

Phone Home Run

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You've labored over your Facebook page, fretted over two thousand dollars you spent in pet-related community=event sponsorships, agonized over a decision to cancel your yellow page ad: most of us have a blind marketing strategy. You close your eyes, throw a marketing barb out there, and hope that you hit your mark. A substantial amount of time, money, effort and concern is invested in marketing our practice with all efforts bent towards a single end outcome: get the phone to ring.

And yet...take a second to review how much time you've spent managing how that phone should be answered, the kind of person that should answer it, and what should be said at the moment it is picked up.

Travel this country from shore to shore, step into any veterinary hospital and the set up is likely to be the same. Someone is out front answering the phone and handling the clients, and some people are in the back handling the pets. It's the same set up left over from when 'old doc Adams' was in business 40 years ago; when a cat spay was 55 bucks and a vet visit was once every so many years for a rabies vaccine. Today, veterinary medicine is incredibly sophisticated. The managing of patient records alone is a gargantuan task and yet, we have the same business plan. We hire someone with a 'bubbly' personality to sit out front and pick up the phone, while the rest of us hang out in the back waiting for the clients to come in and...someone up front to pick up the phone.

All that money invested in getting that phone to ring and we leave it to one or two, not-very-well-trained (though probably very well-intended) individuals. Then we add insult to injury by asking them to answer the phone in conjunction with these other responsibilities: personal secretary, switchboard operator, faxer, medical-records-coordinator, food-order-taker, international-health- certificate-signer-offer, greeter, teacher, accountant, cashier, rabies-tag-organizer, etc.

Effectively communicating to our clients is not impossible, in fact, it's not even hard, provided we take a moment and consider what we are trying to accomplish and have the right tools at hand to succeed.

A Great First Impression

When is the last time you called a business and the phone rang and rang? What was your perception? You weren't thinking, 'oh those poor employees, I'll bet they are really working hard'. Quite the opposite, you imagined a disorganized workplace or worse, apathetic employees who didn't care about you. Regardless if it's true, people are making immediate presumptions about who you are and the kind of business you are running if the phone rings too long. A presumption that is completely antithetical to your Mission and goals.

A Greeting that Matters

What's in a greeting? A 'this is Mary' or announcing that they have called ABC Animal

Hospital is so basic, that I would argue it's not worth paying a human to do. If that's all you want to accomplish with a phone greeting...the introduction to a switchboard... then allow a robotic switchboard operator to handle it. The first sounds of a phone call should communicate how much your practice cares. It doesn't matter if you are busy with three or four other projects, answering the phone in a rush of words 'abcanimalhospitalthisisMaryhowcanIhelpyou' is completely antithetical to your goals. Everyone on the team must be aware of this and be willing to assist with the sometimes over-whelming workload of phone calls. Prioritizing phone calls and client care is something the entire team (owners, doctors, technicians and assistants) must understand. In fact, during the first week of training, all team members should be taught to prioritize responsibilities in this order: employee safety, patient safety, and client wellbeing. In other words, provided you are not going to injury yourself, others or patients, you should look out for opportunities to directly assist clients whether they are on the phone or in the practice.

A Tone of Voice that Conveys Understanding and Concern

The people who are calling up your veterinary practice are probably a lot like you: well-intended folks who love animals. In this case, they're calling up because they would like some help in caring for those animals. They may be under some stress about the well-being of their pet or how much the services are going to cost, so they might not be as pleasant sounding as you would like them to be. Still, underneath this 'noise', their heart is as full as yours. Letting them know that you care by investing in how you sound will go a long way in defusing any negative emotionality they may be feeling on their end. Additionally, you will make your practice stick out from the roster of practices they may have decided to 'shop' before yours. I would argue that the level of customer service any of us experience on a day-to-day basis is so rudimentary that the smallest efforts you can make on your end will make your practice shine.

Showing that Your Practice's Services and Products Address the Client's Needs

How many times have I called practices, told them that my pet had diarrhea, and was provided general guidelines for what I should feed my pet over the next 24 hours? How many times have I told a client care representative or technician that I was concerned about fleas and been given a lunch-and-learn lecture on the flea life cycle? We are more than information booths at veterinary practices. Our job is to listen to clients' needs, show them that we care, and teach them how our services and products satisfy their concerns. Forget about training client care representatives how to be mini-veterinarians. Skip your interests in being non-committal about a veterinary visit. We are in the business of providing medical care. When clients call up for our services, invite them to take part of them. Period. If you are too concerned that a veterinary visit is not worth it given your belief that the problem is too small, then discuss changing your practice's fee structure with the practice owner or seek out additional education with a veterinary professional so that you understand the value of a visit. Instead of making a pact that you will turn away cases you feel are too minor to address, make a pact that you will make every veterinary visit worthwhile to your clients. No one benefits from keeping your clients at arm's length. Your practice owner has invested hundreds of thousands of dollars in her quest to provide veterinary medical care, love, and concern to the animals in the community.

Now invite the community into your practice so that all of you can make good on that commitment.

Catalyze an Appointment

Ending a conversation with ‘well if you’d like to come in, it’s up to you’, underlines your own belief that the veterinary visit lacks value. People don’t make phone calls to veterinary hospitals because they have nothing better to do with their day. They call because they are concerned. Teach them that they can allay their concerns by making a veterinary office visit and that you and your team will do everything you can to make the patient comfortable, answer the client’s questions, and mitigate whatever problem is going on. Instead of fretting about what should or should not be seen, work as a group to evaluate the client and patient experience and do everything you can to improve its take-away value. Remember that all the hours you spend improving your own knowledge base, the services that the practice offers, the improvements to the facility itself, and the commitment you have all made in one another as a team, is wasted if no one gets a chance to experience it first hand.

Phone Shoppers

Veterinary team members should be trained to take control of phone shoppers; not an easy thing to do when one is on the receiving side of a series of questions like, ‘How much is an exam? How much do you charge for a rabies vaccine?’ These questions leave you feeling like you have too little conversational wiggle room.

Train team members to politely stop the caller. “I’d be happy to go over the prices with you. Before we start, can I ask your name? We’re always so happy to hear from new clients I’d like to know you, even if it is over the phone. Carol! How nice of you to call us. My name is Bash. Let’s get you the information you need. What is your pet’s name? Brewster! How nice. Is he a dog, a cat...? A cat! Nice. I have three!”

Always ask if you can follow up with the caller to see how they make out with their shopping experience.

Challenge the Status Quo:

As I said earlier, lots has changed since ‘old doc Adams’ days. Today’s veterinary offices provide as wide of a range of services as do human hospitals, yet the work systems we have in place for handling the additional volume and complexity of services remain the same: someone up front who answers the phone and two people in the back who treat the patients. Communication has changed so dramatically and increased in volume so much, that we simply must rethink the way we handle this new burden if we are going to be successful. Practices today are experimenting with Live Chat, Facebook, Twitter, texting, YouTube, Pet Portals, and email as an alternative to the telephone when communicating with clients. It is likely that these last few years of rapid changes are only the beginning of many more years to come of additional changes and increased complexity to the way we communicate. Stop putting someone out front and someone in the back because ‘that’s what you’re supposed to do’. Stop relegating the responsibility all of us have to greet, care and welcome our clients to our practice to one or two over-

taxed individuals. Sit down as a group and think about the process by which these clients in need come to us and how we tell them 'you're in good hands'. The discussion will be the first step in a journey all of you take to help these animal-loving folks feel more secure and to create a nurturing care facility for patients in need.