according to the digital marketing and e-commerce consulting firm eConsultancy, 53 percent of Twitter users expect responses from the brands they follow within one hour; and that figure increases to 72 percent if their communication is a complaint. There is a clear increase in client interaction on social media. So getting client services involved could actually be a wise move.

Create a Social Media Advertising Budget
According to Business Insider, social media ad spend is expected to reach $14 billion in 2018 – more than double the $6.1 billion spent five years ago. Your clients spend a lot of time on social media, so allocate a dedicated social media advertising budget. Social media advertising can help you find new potential clients because you have access to users’ own shared information, which allows for proactive targeting even before potential clients begin their search. You also have the advantage of advanced targeting options, conversion tracking and targeting via mobile apps.

Spread Your Social Content Strategy
Mix up your veterinary social content spread. This ties in with the earlier point of understanding your audience. Having a varied client demographic means you can’t serve everyone the same type of content. So, make things fun and interesting by posting videos, articles, infographics, SlideShare slide shows and podcasts. Live-video streaming is another format that is gaining popularity. There is no doubt that any kind of video content can easily drive client engagement, so use it to your advantage. Each of these content formats can be used to address specific pet health care issues, which can lead to better social engagement.

IDENTIFYING AND UNDERSTANDING YOUR TARGET AUDIENCE
Most of the major social media platforms offer analytics, which is a mechanism you can use to gauge how well your audience is interacting with the content you produce.

• **Google Analytics** can give you great insight into your target demographics as well as their interests and behavior.
• **Facebook Audience Insights** allows you to track user activity, Facebook usage and purchase activity as well as gain insight into other useful user information.
• **Twitter Analytics** is a great tool for harvesting useful data on the people who follow your Twitter account.
• **Instagram Analytics** allows account holders to track impressions and clicks to the link in the bio and track total reach. Most importantly, the tool offers a gender-based percentage breakdown of followers.

CONCLUSION
Social media can be a great place for veterinary practices to build a strong brand presence and attract new clients. Social leverage is simply a matter of being where your audience is and connecting with them in a way that is both relevant to them and of value to them.
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