



## If you market, they will come

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By: Jessica Harper

VETERINARY ECONOMICS

EFFECTIVE MARKETING FOCUSES on your clients, not on your practice. So to develop marketing strategies that work, you need to know how existing and potential clients perceive your practice, what they want from a veterinarian, and what factors they consider when choosing a practitioner. Then and only then can you turn your thinking to the tactics that you'll use—such as telephone-directory advertising and event sponsorships—to tell the community what you offer.

"You wouldn't treat a patient before doing an exam and performing necessary diagnostics," says Linda Wasche, founder and president of LW Marketworks Inc. in Bloomfield Hills, Mich. "Running an ad before you've done the background research is like saying, 'Let's try this antibiotic' before you've looked at Fluffy." Plus, when you know what message to send to clients and how best to reach them, the decisions about where to spend marketing dollars become much easier.

If you put off marketing efforts, the costs may be one excuse you give. Yet you don't need to spend an exorbitant amount, says Wasche. Your budget will depend on what you want to achieve.

If you've set your sights on aggressive growth, then you'll be looking at a higher price tag to accomplish your goals. But if you just want to strengthen your practice, you can get away with a smaller investment, she says.

Not having enough time to think through your approach is another common excuse for giving your marketing strategy short shrift, says Rebecca Hart, an accredited public relations professional and co-founder of <http://TheVetZone.com/>. "But like any area in life, you make time for what's important to you," she says.

Wasche agrees that making time for marketing is worth the effort. "Professionals, whether they're physicians, attorneys, or veterinarians, think that because they run an outstanding practice and they're great at what they do, people will come," she says. "But your client can't evaluate the quality of that surgery you performed. Clients decide whether they'll work with you based on other factors."

### Getting to know your clients

"You've got to understand what motivates clients and what they want from you. Then deliver what they're looking for. Then you can go tell people about it," says Wasche. "Until you know what makes a client so committed to you that they go tell a friend, you're just putting stuff out there. This doesn't

mean you should abandon traditional marketing tools; it means you should find more sophisticated ways to use them."

Wasche recommends this four-step approach to gain a better understanding of your clients:

**1. Learn about your market through diagnostics.** You want to know the key elements that strengthen your relationships with clients. Sure, you could undertake an extensive survey to find out all you can about your clients, potential clients, and area competitors, but you could also just ask around and gain some insightful data. "You don't need to spend a lot to better understand clients and the local market," Wasche says.

"In any situation, I advocate more pulse-taking than doing huge studies. Sometimes you can get a good idea of what's important to clients by talking to as few as 10 people if you see trends and patterns emerge. Of course, this is absolutely not scientifically reliable, but it gives you an idea of what's going on and will help you make decisions."

For example, she says, you could call current clients and do a short interview. Wasche recently performed this kind of informal research by getting in touch with six horse owners. She asked about how they found their veterinarian, what they wanted in a doctor, what they value about their veterinarian, and so on.

To get the most objective feedback, Dr. Elizabeth Bellavance, MBA, owner of Canadian Veterinary Consulting Services in Camlachie, Ontario, recommends using outside help, especially someone with experience in the equine market. "Blind surveys and interviews in which your clinic is not identified give you a clear, outside perspective of what people think," she says. "Mystery shoppers are also an outstanding tool to understand how you interact with clients."

If you'd rather do the digging on your own, Wasche recommends building in ways for clients to give you feedback. For example, you could:

- Give clients a way to make suggestions on your Web site.
- Develop comment cards and a suggestion box so clients can leave suggestions at the clinic or mail them in later.
- Create a clinic e-mail account and ask clients to send you ideas about how you could better serve horse owners.
- Ask your team members how the practice could improve. Your staff members work on the front lines, says Wasche, so they're in a good position to recommend service improvements.

**2. Make changes.** "When you ask clients and team members what you could do better, you must be prepared to act on their suggestions," Wasche warns. "Otherwise, you risk disappointing them."

**3. Find out how your target clients choose a doctor.** Do these owners go to a show, the phone book, a local horse rescue organization, or somewhere else to find you? Who do they talk to?

**4. Build a marketing strategy**, applying the data you've gathered to reach more potential clients. For example, did most of your clients find you through referrals? If so, think about how you could generate more referrals.

Yes, these steps will take work, says Wasche. But just as you would with a patient, you must focus on diagnostics before you move to a treatment plan. Then you can move on to the tactical aspects of marketing that most people are familiar with.

The good news: If you're practicing high-quality medicine, you've already started marketing your services, says Dr. Bellavance. "When you talk to clients about what's best for their horse, your recommendation usually involves preventive medicine and diagnostic work," she says. "Informing clients about these treatments and tests is one way of marketing the services you offer."

### Underutilized tools to try

When you broaden your marketing approach, you need to choose the specific tactics that best fit your needs. The following strategies could be useful, and they tend to be underutilized by equine practitioners.

(See "Options for Your Marketing Plan" at <http://www.vetecon.com/> for a more complete list of strategies.)



- **Web site.** "Even practitioners who currently maintain Web sites aren't using them to their full potential," Dr. Bellavance says. Do you provide client education materials online? Do you offer clients online pharmacy options? "These tools save clients time," she says. "And you can start a Web site easily, and affordably. I know some practices pay only \$25 a month for hosting. With all the Web site programs and services available, you just need to know how to type to get started."
- **Client education seminars.** "Collaborating with your colleagues sends a strong message to clients about your professionalism," Dr. Bellavance says. She suggests working with a group of local or regional equine practitioners to offer educational seminars to the community. You could even tap suppliers to see if they'd be willing to sponsor a seminar, she says.
- **Referrals.** Asking for referrals might feel a little strange at first, says Hart, but word-of-mouth recommendations are your most powerful advertising tool. And you don't need to shell out a lot of money to get started. (See "Nudge Clients to Spread the Word.")

Wasche agrees. "If you're really marketing right, you'll see growth from referrals. If you can distinguish your practice in a way that pleases clients, they'll refer their friends to you."

### A successful campaign

"The best marketing campaigns consistently bring in the new clients you need to sustain the practice," says Hart. "So figure out how many new clients you need—then find the most cost-effective methods to reach them."

One caution: You shouldn't expect to hit on the best method upfront. "Generally, practices need to track response to a variety of strategies for about a year to identify the most economical ways to bring client to the door," she says. In fact, thinking too short-term—then getting frustrated and doing nothing—is practitioners' biggest marketing mistake, she says.

Eventually, you'll hit your numbers. But don't stop there. "Marketing is a never-ending process," says Wasche. "You need to stay focused on what horse owners are looking for because clients' needs and market dynamics change over time."

### **The bottom line**

Randomly placing an ad here and sponsoring a show there is like suggesting a treatment before you diagnose the problem. In other words, you need to start by focusing on clients' needs, then decide how to spread the word about your strengths using the Web, educational seminars, referrals, and more.

### **Web exclusive**

For ways to reach your clients, see "Options for Your Marketing Plan" at <http://www.vetecon.com/>

Contact Linda Wasche at [lindaw@lwmarketworks.com](mailto:lindaw@lwmarketworks.com) or 248-253-0300. Read more articles by Linda Wasche in Veterinary Economics at <http://www.dvm360.com>.