Marketing in a veterinary practice
Definition

Marketing is the analysis, planning, implementation and control of steps, which are designed to build or increase the positive (and profitable) relationship between your practice and the animal owners.

It is a skill to organise and manage personnel, their expert knowledge and material resources, so that you match you clients’ needs.

It is a long-term manager task to achieve these goals.
To be able to compete you need to revise:

- Services offered and the way they are offered
- Prices
- Communication
- Advertising
- Location of the practice
Why to do marketing?

- To ensure that current clients stay
- To generate more business from the existing clients
- To attract new clients

To be successful you need to know:

1) Who are your clients?
2) What they are interested in?
3) What they think is most important for them?
1) Which clients are of most value to your practice? Which other clients you would like to have in your practice?

Most of the clients will be from the neighbourhood, but except working in a distant village, you don't have to cover all of them – from poorest to wealthiest, from those coming only in critical situations to those coming with every detail, from those who want only low prices to those who want to give any money but expect high quality of care. In big cities think also about specialization on cats or small/exotic animals + birds only etc.
4 types of clients:

a) Those who give you big profit and they have potential to give it also in the future – take care of them as much as possible and offer them all your services and effort

b) Those who give you big profit, but already use most of your products, so not much chance to increase the profit in the future - take care of them as much as possible and offer them new services

c) Those who give you low profit right now, but there is a chance for bigger in the future – improve your communication – explain and ask, offer them all your services and products

d) Those who give you low profit now and there is not much chance that it will improve in the future – also improve communication (maybe it is just temporary money deficit or lack of information and it can be better later) and think about the animal, who is not responsible for its owners. Your other clients will see you devote to every animal with care and enthusiasm and this will improve your credit
2) They are interested in health and comfort of their animals and „peace of mind“ of themselves when they visit your practice.

3) Most important is the ratio price/quality of your services, empathy and the ability to listen and understand.
Marketing for established or new clients?

• Most of the practices (and all kinds of businesses) unfortunately focus only on marketing for new clients and often neglect their current clients. But to attract many new clients is usually less effective and many times more expensive than keeping the current clients attracted and increasing the profit coming from them.
Attracting new clients:
- New clients are needed to replace „natural losses“ of current clients
- New clients bring new challenges

BUT:
- Good veterinary service needs trust and confidence, which is build slowly and requires personal approach and understanding of clients needs. Ask new clients what they want and need
- Attracting new clients is best way for practices with already good profit from satisfied current clients
Attracting established clients:

- Offering all your services to current clients who trust you and are satisfied with your practice brings higher and more stable profit (e.g. preventative care, programmes for seniors, kennel owners etc.)

- To attract current clients to a new service is much cheaper than to attract new clients to the same

- Current clients usually welcome new equipment, methods or products you offer and are more tolerant if your younger colleagues help or do some less difficult work for you
Loyalty:
- In some clients the loyalty is an emotion, but mostly it is a kind of behaviour which is intimately linked with client satisfaction.
- But loyalty should not be confused with the satisfaction.
- With the choice available nowadays, many clients are not loyal and try new possibilities even though they are satisfied with your services.
- On the other hand, satisfaction is in most cases necessary to gain loyalty.
- One of the most common factors that may change satisfaction to loyalty is the client's feeling of being important to the practice.
The problems of marketing services

Services are of non-material character and this complicates their position on the market.

- We cannot measure them, hold in hand, try out before buying etc. The buyer has to trust the person providing the service. The service always has to be described and explained properly, so that clients can imagine its properties. Comparison to the similar health service in humans can be recommended in many cases.
- **Inseparability** of the service from its provider
- **Variability**, which means it may consist of several parts, and also that its interpretation may vary according to the provider and the owner
- Many clients are not able to confidently evaluate the value or quality of the service before and sometimes even after they receive it
- Owners sometimes don't know whether the service is really necessary or it is done just for the provider's profit, so the continual client education on animal health issues is a long term and integral part of the veterinary services, they need to know, what all kinds of care and in which situations their animal needs
Veterinary services have only limited differentiability from practice to practice. Any unique technique, quality or range of services must be promoted. How to give your practice a unique and individual personality, is one of the biggest challenges in veterinary marketing.

Quality control is complicated, as vets (personality and abilities), and both owners and pets are unique.

Veterinary universities train experts in medicine, not sellers. Products may be also important, but services are most important source of profit in the practice, so vets – as their providers – must first learn how to „sell“ themselves.
- Only reacting to clients’ demand is not sufficient, there should be also proactive marketing services
- Time spent with marketing does not directly generate income, but veterinarians should not pass all marketing on somebody else, as they are the key in their service
- Even if you want to reach good profit, you have to be ethic and you can’t break legislation connected with advertising in health services in your country, which may be quite strict
Common mistakes

- Veterinarians believe they can do all the marketing themselves, and do not employ experience consultant for at least advice. Total outsourcing is not an optimal way, but cooperation with a skilled marketer is highly recommended. Involvement of your staff with their ideas and knowledge of clients is also necessary.
- They define and limit marketing to new clients only
- They do not examine organisational and attitudinal changes necessary for marketing to be successful
- They do not reward staff for their individual marketing efforts
- They rely on feelings rather than numbers and statistics to measure the effects of marketing
What to avoid

- Decisions based on personal opinions – research on clients and their needs is needed before starting marketing or before new service, as the vet is not a target audience and his/her personal opinion may be of little worth
- Judging the effects of marketing based on feelings – results have to be measured (sales figures, statistics etc.)
- Doing marketing randomly – the whole thing needs a carefully prepared plan, as the effect of whole is greater then the sum of the parts
- Procrastination – eliminate the reasons why not to move forward
- Do not expect a perfect plan – excessive refinement and long term analyses and discussions kill the primary initiative and effort
- Don't ask for everyone's opinion before doing anything – keeping everyone informed and involved is important, as well as the opinions on important and fundamental changes, but not every detail has to be solved with whole staff.

- Avoid lack of vision and short-term results – marketing is to create customers who believe that doing business with you is reasonable and has the future.

- Do not wait till you have decreased sales – hoping that things will turn themselves instead of acting quickly is leading to big problems, marketing is not a desperation move.
How to market?

Effective marketing is about showing selected clients that you satisfy their needs. It requires involvement and support of everyone in the practice, the staff must understand the value and the benefits of marketing.

- What services do we offer? – thing about well-trained and friendly staff, technical equipment, emergency service, programmes of prevention or specific care for specific groups of animals (junior, senior, diabetes, breed genetics etc.), parking for clients etc. At this step do not think about new services, but how to improve those you already offer.
- What do our clients want? – give them short, focused questionnaires about particular services
- What is the competition and how do we differ? – good location, opening hours, referral place, feline/exotic animal/surgery/oncology specialist clinic, etc.
- Market and remind the benefits to the clients all the time – answer yourselves the question: Why should the customers buy our services, what are our advantages?
- Explain to staff why marketing is important to them and to the practice, so that they joyfully accept marketing activities into their daily work
Communication tools for marketing

- Marketing is a special form of communication
- All senses should be involved:
  • Sight – clean outside of the practice, clean inside, healthy flowers, enough light, professional and clean appearance of the staff
  • Smell – clean smell in the practice, pleasant but not exaggerated smell of the staff
  • Hearing – avoid staff joking in front of the client, personal phone calls, time wasting when clients want to check-in or pay at the reception, try to avoid clients hearing animal crying and other unpleasant sounds from the examination room or hospitalisation, etc.
- **Personal contact and selling:**
  - Proposals
  - Presentations
  - Demonstration of skills

- **Advertising:**
  - Logo
  - Practice signs
  - Practice car
  - Yellow pages
  - Professional journals, local newspapers (if allowed)
  - Internet
- Public relations:
  • Practice brochures, Visit cards
  • Web pages, social media, blog!
  • Client testimonials
  • Practice newsletters
  • Reminder service
  • Open days
  • Publication activity
  • Lecturer activity
  • Participation on animal shows
  • Sponsorship, help to animal shelters etc.

- Establish a system to measure their effect, because if you can't measure them, you can't manage them (you can't improve or refine them)
You always have to compare how much all these materials and advertisements will cost and how much profit it can bring you, not all ways are worth it, depends on your situation.

Many clinics declare to offer high-quality services, but this is not only competent staff and perfect device. Quality in general is a difference between client's expectations and how the particular service fulfilled those expectations. If you declare quality, you have to measure this client's perception systematically.
Logos, brochures, vouchers, invitations etc.

Examples are from http://initial-ideas.com, www.vetarazzi.co.uk.
Examples are from [http://initial-ideas.com](http://initial-ideas.com), [www.vetwholesaler.co.uk](http://www.vetwholesaler.co.uk).
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