

Unique Ways to Market Your Hospital

By Sharon Biggs
For Veterinary Practice News

Aside from word-of-mouth, how does a veterinary clinic sell itself?

"Marketing is always a challenge for veterinarians," says Gina DePinto, owner of Bylines Public Relations and Marketing in Encinitas, Calif.

"Generally, veterinarians come out of school, start their own clinics and proceed to get bogged down with being a business person and a vet. Publicity and promotion are usually not their areas of expertise." But, she says, with a little creativity, self-promotion can pay off.

Community Connection

Consider getting involved with your practice's community by sponsoring a Little League team or donating free pet exams/vaccinations to local schools or charities for their silent auctions or lotteries.

Offering hospital tours for Scout troops and other community ser-

vice groups, or holding classes on pet care at local schools can help brand a veterinary clinic as a strong supporter of the community.

Classes that teach small children how to properly pick up a rabbit or a cat, or instruct older children how to care for the family pet can remind a community that a veterinary clinic is a source of support and education for pet owners.

Opening a practice to monthly lectures from guest speakers, such as dog trainers, the local ASPCA, breeders or animal communicators, can also increase a clinic's presence in a community.

If a clinic has a resident groomer, he or she can give talks on grooming and clipping and offer door prizes for free "makeovers."

Marketing these events is important and asking a local newspaper or radio station to cover the event will get the word out.

A Prime Example

Richard B. Silverstein, DVM,



The Heritage Animal Hospital in Maple Grove, Minn., has created a strong bond with its community by visiting nursing homes and schools.



COURTESY OF HERITAGE ANIMAL HOSPITAL

owner of Heritage Animal Hospital in Maple Grove, Minn., wanted to do more than just donate money to sports teams and charities.

Two years ago he decided to give back to the community by offering tours of the hospital, conducting educational activities and visiting schools and nursing homes.

He also encourages clients to certify their dogs as therapy pets.

"Veterinarians are uniquely qualified to identify healthy, socially minded pets. Suggesting to their owners that they would make an ideal therapy dog, and then assisting in that goal, flatters both the pet and owner and helps give joy to others," he says.

Dr. Silverstein reports a steady increase in business of about 10 percent year after year.

"I believe this program has bonded us to the community. It's also given our staff and clients a good feeling that this business facility is something of importance and committed to the community," Silverstein says.

Costs of Outreach

Since its program is so large, Heritage Animal Hospital employs Ellen Whiteknight as community outreach coordinator. She spends 20 to 30 hours a week outside the office keeping all the activities running smoothly.

"The overall cost amounts to about one salary per year,"

Silverstein says. "I am having conversations with my accountant and lawyer regarding setting this program up as a separate nonprofit so we can have fundraising activities to pay the coordinator's salary."

Your Name in Lights

DePinto says that veterinarians who have several years of experience with a practice should look into contacting the media. Local television and radio stations are often looking for veterinarians to comment on stories.

"Producers are always looking for experts to talk on camera. If the vets do a good job and have an on-air presence, they will get called back," DePinto says.

Many community newspapers welcome columns written by veterinarians. Even if the subject is simply advice on basic health care issues, the column can get your name and face into the community.

"Be bold when contacting the media," DePinto says. "Call them or send them a letter telling them about a story, perhaps linking into a special day or seasonal issue."

Days of Recognition

Linking special offers with human holidays and occasions, such as Heart Disease Awareness Month, may provide an opportunity for a veterinary clinic to offer free heart checkups.

Hiring Public Relation Experts

You don't necessarily have to be wealthy to have a public relations person.

"Ten to 15 hours a month may be all you need, and there are many freelance PR people around," says Gina DePinto of Bylines Public Relations & Marketing in Encinitas, Calif.

"They can get some programs going and teach you how to promote yourself. Depending on the freelancer, you can expect to pay \$25 to \$100 an hour."

-S.B.

There are also many special months specific to animals, such as Geriatric Awareness Month or Dental Health Month, that practices can use to promote specials.

The need to remind clients about the importance of twice-yearly examinations was the impetus behind a program started in 2004 and sponsored by the American Veterinary Medical Assn. and Fort Dodge Animal Health.

"The National Pet Awareness Month/ Twice-A-Year Campaign is clinic-centered and provides tools for veterinarians and their staff to educate clients about pet wellness," says Steve Hofer of the National Pet Wellness Team in Syracuse, N.Y.

NPWM provides participating clinics with in-clinic education kits containing a variety of educational tools, including posters, client literature about the pet aging process, disease threats and quality-of-life issues.

"Over 10,000 clinics participate each year. October is National Pet Wellness Month, but the campaign runs year-round. Veterinarians can join at any time through the campaign's website: www.npwm.com."

Sharon Biggs is a frequent contributor to Veterinary Practice News.

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