DVMoms: Balancing practice ownership & motherhood
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DVMoms: Balancing practice ownership & motherhood

The road to practice ownership for veterinarian moms may be rough at first, but it's absolutely doable—and tremendously rewarding when you do it right.

By Amanda Carrozza
As a veterinarian, juggling parenthood and a career can be daunting on its own. Add in being a woman and owning a practice, and you might as well sell tickets for a 3-ring circus, right? Maybe not. It turns out that owning a veterinary practice might be the key to striking the ideal work-life balance for these working moms.

Moms have the adaptability, patience, and perseverance to thrive in any high-pressure situation. Just ask Kim Bishop, DVM, Jordan Gesimondo, DVM, MPH, and Stephanie Strunk Hickey, DVM. These all-star multitaskers represent the leadership team of DVMoms, a Facebook group with more than 14,000 members that provides “support, empathy, commiseration, and humor between women who are all struggling to find balance and sanity in work, motherhood, and life.”

During a recent Fetch dvm360® virtual conference, the trio coordinated their hectic schedules to host an honest discussion about balancing motherhood and veterinary practice ownership.

Everyone must learn to play by the rules

“Simultaneously, the best and hardest part of being a business owner is creating the culture for your practice,” Bishop said. But as a mom, you were built for this. “We are used to being in charge of growing and sculpting the character of our children. It may sound like a cliché, but a lot of those strategies can be used to your advantage in forging a clinic culture.”

“Being a role model both at work and at home is a lot of work,” Gesimondo admitted. “But we learn what works and what doesn’t, we experiment with various ways to coach and correct.”

Practicing servant leadership is one of the pillars of creating a positive clinic culture, Gesimondo said. “Leading with humility can help you gain the respect of your staff and also displays the expectation of teamwork. If I am cleaning out a kennel to help a technician, it shows I truly care and am in the trenches with them.”

Hickey believes staff management can be the single biggest factor in determining how successful and fulfilled you are as a practice owner. “Finding the right staff is hard work and takes time, but it absolutely can be done,” she said. It starts with setting the tone of your practice culture, never wavering from your ideals, and training staff to understand and meet your expectations.

Do not be afraid to hold your staff accountable, Bishop said. “I have done this with my staff in the same way I do with my 7-year-old. You have to make sure the rules are explained and understood. You cannot have a moving target and expect them to abide by rules they don’t fully understand.”

“Setting boundaries first and foremost helps build a successful practice and allows clients to know what to expect.”

—KIM BISHOP, DVM

If it becomes apparent that a staff member refuses to play by the rules or does not align with the clinic’s culture, make the decision to let them go. “That is one difference from parenthood,” joked Bishop.

Whining and tantrums...from clients

The adage that “the client is always right” has some important caveats, the doctors agreed. “Clients should definitely be listened to, but they cannot be rude,” Bishop said. In some instances, letting clients know they should find care for their pets elsewhere is for the betterment of your hospital. “It makes your employees feel so much better to know you have their backs,” she added.

Setting boundaries with pet owners from day 1 can help generate the right clientele, Hickey said. Ask yourself: Will you be the kind of owner who drops everything to help a client, even if it means sacrificing time with your family? Or will you set—and stick to—boundaries?

“We can’t be all things to all people,” she explained. “Setting boundaries first and foremost helps build a successful practice and allows clients to know what to expect. You don’t have to be rude, but you do have to be firm.”

“It is a fine balance,” Gesimondo added. Clients under stress due to an unexpected pet illness or unforeseen expense are akin to toddlers struggling to process emotions they do not yet fully understand. “They are vulnerable and often scared. So, we have to dig deep to find empathy for them and their situations while also setting boundaries and not letting them get away with bad behavior.”

To ensure everyone is playing from the same rule-book, practice owners need to be upfront and consistent about the hospital’s operating hours, what the staff’s skills and abilities are, and the caseload you can reasonably handle. Be honest about the fact that you have a family that requires your attention, too.

“While you don’t have to be too personal, showing clients that you are human can make them respect and appreciate you more,” Hickey said. “And if they don’t, those were not the clients you wanted anyway.”

WORK-LIFE BALANCE
Meet the moms

Kim Bishop, DVM, a graduate of Texas A&M University College of Veterinary Medicine & Biomedical Sciences in College Station, is a veterinarian at Courtenay Animal Hospital in Merritt Island, Florida, and mom to a 7-year-old daughter. Bishop is currently on the path to becoming a veterinary practice owner.

Jordan Gesimondo, DVM, MPH, a graduate of Colorado State University College of Veterinary Medicine and Biomedical Sciences in Fort Collins, is part-owner of Beardsley Animal Hospital in Glendale, Arizona. She is also mom to 3 children ranging in age from 6 months to 5 years. Gesimondo's clinic is a part of AZPetVet, a group of 21 hospitals throughout Arizona.

Stephanie Strunk Hickey, DVM, a graduate of the University of Tennessee College of Veterinary Medicine in Knoxville, owns Admiral Veterinary Hospital in Knoxville and is mom to an 8-year-old son. Hickey purchased her practice from its previous owner—and her former boss—upon his retirement.

Mastering the balancing act

“As a practice owner, you work long hours, and a little piece of your mind and heart are always in the clinic whether you are physically there or not. But you also have the freedom to control your schedule and drive your destiny,” Bishop reiterated.

“Even though everything falls to me as the practice owner, it is possible to have a good work-life balance as both a mom and a veterinarian,” Hickey said.

It all comes back to establishing proper boundaries, Gesimondo said. First, decide what is most urgent—think of it like triage for your life. “This is our specialty. We are so good at this!”

Rather than dwelling on what you were not able to get done on any given day, shift your focus to what you were able to accomplish. That list is bound to be much more impressive.

Will the first few months of your new venture be difficult? Absolutely. But that does not mean it won’t be worth it. “Your work-life balance will likely be a bit skewed at the beginning of any ownership journey, but with proper management, you can find the right balance again,” Hickey said. “Cultivating a great team, delegating tasks to individuals, hiring a practice manager, and having boundaries with staff and clients will set you up to be happier at home and work.”

Moms, listen closely

“If you were thinking of taking the ownership leap, I say go for it,” Hickey said. “There are so many resources out there to help you. Being a mom has not slowed down my ability to take care of my practice, and my practice has not hurt my being a mom either.”

This is not Monopoly money

The women agreed that one of the most common perceived roadblocks on the journey toward practice ownership is the belief that you will not be able to afford it. “It is definitely possible and can be one of the best decisions to set you and your family up for financial stability,” Bishop said.

Hickey echoed that thought. “Owning a practice can allow you to have more time with your children, help alleviate debt, and give you the freedom to take more time off and experience life outside of work,” she said.

Hickey purchased her veterinary hospital using a Small Business Administration loan. “While I do have all of the debt, as a single practice owner, I also have all of the profits,” she said. “And since my practice was already established, I was pretty profitable within 6 months of ownership.”

She credits part of her financial success to surrounding herself with the right team. “Hiring an accountant who understands veterinary hospital finances can be ideal in maximizing your profits. Hiring a practice manager can also help you keep track of your financials and allow you to focus on medicine while still growing the business.”

Gesimondo, who has the unique perspective of buying into an established network of practices, was transparent about the pros and cons of this particular avenue of ownership. Currently, she is 1 of 3 on-site owners and initially purchased 4% of the clinic she practices at. “The great thing about being a partner in a group is that you don’t have to buy a whole practice,” she explained.
How to build trust in the emergency setting

Every day in veterinary hospitals around the world, decisions are made based on 1 major factor: trust. Clients agree to protect their pets with recommended vaccines at specific times because of the longstanding trust they have in their pet’s doctor. They trust their veterinarian’s diagnostic and treatment recommendations when their pet is sick, because they have known the pet since it was young. But when their pet has an emergency at 2 AM, it’s not their primary veterinarian they see. What is it that makes or breaks a pet owner’s trust with the emergency room veterinarian?

In my experience as an emergency veterinarian, I have found that trust is pivotal. I have to gain the client’s trust quickly, so they can make difficult decisions based on my findings and guidance. I am fortunate enough to work for a practice that allows clients to remain with their pets throughout the entire visit, so communication is established from the moment they walk through the door. Their confidence in my recommendations is key not only to the well-being of the pet, but also to the budding relationship with that new client.

Introduce yourself.
Don’t skimp on your introduction, no matter what. When animals are rushed into the hospital, our brains immediately start evaluating the problem. Instead, take the 2 seconds to say, “Hi, I’m Dr Sterk,” before asking what happened or advising your team on next steps. It may seem unrealistic to expect the client to remember your name during a stressful situation, but share it anyway to offer personal insight about whom the client should place their trust in. They want to know who you are and how to address you.

By Monica Sterk, DVM
Be relatable.
It seems simple, but this is generally an underused tool when building a relationship. Share your own story to connect with clients, not as a doctor but as a fellow animal lover. For example, tell your client that your dog is also a picky eater or that you also struggle to pill your cat when it is sick. Offering a glimpse into your own life will help you connect with clients on a deeper level. It is also likely to reduce their anxiety somewhat.

Say it like it is.
Lack of trust stems from miscommunication and misunderstanding, so be transparent with clients. Explain exactly what is happening with their pet and why. Describe each step of what you are doing and what you are trying to accomplish. It is crucial that clients understand you are all on the same team and that you want them to understand your decision-making process. For instance, if you are performing a quick ultrasound, share with the client what you are looking for and what you find. Communicating this information puts the client on the same page as you, and will quickly result in a trusting relationship.

Admit you are not their primary veterinarian.
I do it all the time. “I know that I’ve never met Fluffy and I am not there for his monthly allergy injections, but I truly have Fluffy’s best interests in mind.” At times, clients may feel a need to hide their concerns, so it’s up to you to address them. There is nothing wrong with explaining that although you just met, you want the best for them and their pet.

Build relationships with local veterinarians.
What better way to kickstart a relationship than by having a mutual friend? I make it my business to know the primary veterinarians in my hospital’s local area and develop a relationship with them. It may be irrelevant in an emergency situation, but when the client is used to seeing a certain doctor, it helps if you can share your relationship with that doctor as well. After all, we all share the same goal of providing excellent pet health care.

Their confidence in my recommendations is key not only to the well-being of the pet, but also to the budding relationship with that new client.

Use common terms.
People without a medical background are not likely to know what hemangiosarcoma or leukocytosis is. Everyone understands that you’re the doctor and you know those words, but be cognizant that most of your clients won’t. So, use medical terminology but also use layman’s terms so everyone is on common ground. I promise you that if they have a medical background, they will quickly tell you.

Put yourself in their shoes.
This isn’t new advice, but it’s important. If I were a client, I would be the one being viewed as “overreacting.” I would be over the top in my disposition and concern, but wouldn’t you? Sometimes we forget that we might react in the same manner if our pet were having an emergency. Showing clients empathy will not go unnoticed and will absolutely lead to the trust we seek.

The bottom line
Earning trust begins with empathy and compassion and ends with a lasting and confident relationship. Achieving trust may be a challenge, but it’s crucial during an emergency. All the knowledge in the world often does not make up for a lack of trust between client and doctor. So, remembering these simple building blocks will lead to a successful relationship during an emergency visit.

Monica Sterk, DVM, practices at Veterinary Emergency Group in Nanuet, New York.
Hiring new talent: Why soft skills matter

When it comes to hiring new team members at your veterinary practice, you should consider a nice balance of both technical and soft skills. Here’s why, plus how to identify key soft skills.

By Kellie Olah, CVPM, SPHR

From prepping a cat for surgery, to cleaning a dog’s teeth and taking x-rays, to filling a prescription, there are myriad technical skills to consider when interviewing and hiring at your veterinary practice. It is equally important to select team members who possess key soft skills such as flexibility, open-mindedness, and creativity. These types of traits will help them to provide the best possible service and care to your patients and clients and to become a valuable part of your team.

Although you can easily review hard or technical skills on a resume or observe them in action, it’s more challenging to discern soft skills. As these can be such an integral part of an interviewee’s personality, they may not even be aware of them, much less able to articulate them. Integrity, for example, is an important soft skill, but oftentimes people with integrity live ethics-based lives without considering it a skill that they need to highlight during an interview. That’s just who they are—and who you want.

**Crafting job descriptions and ads**

People may feel more comfortable highlighting their technical skills. Thus, you should consider including soft skills in your practice’s job descriptions and advertisements. For example, if you are looking for a veterinary technician who works well with others and can communicate clearly and compassionately with clients, include those attributes in your job descriptions and not just as an add-on.

**Key soft skills**

Each practice may value different traits, but here are some soft skills that every hospital can benefit from.

**Can perform under pressure**

To tackle the day-to-day challenges of a veterinary practice, you need team members who can thrive under pressure. For example, you want to hire people who can remain calm when dealing with stressed and frightened animals or when responding to anxious clients. Additionally, veterinary professionals must be prepared to deliver heartbreaking news such as a terminal illness—or help clients make the challenging decision to euthanize their beloved pet. Having team members who can remain calm, especially during emergencies, is critical.

**Detail oriented**

When everything is running smoothly, this trait may not come to the forefront. But paying attention to detail is crucial when following protocols, taking notes, labeling samples, and more. Being detail oriented usually goes hand in hand with being organized. When pet records, for example, are well organized, your team can easily access accurate details, thus putting clients at ease.
Empathetic

Empathy is the ability to discern the emotions of others or to put yourself in someone else's shoes so you can better understand what they might be feeling.

Compare someone who can do their job effectively with someone who can manage technical skills while also communicating with empathy and you will understand why soft skills are so valuable. Empathic team members build trusting relationships with clients, thus allowing them to provide the best possible care to their pets.

Flexible

Although the practice can plan its day, emergencies happen and even the seemingly most ordinary appointments can become difficult. Having a practice team that can roll with the punches is essential to providing optimal care.

Interviewing for soft skills

Identify which soft skills are important to your practice and then tailor your interview questions to reflect them. If you have an exceptionally busy practice and time management is key, you could say, "Please share a time when you had multiple deadlines to meet, and tell me how you prioritized your tasks to meet those deadlines."

If creativity and problem solving are important to your practice, you could ask interviewees to describe a time when they faced a problem they had never encountered before and have them share their problem-solving process.

To measure an interviewee's level of empathy, ask about a time when they had to share bad news with a client. They should detail the specifics of the situation and explain how they responded.

If collaboration is crucial in your practice culture, ask the applicant about a time when they had to collaborate with someone who was not easy to get along with.

Throughout the interview, you can determine how well an applicant communicates and how they respond under pressure by how effectively they answer your questions.

Finding balance

When it comes to hiring new talent, it's all about balance and paying attention to soft skills that may not get the time and attention they should during the recruiting, interviewing, and hiring processes.

In a hectic practice, it can be tempting to choose a candidate with great technical skills and mediocre soft skills over someone who has the soft skills you want but less work experience. Why is this so tempting? Let's face it. Your practice likely needs the position filled ASAP. And under tight time constraints, it's normal to want someone who can hit the ground running. In the short run, that's probably true. Here's a flaw, though: Soft skills are typically inherent. Sure, someone can work on improving their communication skills, but the reality is that integrity, creativity, adaptability, and other intangible skills tend to be intrinsic to someone's personality—or not. So, while you might envision that a candidate with excellent technical skills will somehow develop the soft skills you need and want, understand that it may not happen.

According to Daniel Goleman in Working With Emotional Intelligence, soft skills are a better predictor of top performers than either experience or IQ. So, hiring someone with desired soft skills and working with them to gain adequate work experience may be a more practical approach to consider when hiring new team members.

Kellie Olah, CVPM, SPHR, is a practice management and human resources consultant at Veterinary Business Advisors, Inc.

REFERENCE


A look at the most in-demand soft skills

According to a 2016 LinkedIn study of in-demand soft skills, here are the top 5, in order:

- Communication skills
- Organizational skills
- Teamwork
- Punctuality
- Critical thinking ability
Tips for resolving team conflict

Communication experts Carolyn Shadle, PhD, and John Meyer, PhD, offer useful strategies for diffusing staff conflict at your veterinary practice.

By Erica Tricarico
Conflict is part of life, so ridding your clinic of all strife is truly an impossible task. But healthy resolution is possible, according to communication experts and spouses Carolyn Shadle, PhD, and John Meyer, PhD, who lectured on the topic at a recent Fetch dvm360® virtual conference.

For team members, differing perspectives, feelings of inferiority, jealousy, and uncertainty about roles can lead to clinic quarrels. “People have different perspectives on their job, how it should be done, about their profession, and the goals of their profession.... And they start fighting with each other just because they do have these different perspectives,” said Meyer.

It may seem easier to ignore conflict, but it’s best to approach it head-on. The goal is for each party to get what they need—a win-win. Here’s how.

**How to listen**

Stellar listening skills are key to resolving team conflict, the duo explained, offering a few tips to help your team members listen like pros.

*Silence is golden.*

Amid conflict, silence is sometimes the best response. Stop and think about what the other person has said before responding, and always be cognizant of your body language. Nonverbal communication can speak louder than words. Try to keep your body language open. Lean forward and nod to show that you are listening. “We have to be sensitive about how much we communicate even when we’re not communicating,” said Shadle.

But what happens when silence is not enough? Try statements such as “Say more” or “Tell me about it,” said Shadle. These statements let your coworker know that you’re listening and that you care about what they have to say.

During the conversation, repeat what your team member says to ensure you fully understood everything. Be sure to ask questions for clarity.

*Listen for feelings.*

We typically show people how we feel instead of using our words to express our feelings. “Our feelings vocabulary is pretty diminished,” said Shadle. During conflict, pay attention to each other’s feelings and then attempt to put them into words. For example, “David, I sense that you’re feeling afraid of...” If you interpret their feelings incorrectly, that’s OK. This will allow them to explain how they actually feel.

Putting feelings into words is a difficult skill to master, but with a little practice, it’s powerful, said Shadle. “When people sense that their feelings are heard, they open up, and they relax, and they’re willing to talk,” she said.

*Speaking up*

It can be challenging to speak up with care and control, especially if you feel that you are right and the other person is wrong, said Shadle. “You can be so insistent that you drive the other person into silence,” Meyer added. “It’s difficult to speak up when people cut off the conversation.” Maybe you feel anger, resentment, embarrassment, or fear. Or, you’re afraid of being fired or criticized for speaking up, or feel your self-identity is on the line. There’s a tool that can pull you out of this black hole of despair: the I-statement.

“One of the skills everyone can add to their bag of tricks is the I-statement,” said Shadle. The I-statement allows you to explain where you are coming from and how you feel. For example, “I feel anxious about our practice embracing technology.” This statement is an expression of how you feel. You have to own it. Other people can’t deny how you feel.

Be sure your statement is not a you-message, she added. A you-message is often an inflammatory statement that adds salt to the wound. For example, “You get on my nerves. You never do anything right.”

*The scout mindset*

Another way to tame conflict in your clinic is to instill the scout mindset among your team members. A scout is curious, values accuracy and solving problems, is well-grounded, and isn’t concerned about being right or wrong. These traits lead to practicing good judgment during conflict, Shadle and Meyer explained. You’re not there to win or lose but to understand, Shadle said. Scouts try to understand what’s behind the resistance.

*How to get to a win-win*

In your practice, it’s crucial that every team member feels accepted, heard, and respected. So ultimately, to get to a win-win, you have to approach every conflict as a learning opportunity, the couple said. Acknowledge the other person, share your feelings, continue the dialogue, and avoid roadblocks, Shadle concluded.

“When people sense that their feelings are heard, they open up, and they relax, and they’re willing to talk.”

—CAROLYN SHADLE, PhD
Better medicine, Better business: Otitis externa

Two options for managing this condition, plus how to decide which plan is best for your clients.

By Shawn Messonnier, DVM

Otitis externa is a very common problem in companion animals. In most cases, the condition is caused by bacteria, ear mites, or *Malassezia pachydermatis*. Unless it is causing pain or severe inflammation or is caused by a mixed bacterial infection, a single acute episode of otitis externa likely does not require an extensive workup. More chronic cases require extra attention and a prudent search for an underlying etiology, such as atopy, food allergy, or hypothyroidism.

As with many conditions, there are multiple options for managing a case of chronic otitis externa. To keep things simple, following are 2 of those options. The first option is what I consider minimal care for the patient, the kind of care that unfortunately is very common across our profession. The second option is what I consider the best practice—the platinum standard—one we all hope to achieve.

I understand that the platinum option may not work for every client in every practice, but the goal here is to encourage you to review what you currently do and consider whether there is room for improvement. At least some clients will accept the platinum standard in most practices. Having worked in many practices prior to opening my own hospital, I have seen this level of care offered across the income spectrum. Note that the prices quoted here are typical of practices in my locale; the prices near you may differ.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Basic approach</th>
<th>Platinum approach</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exam: $50</td>
<td>Exam: $50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cytology: $30</td>
<td>Cytology: $30</td>
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<tr>
<td>Topical medicine dispensed: $20</td>
<td>Culture (if needed): $125</td>
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<tr>
<td>Medicated ear flush: $35</td>
<td>Sedation (if needed): $100</td>
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<tr>
<td>Electrocardiogram (if needed, pre-sedation): $40</td>
<td>Ear infusion/packing: $40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-inflammatory injection: $30</td>
<td>Total: $180-$445</td>
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Comparing the basics vs the platinum standard

The basic approach is pretty simple. The ears appear infected, cytology may or may not be done to correctly identify the type of infection (if any), and some generic medication is dispensed in hopes that the ears will improve in 1 to 2 weeks.

The platinum approach understands that a correct diagnosis is crucial in guiding the proper treatment. Also, for chronic cases of otitis, we know that an underlying cause...
such as atopy, food intolerance, hypothyroidism, or some type of immune suppression that can occur with adrenal disease or diabetes may be present and must be treated if the ears are ever to improve. Finding and treating that etiology is important to cure these chronic cases of otitis. Cytology guides our treatment and helps us determine whether a culture is needed (often I routinely culture chronic cases of otitis regardless of cytological findings, but always when bacteria with or without white blood cells are seen.)

For treatment to be most effective, and if the owners are expected to treat the ears at home, a medicated ear flush is vital. Because otitis, especially chronic otitis or acute otitis with severe inflammation, is painful for the pet, sedation or anesthesia (with a pre-sedation electrocardiogram) is a must. To minimize the need for owner adherence, it is preferable to treat the ears in the hospital with some type of infusion (guided by cytology). To reduce inflammation and pain, and to address the underlying cause (if allergies are suspected), an anti-inflammatory injection of a short-acting corticosteroid can be administered. A follow-up exam in 7 to 10 days (with repeated cytology, flushing, and treatment) is also needed (but not included in this initial estimate.)

The platinum plan offers the best medical care for the patient, reduces noncompliance with messy and often painful ear treatment at home, and increases practice revenue. Additionally, client handouts reinforce your prescribed diagnostic and treatment plan. We have prepared several handouts with our standard diagnostic/treatment plans. The technician gives these to the owner to review before an official treatment plan and costs are presented. This better prepares owners for the actual plan and costs, thus improving client compliance. Owners who are unable or unwilling to accept the platinum plan can always choose the basic plan and upgrade if and when that plan fails to give an acceptable resolution. Regardless of their preferred treatment plan, a progress evaluation is a must to document the case and intervene with additional treatment if needed.

Shawn P. Messonnier, DVM, owns Paws & Claws Holistic Animal Hospital in Plano, Texas, and serves on the dvm360® Editorial Advisory Board. He has written multiple books on marketing as well as holistic veterinary medicine.
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Marketing musts for every veterinary hospital

Want to build brand awareness and increase your patient roster? Here are the 5 things you (or an affordable marketing person) should be doing.

By Naren Arulrajah
Brand awareness is vital for the success for any company, including veterinary practices. But the reality is that most practice owners and managers don’t find the time for marketing. This work demands time, money, and regular monitoring to make sure it’s yielding positive results. Multipronged, sophisticated marketing tactics require significant input from the management team (always in short supply). Trying to get it all right slows down the whole process. My recommendation is to focus on a limited number of channels, giving the most attention to those that complement each other and yield the best returns.

Here are what I see as the best digital marketing tips for veterinary practices. Hit some aspect of these 5 throughout your year, and you’ll be in good shape.

**Search engine marketing**

Search engines decide what pet owners see when they go online to find a veterinary practice in their area. Search engine optimization (SEO) is the most important part of that process. In competitive markets, there’s a first entrant advantage that veterinary practices starting on this later need to counter tactically.

But SEO can cut both ways. If the tactics are appropriate and the message is appealing, you can get fantastic results in terms of new clients. But if you’re spending a lot of money in competitive environments, graduating to a higher website ranking and showing up earlier in search results can be a very slow process. SEO should be both on page and off page.

**On-page SEO**—what appears on your individual web pages—involves posting visually attractive, quality content and ensuring that your words are pithy and free of unnecessary repetition. Great care should be given to the process of tagging. Meta tags facilitate viewing for both search engines and pet owners, and offer a favorable experience once someone clicks through to a particular page on your website. Every page should have both a title tag (preferably fewer than 55 characters) and a meta description (preferably fewer than 150 characters). Structure your website and web page headings (H1) and subheadings (H2 and so on) carefully. You don’t want too many—just enough to honestly and helpfully highlight key aspects of your brand. Internal linking should be minimal (don’t go crazy with hyperlinks to other pages on your own website), and the site needs to be mobile-friendly (which makes sure it looks good on any size tablet or smartphone). >>
As the veterinary marketplace becomes more competitive, it’s harder and harder to ignore marketing efforts.

**Off-page SEO**—which includes links to and from other reputable websites—should involve plenty of backlinks, especially to reputable ones such as educational and government domains. It’s better to have a few quality links to other websites than lots of low-ranking ones.

Does this all sound overly complicated? Well, somebody—you or a talented team member or an outside consultant or an outside service—needs to think about it. It’s not as hard it sounds, but it takes a bit of time to learn and understand.

**Pay-per-click advertising** —This is advertising placed in search engines (eg, Google, Bing). Every time a viewer enters the relevant keywords or search phrases, the search engine results pages show up with your ad displayed. If the viewer clicks on your ad—moving to your website—you pay a charge. There are a number of pay-per-click options for you or your marketing person to choose from. A paid search can yield faster results than organic search. These ads are flexible and can be scheduled to be turned on and off so you advertise when you want.

**Social media marketing** —Social media can enhance brand awareness, but the question is which platforms should you use? You need a presence on Facebook, but it could help to survey your current clients to find out where they are. Maybe they want to hear from you on Twitter. Maybe they want to see cute pet pictures (like theirs!) on a Pinterest board or Instagram.

The great thing about social media is that these platforms have access to users’ geographic location, age, gender, and interests. That makes it easier for advertisers (like you) to target audiences, and those interactions on the platform can provide testimonials as well.

Remember, though, digging into social media and building a presence on any platform isn’t just about throwing up some ads. At least 1 team member needs to be somewhat active. This takes time and effort as well as a sensitivity to the fact that social media users get irritated with pitches. Your content needs to be heavily focused on interesting facts, pictures, videos, and helpful resources, distracting users from the overall pitch that you are the best veterinary hospital in the area and they’ve just got to swing through your doors.

**Email marketing** —Email continues to be a useful direct strategy to address prospects and nurture existing clients. It’s best to schedule promotional and educational messages with specific "calls to action"—you need to inspire the email reader to do something after seeing your message.

Email marketing allows for specific messages for distinct categories, tailoring your pitch to different segments of your clientele or other locals if you’re paying to use someone else’s email list. Emails also allow for "word-of-mail" cascade for the brand, just as word-of-mouth publicity does for you now.

**Public relations** —Would it be worth it to build a multimedia public relations (PR) campaign or contract with someone to do that for you? A multimedia PR thrust under the aegis of a reputable PR organization can definitely create a high level of brand awareness.

If affordability is an issue, there are tools available that allow you to run your own in-house PR campaign, and it’s likely your local competitors don’t use them yet. Popular PR software tools allow you to write a press release and share your news with reputable news websites (eg, PressCable and PRWeb), enhancing brand awareness and developing valuable backlinks to your veterinary website.

**The bottom line**

As the veterinary marketplace becomes more competitive, it’s harder and harder to ignore marketing efforts. Practice owners and managers should learn a little about digital marketing and then decide how deep to go themselves with or without outside help. But if you include these 5 items in your marketing strategy over the months and years, you’ll be way ahead of most of your local competitors for a long time to come.

Naren Arulrajah is president and CEO of Ekwa Marketing, a complete internet marketing company that focuses on SEO, social media, marketing education, and online reputations for practice owners.
Monetizing veterinary telemedicine: It can be done

Using data from more than 2500 cases, Aaron Smiley, DVM, explains how adding paid telehealth services improves veterinary practice workflow, increases revenue, and boosts client satisfaction.

By Erica Tricarico, Senior Editor
There has been a lot of talk in the veterinary profession about telemedicine, particularly since the start of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. But does it really live up to the hype? According to telehealth expert Aaron Smiley, DVM, chief of staff at Devonshire Veterinary Clinic in Anderson, Indiana, and president of the Indiana Veterinary Medical Association, it does.

Although veterinarians are good at offering free telemedicine services, they aren’t so good at monetizing their remote expertise, Smiley said at a recent Fetch dvm360® virtual conference. But incorporating telemedicine into your practice not only saves you time, it generates new revenue and makes clients happy.

During his lecture, Smiley outlined telemedicine’s benefits and explained how to incorporate paid telehealth services into your clinic, using real data to support his claims.

**Why telemedicine is efficient**

With so many people fostering and adopting pets during COVID-19, teams at many veterinary clinics are burning the candle at both ends to match the high demand, said Smiley. But how can you take care of clients who have been with you forever and accommodate new ones with this large influx of patients? Smiley says the answer is asynchronous, paid telemedicine.

Asynchronous telemedicine involves interacting with your clients conveniently and efficiently via a telehealth app, such as Medici, Airvet, PetDesk, and others. Instead of being glued to your computer, you are receiving client images, videos, and messages at different times throughout the day, allowing you to juggle other appointments and work-related tasks.

“Most of the time, we think of telemedicine as being synchronous, sitting down at a computer and doing a video consult with a client,” said Smiley. “But veterinarians do not have to do consults this way. On the human side, insurance companies require synchronous telemedicine for reimbursement, but veterinary medicine does not have that constraint.”

If you’re looking to convert to paid telemedicine, use asynchronous telemedicine, he advised. Don’t schedule time for live telemedicine video chats, he explained.

“Veterinary patients do not ‘perform’ well on demand, clients are busy, and most veterinarians do not have extra time in their calendars to block out synchronous telemedicine appointments.”

About half of Smiley’s daily case load is managed via telemedicine. “That’s a big chunk of my practice that’s remote,” he said. “Telemedicine is a supplement to traditional practice and will never replace a physical exam, but it does help us to meet the needs of many of our clients and patients.”

Asynchronous telemedicine is also efficient for your front desk staff. Instead of your receptionist going back and forth with clients on the phone about medical concerns that they cannot directly answer, asynchronous telemedicine allows clients to contact the doctor directly.

**How and when to use telemedicine**

Veterinary telemedicine is not new. Generations of veterinarians have offered it to their clients since the advent of the telephone and it has proved to be a vital tool, said Smiley. Here are some specific medical recheck issues for which he uses paid telemedicine:

- **Diabetes.** Offer to interpret glucose curves.
- **Seizures.** Ask owners to send you a message or video of any seizure after you start medical management.
- **Arthritis.** Monitor arthritis therapy with a video of the animal moving in its “natural” environment.
- **Heart failure.** Ask the owner to send a video of the animal breathing to appreciate the resting respiratory rate.
- **Allergies.** Reevaluate seasonal allergies with pictures and videos of the animal.
- **Deep pyoderma.** Recheck the animal with a video or picture of the infected area to confirm that therapy is effective.

Sometimes, when veterinarians discuss diagnosing patients remotely, there is a fear of the worst-case scenario. Smiley calls this the “what-if” game. What if I miss something? What if I need a diagnostic test such as blood work? What if the client doesn’t tell me everything I need to know? Smiley’s argument is that he uses the same medical knowledge for remote
Telemedicine by the numbers

Smiley examined 2560 telemedicine cases with clients with whom he has an established veterinarian-client-patient-relationship. Here is the breakdown of the types of cases. "This is what you are doing in small animal practice every day," he said.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gastroenterology</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dermatology</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cardiology</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toxicosis</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hospice</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postsurgery rechecks</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Test results</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respiratory medicine</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pain management</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urology</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ophthalmology</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dentistry</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neurology</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courtesy tele-atriage with technicians/nurses</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

How long it takes and what it entails

Telemedicine consults can seem to take an inordinate amount of time, but remember, it’s all asynchronous, said Smiley. The average length of 1 of his consults is about 272 minutes. That may sound like a lot, but it equates to him sending about 12 messages and the client sending 9 messages. Again, these messages aren’t always back to back and might be stretched out over the course of a few days, he explained. It depends on how busy the client is and how busy you are. Additionally, Smiley receives an average of 1.5 videos and 2.5 photos per telemedicine consult.

You’re worth it

The biggest impediment to paid telemedicine is that veterinarians don’t always realize that they are worth it, said Smiley. “When veterinarians forget their worth, they become blinded to the high value animal owners place on their medical expertise. Veterinarians revert back to the misconception that a client will only pay for services when they are rendered in person,” he said. “But it’s not true. You are worth it, and your clients are willing to pay for it.”
Malpractice: Are you covered?

Despite the assurances of well-meaning practice owners, associate veterinarians may not be as protected as they think in the event of a lawsuit.

By Christopher Allen, DVM, JD

Imagine this scenario. You took an associate position a few years ago and your boss promised you that in the event of a malpractice lawsuit against you, you would be “covered” by the hospital’s malpractice policy. Eventually, you move on to another job and, shortly after starting, you get a call from your old boss who tells you that a client, Mrs. Smith, was very unhappy with your diagnosis and treatment of her dog, Fluffy.

“She mentioned the word ‘lawsuit,’” your former employer tells you, “but she didn’t mention contacting the state veterinary board—at least not yet.”

The call leaves you very much on edge, so you get the insurance company on the phone to advise them that there could be a pending suit, and possibly a board complaint, over Fluffy Smith. After a few minutes on hold, the agent tells you that the company can’t help you for 2 reasons. First, you had no personal coverage when you treated Fluffy or any other patient while you worked at your former practice. Second, the agent explains, even if you had been covered by a malpractice policy back then, Smith’s claim was made after you left the practice, and as such the coverage would have expired due to nonrenewal.

“And FYI,” the insurance rep adds, “the practice where you treated Fluffy never had any state board license defense insurance at all, so you and your boss are both on your own if this Fluffy business gets messy at that level.”
Malpractice insurance: a double-edged sword
Veterinary malpractice insurance is one of the great bargains of all time. Compared with what our human doctor counterparts pay in premiums, we should consider ourselves lucky to have access to outstanding protection for remarkably reasonable rates. Whereas physicians may spend 6 figures on an annual “errors and omissions” policy, even exclusively equine practitioners (whose malpractice coverage is often the most expensive) pay just a thousand or so dollars in yearly premiums.

But with that said, veterinarians (especially associates) very often take their malpractice protection for granted. Many employed veterinarians are told, incorrectly in many instances, that they are insured against malpractice “as long as they are practicing for our hospital, which has a policy covering all our licensed doctors.” Even more concerning, associates and owners alike assume that all veterinary malpractice policies cover them for allegations of malpractice brought to a state veterinary licensing authority. They do not.

So, don’t let the very reasonable price of professional malpractice insurance lead you into a false sense of security. Employers: learn as much as possible about the coverage you and your employed doctors actually have. Associates: read your employment contract carefully to learn what it states about your insurance coverage (or lack thereof). Then examine the policy.

Misconceptions about malpractice insurance
When our office consults with a practice owner or associate veterinarian about an employment contract, the issue of malpractice insurance premiums and coverage nearly always comes up. The employed doctor usually wants to know if their coverage will be employer paid, whereas the owners ordinarily assume that their hired doctors are somehow “included in our umbrella” insurance package.

Here is how it actually works, based on my background in insurance defense law and my recent discussions with indemnity professionals at several insurance companies: Veterinary hospitals—the businesses themselves—are usually covered for malpractice committed by veterinarians who work there. This coverage comes either from a comprehensive business policy (along with slip-and-fall, fire damage, and similar coverages), or from a stand-alone malpractice policy such as the type offered through the American Veterinary Medical Association Professional Liability Insurance Trust (AVMA PLIT).

These policies protect the business (which in many cases translates to the owner) against lawsuits for financial damages in the event that a doctor in the practice commits an act of malpractice or malfeasance. What is covered? Provable injury to the injured pet and, more importantly (and more costly), legal fees associated with defending the malpractice claim.

But what happens if, in the example above, Fluffy’s owner decides to sue you personally for your alleged malpractice committed upon Fluffy months ago when you worked at your previous clinic? It is virtually certain that the clinic’s coverage will not protect you and you will have to hire your own lawyer(s) and pay any verdict out of your own pocket. But if you had your own policy, you would be all set, up to the policy limits.

A second, even more serious misconception traps owners and associates alike. I speak to veterinarians all the time who believe that their malpractice insurance will “indemnify and defend” them if and when a client alleges malpractice to a state veterinary board. The truth is, such “license defense” coverage is not always in place when a veterinarian (owner or associate) purchases a basic malpractice policy. Such coverage may only be available as a “rider” or supplemental coverage—with an additional premium. It’s an add-on, like roadside assistance coverage might be in an auto policy.

What’s a confused practitioner to do?
Here are some useful steps to follow when attempting to navigate the malpractice insurance landscape:

• Generally, assume you need your own personal malpractice policy unless convinced otherwise by a qualified, knowledgeable insurance professional.

• Always obtain a license defense rider to protect you against exorbitant legal costs associated with state board license defense. And note: All such policies have coverage ceilings depending on how much you pay for the rider, and this is no place to be a cheapskate.

• A corporate practice may cover you against malpractice claims made against you personally. But if you rely on such coverage exclusively, make absolutely sure you understand the coverage details.

• Associates, when negotiating your employment contract, make sure you have appropriate coverage even if the employer will not reimburse you. It’s that important.

Christopher J. Allen, DVM, JD, is the president of Associates in Veterinary Law PC, which provides legal and consulting services exclusively to veterinarians. He can be reached at info@veterinarylaw.com. Allen serves on the dvm360® Editorial Advisory Board.
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A history worse than a thousand words

By Karen Robb Wheeler, DVM

I like history. You like history. Let’s give this a go. You say your dog is limping and he had a swollen toe? His left foot. One day. No known trauma. This is going good! Oh wait. There’s more? I knew it! (I should have knocked on wood.)

So it started on his left side? Right? What? Other left side? Whoa! Your left side? No! Looking at him doesn’t change it so. Pretend he is a car. Is it the driver’s side that’s lame? Okay. The passenger is bad. It’s good we’ve played this game.

So now, we know he’s right side lame, and it started yesterday. You say it showed up suddenly when he went outside to play. Wait. Friday he was limping, too? Okay. Five days. That’s cool. What? Licked a toad? It made him puke? And then he sat in drool?

OK, I think I’ve got this. He’s been limping several days. Last week he also licked a toad, but now he seems okay? Oh no, he’s not, you say. He’s sick. He vomits every night. He pees a lot. He’s seems depressed. There’s something that’s not right.

There’s more? The neighbor told you that your dog poops in his yard, So you think the neighbor poisoned him and kicked him really hard? Well, we can do some testing, but it would be hard to prove. Umm, really that is up to you if you think you should move.

Now let’s start our exam…. Oh, what? You’ve something more to share? You’ve also noticed that your dog has lost a lot of hair. And he’s itchy. (Sigh). Of course he is. And his ear is not so great. It’s the one there on his driver side? Yes, glad we’ve got that straight.

So let me try to summarize—he’s been limping on his right. He pees a lot. He itches. Loses hair. Pukes every night. The toad was mad. The left ear’s bad. He seems a bit depressed. And your neighbor’s retribution could have added to this mess.

Whew! That is quite a history! It puts the rest to shame. But on busy days, when I run late, it’s not my favorite game. Oh wait? There’s more? Sob! Please excuse the tears. Yes, I am fine. It’s just I once liked history, but today you’ve changed my mind.
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